

Julian Schnabel

AT OPERNTURM, FRANKFURT AM MAIN

.



Ahab, Julian Schnabel 2009

“The painting in Frankfurt is 46’ tall and 44’ wide. I painted it outside. I’d been to the building prior to see exactly what size I thought the painting should be, so I thought those dimensions would be appropriate for that wall. Many times people will make a design or bozzetto for a large painting and other painters will fill in the mural. My attitude is that of a surfer taking off on a big wave, and the opportunity of an arena where marks can interact to make a painting that is spontaneous and premeditated at the same time. I selected pieces of canvas that have been stained with oil and pressed on wooden floorboards in a random way. Seeing in the imprint of the oil horizontal lines that conjured up for me a sense of water, conspiring with other fluid watery and white shapes. I often paint by the sea at the end of Long Island. I think about Moby Dick a lot. In fact there’s a whole treatise on white that Melville has included in his epic novel. Nevertheless, I have my own attraction and fascination with white. So I covered this large sandstone colored canvas with white gesso that I applied myself, and painted a large horizontal diagonal shape through it that was black and pink with the name Ahab. It looked like a painting to me. It’s irregular, stained, handmade, and anthropomorphic. There’s a topography to it; the ballet of a navigational chart that you can’t find on a map. I felt like it would humanize the building and make it more like nature, more like the sea.”



Ahab, Julian Schnabel 2009

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“THE AMERICAN VANGUARD PAINTER TOOK TO THE WHITE EXPANSE OF THE CANVAS AS MELVILLE’S ISHMAEL TOOK TO THE SEA. ON THE ONE HAND, A DESPERATE RECOGNITION OF MORAL AND INTELLECTUAL EXHAUSTION; ON THE OTHER, THE EXHILARATION OF AN ADVENTURE OVER DEPTHS IN WHICH HE MIGHT FIND REFLECTED THE TRUE IMAGE OF HIS IDENTITY.”

HAROLD ROSENBERG, *THE AMERICAN ACTION PAINTERS*, 1952

When the critic Harold Rosenberg, writing about the work of New York-based artists such as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, likened the expanse of the canvas to the ocean, he determined a philosophical direction for painting. This image, of the painter plunging into an unknown realm, seeking an image to quantify the infinite dimension of being, came to characterize a generation of artists. When Julian Schnabel came of age as a painter in the mid-1970s the existential terms of art making had shifted. Now painting was understood to be a system, governed by rules, codified by ideas rather than gestures. And yet, against the tide of conceptual art, Schnabel declared that painting might still possess the power to narrate the world, the self, the identity of the artist.

In numerous early works the ocean figures as a prominent subject: *The Sea* (1981) depicts an enormous wave thundering ashore and also includes an actual totem of driftwood placed in front of the canvas. More recently Schnabel has painted an on-going series of *Navigation Drawings*, asserting abstract emblems and forceful gestures upon the surface of found nautical charts and maps. And in a new series of large canvases, various images of surfers testing themselves within the vortex of breaking waves become emblems of human defiance – daunting feats that channel the power of nature.

Ahab relates to all of these works, and yet it stands apart. In contrast to the intimate scale of the maps, *Ahab* is the largest canvas Schnabel has painted. Its vast surface becomes an analogue to the ocean – open, immense, changeable. The curving, dangling white form conjures the essence of a whale, a leviathan flashing its terrible grandeur surfaced from the deep. The letters that spell out *Ahab* determine this reading, summoning Herman Melville’s single-minded captain whose quest for self-fulfillment led to self-destruction. In a black, blade-like form that conjures the shape of a harpoon, one reads the name *Ahab*, its letters rimmed with pink, both flesh and blood. One compares the name *Ahab* to the white form and contemplates the relationship between the two, a man’s fate tied to a whale.

Schnabel’s grandiloquent painting operates such metaphors: placing painting in relation to Melville’s romanticism while knowingly situating it in a twenty-first century skyscraper. The composition presents an abstract signifier of the painter’s imagination, presenting pure forms that become entangled, joined by visual and literary narrative. This is how Schnabel – an artist who stands at the end of the modern tradition in American painting – visualizes what painting can be today. The word *Ahab* brings the white painted form to life, animating it in our imaginations. At this epic scale, painting assumes the scope of a film screen and one ponders how painting can rival cinema—in its stubborn stillness so many images come to mind.

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Julian Schnabel was born in New York City in 1951. In 1965 he moved with his family to Brownsville, Texas. He attended the University of Houston from 1969–1973, receiving a BFA, and returned to New York to participate in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program.

In 1978 Schnabel traveled throughout Europe and in Barcelona was particularly moved by the architecture of Antonio Gaudi, the same year he made his first plate painting, “The Patients and the Doctors.” His first solo painting exhibition took place at the Mary Boone Gallery, New York City, in February 1979.

Schnabel’s work has been exhibited all over the world. His paintings, sculptures and works on paper have been the subject of retrospective exhibitions at: The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1982; The Tate Gallery, London, 1983; The Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1987; The Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1987; The Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf, 1987; The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1987; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 1987; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1987; Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel, 1989; Musée d’Art Contemporain, Nîmes, 1989; Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich, 1989; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1989; Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 1989; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1989; The Museo De Monterrey, Mexico, 1994; The Tamayo Museum, Mexico City, 1994; The Foundation Joan Miro, Barcelona, 1995; Galleria d’Arte Moderna di Bologna, Italy, 1996; Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, 2004; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Palacio de Velazquez, Madrid, 2004; and Mostra d’Oltremare, Napoli, 2004.

His work is included in the public collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Guggenheim Museums, New York and Bilbao; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Tate Gallery, London; The Metropolitan Museum, Tokyo; The Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid; The National Gallery, Washington D.C.; The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; Kunst Museum, Basel; and the Foundation Musée d’Art Moderne, Luxembourg.

In 1996 he wrote and directed the feature film *Basquiat* about fellow New York artist Jean Michel Basquiat. The film was distributed world wide by Miramax films and was in the official selection of the 1996 Venice Film Festival. Schnabel’s second film, *Before Night Falls*, based on the life of the late exiled Cuban novelist Reinaldo Arenas, won both the Grand Jury Prize and the Colpa Volpi for best actor for Javier Bardem at the Venice Film Festival 2000. Named to over 100 year-end top ten lists, Bardem’s portrayal in *Before Night Falls* earned him both Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations for best actor. In 2007, Schnabel directed his third film, *The Diving Bell and The Butterfly*. He was awarded “Best Director” at the Cannes Film Festival and the Golden Globes. *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* was nominated for four Oscars, including “Best Director”.

Most recently, Julian Schnabel has exhibited his paintings and sculpture at the Met Life building, New York, New York, December, 2006; *Julian Schnabel. Summer Pinturas 1978–2006*, International Contemporary Culture Centre of San Sebastián, San Sebastián, Spain, July–October, 2007; *Julian Schnabel. Paintings 1978–2006*, Palazzo Venezia, Rome, Italy, May–June, 2007; *Rotonda della Besana*, Milan, Italy, June–September, 2007; *Versions of Chuck and Other Works*, Schloss Derneburg, Derneburg, Germany, June, 2007; *Schnabel Asia*, Beijing World Art Museum, Beijing, China, September–October, 2007; 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong, November, 2007; The Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai, China, January–February, 2008; Gallery Hyundai, Seoul, Korea, March–April, 2008; *Navigation Drawings*, Sperone Westwater Gallery, New York, New York, January–February, 2008; *The Conscious Gaze of Frightened Young Nuns*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Kiasma, Finland, March, 2008, *Christ’s Last Day*, Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, California, February–March, 2008; and *Julian Schnabel: Untitled (Chinese Paintings)*, in the Phillips de Pury & Company Gallery at the Saatchi Gallery, October 9–January 18 2009; *Julian Schnabel Recent paintings*, Art Space at Helutrans, Singapore; Manila – March 29–April 20, 2009; June 13–July 6, *Julian Schnabel (Untitled Chinese Paintings)*, Naples – July 3–September 6, 2009.

Julian Schnabel lives and works in New York, as well as in Montauk, Long Island.

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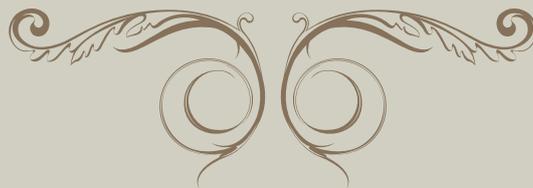
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