

«Art, which is the only activity that interest us, is not merely prayer, dedication, offering, but above all a taking possession, an act of conquest, willed, imperative, triumphant construction... of our Paradise».

From Alberto Savinio's *Childhood of Nivasio Dolcemare*.

The history of art of this century is a History of ideas—conceptualism, of art examining its own existence. Picasso was not as much a painter as a radical serialist. His nude is a nude is a nude is a Steinian presignification of the artist as machine (Duchamp, Warhol). Mondrian likewise was not really a painter as much as a spiritual deconstructionist. One could argue that all the great modernists hated painting—the tradition of painting. Abstraction supplanted the anathema of conventional exchange value of contemporary art—an 'affiche' art signalling the triumph of free enterprise and the reinclusion of the popular. What did all this have to do with painting per se? Perhaps paintings has always been a means to an end (the end) of painting—the transition of painting to meaning.

Diego Cortez

**MUSEO SCHNABEL.** It is 1988. That very recent era of 'new painting', born at the outset of this decade, seems both distant and fiercely close. It was a time of timelessness in art, an explosion of the present, a chance to discover how the *now embodied all time*. It was art history's big boom. Painters fled from the present: through the subversion of the 'latest' artists materials—plastic jars of plastic paints, rolls of bleached linen, spray paints and fixatives, overhead projected guide images, the straight edge, etc.—great Soul artists turned to more natural, more personal options: organic powder pigments, applied to wet plaster (Clemente); straw, antlers, broken plates, felt and fat (Kiefer, Schnabel, Beuys); or rubber-glazed drawings inset into molded metal reliefs (Cucchi). Even in the epicenter of a most painterly era, the 1980's, we saw the history of 20th century conceptualism unfolding, often in spite of the paint tube.

By the end of the '70's, an inexplicable inertia ground the art scene to a halt. No one had realized it as such when the new internationalist painters emerged, they caught everyone by surprise. Intense resistance from the dematerialist school resulted, teamed with their reserves of ruffled revolutionary gazateers and 'play-it-safe' red-tapists from the museum sector. In the midst of this hullabaloo, Julian Schnabel entered center-stage, plates in hand, and swiftly became the reference point for the 'new painting' controversies. His handmade sediments of history, the 'plate' paintings, were an anthropological art which marked a return to the organic, the heart and the hand. Schnabel represented a restitution of the art of an archeological art which revealed the risk and fall cycles of our world's history—how close to the ground our many civilizations have remained. Schnabel's employment of historical surfaces—earth, ancient urban walls, maps of the world, skins from near-extinct animals, velvets from royalty, ceramic shards and relics from fictional excavations, (back) drops from the world's theatres, vestments from the clergy, and now in the recent works of 1987-88, tarpaulin banners recalling the pre-Gutenberg age of illustrated religious tracts and religious war banners—a political-religious art which connects the so-called Dark Ages of our past, with the dark ages of our present.

Trying to classify Schnabel's recent works, to give them a proper title or series title, many work titles were used. For example: the *tarp* paintings, the *sign* paintings, the «Stations of the Cross» series, the «14 Stations», the *religious* paintings, and «The Recognitions» paintings. «The Recognitions» became the final blanket title for the series. It is an homage to a master work of American fiction of the same title, by William Gaddis. Various key headings from the novel, such as «La Macule», «Pope Clement of Rome», and «Flaying of the Unjust Judge», have been culled as titles and appear as well in the visual inventory. Titles are everything in these works. The large, roughly-penned 'titles' are an allusion to an inner literary universe. Here, it is possible to understand the 'book' by looking at its 'cover'. So, these *tarp* paintings are Schnabel's affiliation with literature, not solely with Gaddis' *The Recognitions*, but with the *art* of writing. As history itself is written or recorded memory, these history paintings are a visual investigation of the written word. They are frighteningly forthright in their frontality of manual character display. We do not find the same compositional tricks played by the futurists, cubists or dadaists in their fragmented text collages. This is a more solemn event. We are on a battlefield with the defiled fabrics of war—a camouflaged formation of signs—there is a call to battle.

Here the battle is bloody, as in «Pope Clement of Rome», where the letter *M* doubles as the chasuble, or the letter *C* symbolizes the uprooted temple. This is a religious war a time when church and state were one. We can draw some parallels from this historical fact to understand today's religious zeal in the political arena. Isn't Schnabel asking for trouble (Scorcese) when he chooses to make a religious art, while both liberals and conservatives cry blasphemy? Doesn't Schnabel always act with such provocation? Wasn't Schnabel reminding the *followers* of the Reagan administration of excessive blind faith people give their leadership, in his painting «The Children's Crusade» Schnabel remembered the tale of over-zealous believers-parents-sending their young children off to fight a holy war, never to see them again, as most were corruptly sold off into slavery before ever reaching the battlefield.

«The Recognitions» are then a dirge for the fears anxieties and tragedy of *today's* Plague. We must not forget that fundamentalist tithing has helped support a bloody Central American conflict. Against this reality, much of today's art has decided to become more logoistic, more emblematic, less decorative, more political. Schnabel makes it quite evident. From the overtly political «El Salvador» paintings (1986),

which Schnabel describes as «a nighttime scene of some nurses on the side of a lonely road, blinded by the headlights of an unknown auto, which brings them their final moment. They happened to be in El Salvador at the wrong time». In the recent «Recognitions» works, Schnabel evokes broader issues of our current moral dilemma—a new plague epoch. Malaparte: «The freedom of Europe must be born not of liberation, but of the plague... just as liberation had been born of the new and terrible sufferings caused by the plague which liberation has brought with it». These recent militant works by Schnabel are at war with Reagan Era politics, and are a document of all the unknown missing.

Julian Schnabel visited Sevilla in June, 1987. He toured several sites considered by the regional government for the construction-conversion of a new Museum of Contemporary Art. One of the sites was the historic Cuartel del Carmen. Originally a Carmelite monastery, established in the 14th century, and modified several times before occupation by the military from 1810 to 1978, when it was abandoned. Upon viewing the worn state of El Carmen, Schnabel immediately felt it to be the 'home' of his *tarp* paintings, and plans for an exhibition were made. Schnabel: «The painting belonged there. It didn't matter whether or not anybody came to see them. I wanted to see them there». Many new works were added to the series in the subsequent year and it was probably the *memory* of El Carmen that inspired such an expansion of the series which we now call «The Recognitions». The El Carmen space functioned both as a cloister and as a military fortress, and the architectural remnants of this now derelict edifice, suited the 'religious-military' qualities of Schnabel's *tarp* paintings. The contrast of Renaissance and Baroque structures, altered and overpainted in dehumanized military browns, greys and rusts, create a raw, barbaric setting for these often 'ungainly' works of art. As Hemmingway found a savage inspiration or grounding in the Andalusian culture, Schnabel has himself again returned to Spain as an imagined and real sanctuary for his work. From his first visit to Barcelona in 1978, whereby Gaudil's architecture and mosaic ornamentation inspired Schnabel's first 'plate' paintings, later through his many references to Spanish paintings, the *corrida*, and religion, we have seen Spain used as the imagined site for a *Museo Schnabel*. These «Recognitions» paintings, set in the poverty of Sevilla's El Carmen, create the ultimate memory play. Just as Schnabel describes his new work as «feeling like they've been left outside, left over», El Carmen is a ravaged memory. When «The Recognitions» paintings travel to Basel and Bordeaux for museum viewings, the memory of El Carmen will remain whole.

In «The Recognitions», the large-scale lettering is meant to dominate—they are painted scripture, painted law, 'carved' into canvases provide the nocturnal ground for a language of *signs*; brushed onas is painted with moonlight. The words *are* the image, and their austere use of white paint projects a polar brightness, a luminosity, a changelessness, a durability that the light of the sun does not have. There is of course a hint of narrative, but just a hint. The paintings are warm, folksy, *funky*. The text-picture is so clumsy, so un-slick, so uncommercial, that it could *only* be art. This brut graffiti seems scrawled by a mind incapacitated by the present (Twombly). Sometimes Schnabel does not seem to be in this world, in this moment. Yet these introversions of history are at once extremely effective extroversions of propaganda (banners). They are 'public' works in the tradition of Delacroix, Picasso, Pollock and Beuys. They are meant to speak—speak to an audience. They continue Schnabel's 'last-ditch' effort at late 20th century painting and no matter how difficult that might be, these recent *tarp* paintings are as painterly as any work being made today. They are so unlike the normal function of paintings, but have, in any case, reassessed the power of the gesture in art, and the manipulation of *foreign* and familiar materials. Schnabel: «I am looking for something, and you have to unearth the things you are looking for—something strange and unfamiliar and something familiar. How can it seduce you if it's completely foreign? And yet it has to be something that us unlike you to made you realize yourself». «The Recognitions» again provide Schnabel with a pretext for the resurrection of painting.

Savinio: «Because the superior man speaks in a colorless, transparent, blank language... even the shadow of an accent has vanished from this priestly atonic tongue, stripped of all its earthly allure. And thus we, accentless men, cultivate a nostalgia for accents, and seek in others this flavor and aroma which we no longer possess, believing that they know a pleasure that is denied to us. We grow sad at the call of «local voices», the «voices of things», the voices of men who are like things, who live like things, who suffer as things suffer: fishermen, ballerinas, manual workers...» This fragment from Savinio sums up the

escape route from the perils of modernity to the anthropological/archeological matrix to which Schnabel journeys for sources of inspiration and information. His voyage to an imagined Spain is a conversation with its tumultuous mix of cultural and religious history.

The indecorous likeness of «The Recognitions» paintings may derive chiefly from the irregular shaped canvases, many in the form of crosses. Actually, these tarp cruciforms served as the top and side flaps of open army vehicles. An extreme example is the «Teddy Bear's Picnic», a completely uniquely shaped work, which looks like it was stretched over the tablets of the ten commandments, a work which could seem more sculpture than painting. In the «Teddy Bear's Picnic», a sizable void of spilled white paint makes the painting look vandalized. The likewise central black oil 'slick' void in Sigmar Polke's 1986 *Africa* comes to mind. He grounds the spill on a printed fabric illustrating palm trees and oil barrels. Both Schnabel and Polke seem to employ these voids of oil to remind us of a crucial ecological reality. While, of course, the found tarpaulins have themselves come from a context of oil-fed transport.

These *word* paintings are linked together, there is an inner order, and a voyage route. They lead from one to the next just as the letters and words coagulate and disperse. They are called «The Recognitions» paintings because they are stoppages, moments when a word becomes the body of a realization, an allusion to all the senses of being in a given moment, and all of mystery—the way the word «Rosebud» operates as the key to the film «Citizen Kane».

«The Recognitions» can be informally broken into three or four groups: the *idea* works, which are raw *text* paintings, white on dark grounds; the *banner* paintings («Virtue», «Mercy», «Charity», etc.), one of which «Eus» is perhaps closest in spirit; the *abstract* works like «Diaspora» and «Night Hunting»; and the full, *painterly* works («La Macule», «Ritu Quadrupedis», and «Trees of Home»). Amongst the *idea* works, the threadbare radical works that mark Schnabel's risk-taking in this most recent evolution of his work. Most of his former painterly intentions have evaporated, and what remains is a fecund auto-writing, not unlike the incitation of Twombly's inspired confessions. «L'Heroine is the purest of Schnabel's *word* paintings, as is «Alexander McEvilley Achilles»—it is pure pleasure of the text. In «Spinoza», we see a warm, hearth-lit Bohemia—the mark of a craggy individualist.

In «The Afflicted Organ» and «La Macule», Schnabel incorporates the new *idea* painting inventions into his more replete painterly landscape. In «Diaspora» and «Night Hunting», Schnabel combines abstract with traces of text propaganda, and the effect is a quite solemn nature immediation relative to the major installation works of Beuys. Finally, in «CORTES», the final work in this exhibition, seen on the cover of this catalogue, Schnabel has ignored writing altogether. «CORTES» is the most literal connection to the El Carmen scape. It depicts everything in Schnabel's marriage to Spanish culture. And it may signal an exit from the artist's obsession with writing. In viewing «The Recognitions» paintings, we can now witness the painter's plunge into the printed word as a visual device for creating both art history and 'history art'. Schnabel's sediment of feeling springs from this sediment of history, and what is distant, secret, closed, «dark» as in a priest's cassock, is made visible and heralds the new middle ages in which we strangely find ourselves.

Mankind, even in an age of instant communication, must never lose any of its former means of communication—handwriting, wall carvings, smoke signals and sign language. The 'afflicted heart' of today's Soul artist remember «the dark backward and abysm of time», and use it to make the present more human.

Schnabel: «I like the fact that these paintings look like things that already existed in the world. I like old things; I like the way they're made. It is hard to find new things that I like. Maybe something is wrong with me».