

Julian Schnabel

Works of the 90s

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JULIAN SCHNABEL

“I make most of my paintings in the summer. I always have since I was a little kid. I can still smell the roses in my uncle Jack’s backyard. I like to paint outside. My studio doesn’t have a roof on it. I can see better, get further away from the paintings, see them in radically different light at different times of day. The weather effects the paintings too, stains, rain, mildew, bleached by the sun, accidents, blown by the wind, nature, at first a distraction interfering then helping. It is an activated system. Freedom of materials set in water and daylight, every summer.”¹

This statement reveals a lot about Julian Schnabel’s artistic understanding. Towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 90s Schnabel began to paint large format works.² His decision to use the unconventional material tarpaulin as a support was ideal as, with it, his works could not only grow dramatically but the quality of the weathered tarpaulin, combined with working in his outside studio, also made sure that traces remained visible and spontaneous accidents complemented his painting. Each unique tarp gives Schnabel’s paintings essential features—distractions that fuse image and base to the storyline of his paintings: the underlying, left-over marks visible on the base mingle with a sudden natural interfering (like changing light effects) and with his added paint; the overall result is a vital, ever-changing, new work. This unconventionally free style—untypical for the art canon of his time—is further enforced by transforming existing painting methods into works of art.

The group of four large tarpaulin paintings entitled *The End of Summer I–IV* from 1990 exhibited here is immediately reminiscent of Abstract Expressionism. Julian actually refers back to major figures in Abstract Expressionism—it is characteristic for him to draw inspiration from various sources. He carefully analyzes the techniques used by his precursors and translates their methods, thus creating his own idiosyncratic style. Looking specifically at the three works *The End of Summer I–III*, they appear as variations of Barnett Newman’s emphasis on non-objective, spontaneous, and iconic zip paintings—the latter style interpreted here freely more or less horizontally across the canvases. In-between, there are flying gestural forms: *End of Summer IV* merely comprises informal, expressive shapes which might be a vestige of Cy Twombly or Robert Motherwell’s style using broad brushstrokes in space and a distinctive use of colors—ultramarine blue and ocher yellow become Schnabel’s purple and white. With the approach of adapting other styles for his works and the unorthodox use—as described above—of the accidental and leftover he transmits important signs of masterpieces into the present and adds a reflective contextual and visual means to his summer paintings: “Their beauty was the trace of an investigation into a visual analogue for freedom. They were a palimpsest, a collection of signals that triggered an emotional and an intellectual vision that resides in and outside of the painting.”³

The use of a dirty purple in all the works exhibited here, even reduced to a minimum in the sailcloth work *Jane Birkin*, is a recurrent color in Julian Schnabel’s work; in fact the work *Untitled (Purple Painting)* from 1990 names it directly in the title. The

way Schnabel utilizes his brush to draw, and his use of opaque and dirty colours might be a reference to the highly venerated Joseph Beuys, the master of the distinctive *Braun-kreuz* works. His brown oil paintings are bold and have a sculptural quality,⁴ as the shapes in Schnabel's works often appear. Beuys's sense for drawing and his symbolic gestures, particular mysticism and political influences, attracted Schnabel.⁵ Beuys's analytical approach to understanding which tasks and statements art could (or should) make is an unconventional challenge to art. Schnabel did not look to produce for others or the art market; an inner devotion to art itself might have been a greater attraction for himself. Indeed *Untitled (Purple Painting)* is one of these paintings which take getting used to, it needs imagination; the work is a fragile combination of several individual parts which deliberately collide in one big spot.

Wild imagination and great thinking is eased by the idea of space. Throughout Schnabel's career he has preoccupied himself with the question of space.⁶ The enormous potential of space given to his outside studio in Montauk, and found in his free use of styles, mixed materials, and mingling storylines, as well as the vast dimensions of the "Schnabel Room" at the Nicola Erni Collection—all provide a mental breathing space, and encourage totemic visions, new adventures, and a broad-minded attitude to life. Referring to the work *I Went to Tangiers and Had Dinner with Paul Bowles* from 1990 which measures roughly 490 x 490 cm, William Gaddis points out: "...do his gigantic paintings on old army tarpaulins dragged through the dirt open new avenues for discovery on our own culture, and ask us to look again?"⁷ This ability for voracious thoughts is provided by Schnabel's omnipresent and deliberate sense of memory and different cultures. Works by writers, musicians, or filmmakers in different languages (English and Spanish) are evoked in his images and words. Paul Bowles, a highly-esteemed American composer and author who moved to North Africa where he lived for forty years, became a "pilgrim figure" for Julian Schnabel. He commemorates him by writing "I went to Tangiers and had dinner with Paul Bowles" in the fresh white cloud in the painting shown here, thus capturing the viewer's attention by affixing graphic characters. The typically free-flowing, purple shapes and other rectangles with their patina, ordered in a row without any explicit meaning, together with the manifold traces of the tarp are ingeniously arranged and allude to losing oneself in a story.

The intention of referring to stories, names or events lends works a sense of locality and presence while, at the same time, allowing for contingency. Julian Schnabel himself, besides being a painter and sculpture, is a filmmaker and his thoughts always stretch across other art disciplines.⁸ The huge sailcloth installed here, entitled *Jane Birkin* from 1990—a work with a pronounced sculptural presence—is one of six from the Jane Birkin series, an homage to the English/French actress, singer, and songwriter. Beside her talent in these fields, there is a direct relation here to the fashion photographs in the Nicola Erni Collection and the collector's interest in fashion history with a focus on *zeitgeist* and glamor.⁹ Jane Birkin was the namesake of the popular Hermès "Birkin bag." The homage in this work though really goes back to a sailing boat inscribed with "Jane," evident in the used sailcloth taken as a support for the work. At the first instant, this work, like many others, appears abstract. But the appropriated materials, the painting process, the words, and the titles lend Julian Schnabel's works a narrative component. Reused materials

do not provide a neutral surface, but carry a story themselves and convey atmosphere. Schnabel uses the history of *objets trouvés* as an important reference, thus adding materiality and associations to generate an open thinking space for his paintings.

In the three powerful paintings *Zeus and Duende*, *La Voz de Antonio Molina* (*The Voice of Antonio Molina*), both from 1992, and *Untitled (Duende)* from 1993, Julian proves to us once again that he knows what it takes to make a great painting: the utter experience of actually painting a painting. These works presented here are not as big as other works discussed above but are dense in expression and contextual statement. Here, his painterly vocabulary is full of essentials: vibrant and mixed colors, powerful brush strokes confidently applied, other colors in clear and bold contrasts, purple stains, fantastic shapes and depth, as well as reference words across the canvases. The element of print in his works, mainly elaborated in the 90s, plays a central role and became a key element in his paintings.

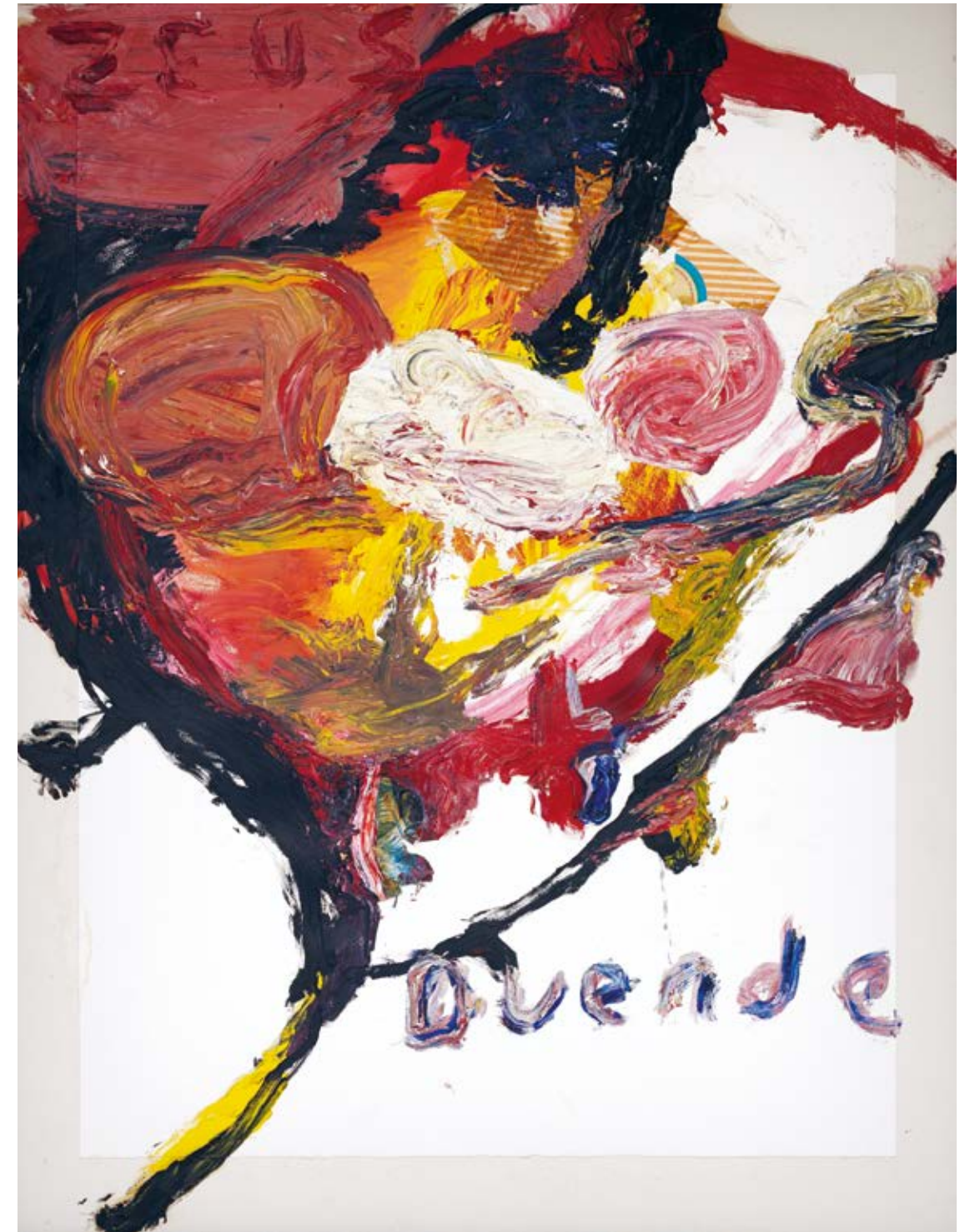
La Voz de Antonio Molina is from the series which he dedicated to the Spanish Flamenco dancer, singer and actor, who was very popular in the 50s. This work, however, is interesting for its composition of flaying shapes, abstract masses, and somehow romantic gestures—a creation which appears to have come out of Schnabel's subconsciousness.¹⁰ This is a work which offers many possibilities for interpretation: there are abstract and figurative forms, pale and strong colors, a sense of flowing—although static—and a permanent switch between back and foreground, drawing and painting.

The two "Zeus" works are differently structured, more figurative, with a direct ambition for power. Literally the word "Zeus" augments the sense of dominance and exaltation. Not by chance did Schnabel select Zeus from among the other Olympian gods. Zeus is not only the first Olympian god in Greek mythology but more powerful than all other gods together. Zeus typically is depicted as a colossal statue or, as implied in both works *Zeus and Duende* and *Untitled (Duende)* as a muscular warrior with the attribute of a thunderbolt or a sceptre. The painted shape has such associations with a powerfully muscular upper torso, and some lines in *Untitled (Duende)* allude to a sceptre. But why and what about "Duende"? The word *duende* is Spanish and means an imp, a magical being or something with that quality. Understanding its meaning, it is as if Schnabel—with a twinkle in his eye—wants more or less to revise the authority of the singular domination of Zeus through that little goblin peeking out from the right side (*Zeus and Duende*). Perhaps it shows Schnabel's light-hearted humor. Knowing Julian Schnabel, it seems reasonable to assume that Zeus might be an allegory of himself, and thus an artistic exaltation of his personality.

Above all, the attraction for everything larger-than-life is most obvious in Schnabel's being, thinking, and his approach to art; it is inherent in his nature. So it stands to reason, or is the reason, why he chooses topics and creates artworks around "greatness"—he is permanently searching for authenticity. As a consequence, this leads to a constant process of discovery through the very experience of making art, and seeking opportunities for it to prevail. It is about his faith in the power of the medium—in the power of art, which he says is greater than life. This is why Schnabel's paintings are full of

energy; it is his impulsive struggle with painting which confronts him without a break. Schnabel's iconographic language lies in the fantastic and real, the manipulation of art styles, the anarchic use of materials, and interdisciplinary thinking. When observing his work, one is overwhelmed due to these striking components, but finally one arrives at its soul because of its impetuous, idiosyncratic authenticity. His painting cannot really be categorized to any one style, but to an elementary artistic attitude. Today, his oeuvre, created over a period of more than fifty years, is of great importance and contributes to the understanding of contemporary painting. This gives Schnabel, perhaps more than other artists (who, for example, can be classified to specific art historical styles) a leading position, a certain seniority—maybe after all he is Zeus?

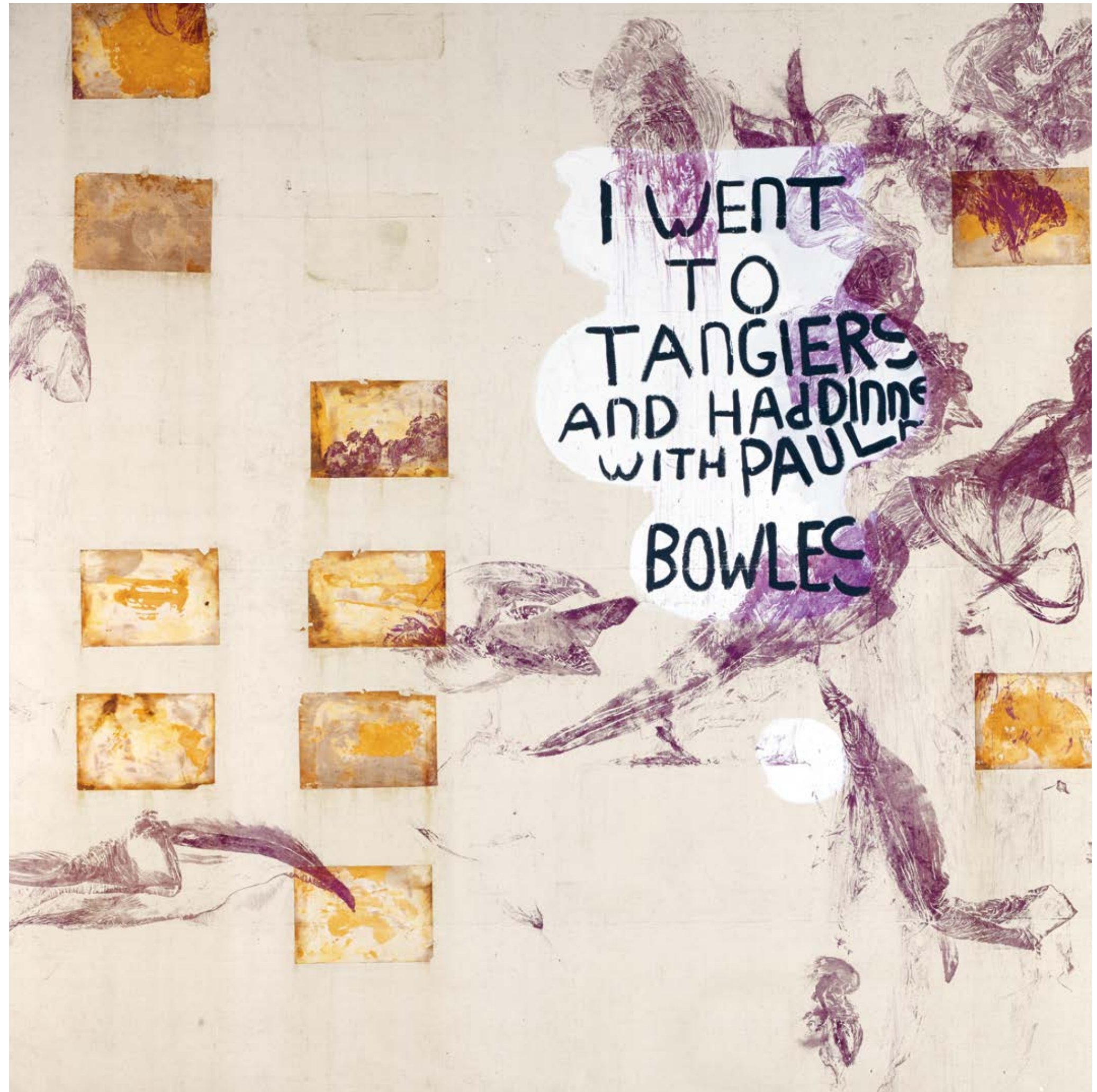
- 1 Introduction in: *Summer Julian Schnabel, Paintings 1976–2007*, Skira, 2008, p. 5
- 2 Schnabel traveled to Europe twice, once at the beginning of the 70s, when he visited Germany, Italy, and Spain. He was hugely impressed by Italian artists such as Fra Angelico, Caravaggio, Giotto, and Tintoretto, all of whom painted enormous works. Traveling, he said himself, has a great effect on his work.
- 3 Julian Schnabel, CVJ: *Nicknames of Maitre D's & Other Excerpts from Life*, first published in 1987 by Random House, here: Hatje Cantz, 2015, p. 39
- 4 Norman Rosenthal, in: *Julian Schnabel: Permanently Becoming and the Architecture of Seeing*, Skira, 2012, here: Museo Correr, Venice, 2011, p. 38
- 5 Beate Reifenscheid, "Julian Schnabel – Palimpsest" in: *Julian Schnabel Palimpsest. Printed Works 1983–2016*, Ludwig Museum Koblenz, Geuer & Geuer Art GmbH, 2016, p. 3
- 6 This experience harks back to the first time he saw frescos in chapels in Italy, relating to the size of the room and the thickness of the walls. The rooms in the Gramercy Park Hotel became a framework for his painting. Bonnie Clearwater, "Julian the Apostle" in: *JS, Versions of Chuck & Other Works*, Schloss Derneburg, Walther König, 2007, p. 60
- 7 William Gaddis, "For Julian Schnabel", in: *Summer Julian Schnabel, Paintings 1976–2007*, Skira, 2008, p. 15
- 8 This again connects him to the core of the Nicola Erni Collection with its focus on 60s and 70s fashion and society with its various overlapping areas.
- 9 Nicola Erni (ed.), *Zeitgeist & Glamour: Photography of the 60s and 70s*, Prestel, 2011
- 10 Maria de Corral, "Painting and Seduction" in: Max Hollein (ed.), *Julian Schnabel – Painting 1978–2003*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Hatje Cantz, 2004, p. 141



Untitled (Duende), 1993
Oil, cloth, and paper on canvas



Jane Birkin, 1990
Oil and gesso on sail cloth



I Went to Tangiers and Had Dinner with Paul Bowles, 1990
Oil and gesso on white tarpaulin



< *End of Summer I*, 1990
Oil and gesso on gray tarpaulin

> *End of Summer II*, 1990
Oil and gesso on gray tarpaulin



< *End of Summer III*, 1990
Oil and gesso on gray tarpaulin

> *End of Summer IV*, 1990
Oil and gesso on gray tarpaulin



Untitled (Purple Painting), 1990
Oil on white tarpaulin





La Voz de Antonio Molina (The Voice of Antonio Molina), 1992
Oil and collage on canvas

Zeus and Duende, 1992
Oil on grey tarpaulin

