

# **JULIAN SCHNABEL**

PAINTINGS 1987-2012

The building for the Nicola Erni Collection has brought to life a long-held dream: the collection, compiled for many years with passion and devotion, can now be shown in its diversity and in a dialogue of different work groups. Spaces were created for paintings such as *Painting for Malik Joyeux and Bernardo Bertolucci (Surfer)* (2006), and *I went to Tangiers and had dinner with Paul Bowles* (1990), now enabling the proper appreciation and staging of these tremendous, large formats, some measuring as much as five meters wide or high.

The selection of works from the extensive Julian Schnabel collection reflects the amazing artistic creative power and immediacy that became manifest in the artist's continuous new work groups. It displays Schnabel's impetuous painting in bold brush strokes, colorful, pastose, and at the same time, structures of delicate drawing, similarly proliferating veins of lines, sensual and seductive, rife with secrets and beauty, untamed lust for painting and abandon to a wealth of materials, forms, figures, and signs.

Schnabel began his artistic career in New York in 1973 as fellow in the renowned "Whitney Independent Study Program", one of the most important training grounds for artists and curators. He traveled through Europe and studied the old masters in museums and churches. Beginning in 1978 he created his first plate paintings, which would henceforth be a base for his fame. In the late 1970s, an era when minimal and conceptual art still set the tone, when the painted picture and its perception by the senses were radically renounced, Schnabel painted monumental and simultaneously sumptuous works with great panache. In doing so, he trusted in the image's magical power. He drew his content from the iconography of ancient myths and from history: gods, poets, and intellectuals emerge, as do common experiences, and personal ones with family, friends, love, death, and dying, "I want my life to be imbedded in my work. If my being isn't crushed into my painting like a pressed car, my work isn't just".<sup>1</sup>

Looking for a characteristic Schnabel style is futile. The artist constantly found new things to surprise both himself and beholders. As he said, "I don't want any logo, and I haven't found any handwriting that represents me".<sup>2</sup> A work that has no ties to any style, that is obliged only to painting. It speaks to and about art rather than to its self, its needs and experiences.<sup>3</sup>

With every new work group, Julian Schnabel employed a palette of

different contents, stylistic means, materials, and signs.

Schnabel had a pronounced pleasure in painting outdoors: at tennis courts, parking garages, and in his open air studio in Montauk on Long Island. Characteristic of his work is the use of different materials, such as oil, wax, resin, emulsion, plaster, and everyday objects that jut into the space like architecture. He used shards of clay as painting surface—broken plates, bowls, and tea pots—canvas, rags, velvet, ornamental and figurative prints, photographs, tent and truck tarps, sails, polyester, animal furs, and even surfboards. These unusual materials serve him as starting point for his paintings and are important components of the work. His secondhand painting surfaces, such as the tattered marquise of *Goya* (2006)—with rips, gaps, and stitches—or the sailcloth of *Jane Birkin* (1990) already have texture and history. They are witness to the past. "For example, I used these huge tarps. They were there to cover up boats on New Portwood Island, I liked the way that they got this wavy form in the rain and dirt. I like it when something has its own character, something that I didn't invent. With my paintings, I try then to create a connection to such an object or to find out what's essential about it".<sup>4</sup> This method thus becomes the continuation of a story that has already begun. Using things that have their own origins, that bear the traces of history, lends the works "something human".<sup>5</sup>

Schnabel's paintings have an enormous presence in a space through their stupendous size, their immense weight, their combination of different materials, and the three-dimensional effect of their surfaces. They completely engage a room and trigger an immediate physical experience in beholders, which is almost impossible to elude. The Schnabel space in the Nicola Erni Collection, the size of a basketball court, exhibits a prime example of this type of experience. Here we encounter the plate painting *His Last Time in St. Moritz* (1989). Schnabel tossed broken pottery—plates, mugs, vases onto a wooden panel brushed with putty: an uneven, sharp-edged field of shards arose, in some places convex, in some concave. The plate paintings are among the most important works in Schnabel's entire oeuvre. They are his trademark. No one before him had used shards as a painting surface, to then paint on fragments of clay. They are paintings of great emotional depth and enormous physical exertion. In the winter season 1987/88, Jean-Michel Basquiat worked as he had done several times before, on invitation from Bruno Bischofberger in the latter's studio on Suvrettahang in St. Moritz. The following winter season, Julian Schnabel finished his plate painting *His Last Time in St. Moritz*, which was meant as

1 Julian Schnabel 1978, quoted in: *Julian Schnabel*, eds. Rene Ricard and Alexander van Gravenstein, ex. cat. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Amsterdam 1982, unpaginated.

2 Julian Schnabel, in *Julian Schnabel. Malerei/Paintings 1978–2003*, ed. Max Hollein, ex. cat. Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Ostfildern-Ruit 2004, p. 166 (annotated biography by Ingrid Pfeiffer).

3 Donald Kuspit, *Der Kult vom Avantgardekünstler*, Klagenfurt 1995 (engl. original: *The Cult of the Avant-garde Artist*, Cambridge 1993, p. 13).

4 ARTE Kultur January 28, 2004, Julian Schnabel in Frankfurt.

5 Julian Schnabel, in *Julian Schnabel. Malerei/Paintings 1978–2003*, ed. Max Hollein, p.163.

homage to his friend Jean-Michel Basquiat. He was inspired by the objects and materials of his friend that were left behind, as well as by the image of a chandelier, which when turned upside down looked like a dunce cap. The dunce cap was meant to be seen as representative of the portrait of Jean-Michael Basquiat here, as a symbol for the life of a young and exceptional talent and person who died much too young. After shooting like a comet to the top of the art scene, Jean-Michel Basquiat died of a “speedball” overdose in 1988, at the young age of twenty-seven.

Writing and language are dominant, central elements in Schnabel’s works that enthrall the curious gaze: as painting and as meaningful sign. Especially with the abstract works, the viewer holds onto words or successions of letters. Usually he or she attempts to devise a meaning or narrative. If one attempts this in Schnabel’s paintings, such as the works from the “Recognitions” series *Teddy Bears Picnic* (1987), where huge, white letters dominate the image from top to bottom, from right to left, the beholder is more or less left standing before a silent wall. A great deal remains enigmatic, charged; the references and innuendos do not come together to form a statement. Nonetheless, the words sometimes prove to be biographical references, for example, “Olatz” is his second wife’s name, “Zeus” the name of his pit bull.

The sound of the lettering is also important. Along with the content that one associates with them, terms such as “Zeus”, “Duende”, and “Mundaza” are to be interpreted also as catalysts of feelings. Schnabel arrives at these words in most cases entirely by chance—when traveling, meeting people, in music (Edith Piaf’s “Je ne regrette rien”) and in literature. They seem to maintain a hold on the artist and develop their own independent life in his works.

Schnabel skillfully combines abstract and figurative elements in his paintings. *Big Girl Painting* (2001) shows the portrait of a classical, American “teenage girl”, blond, in a dress with a buttoned-up collar, frontal, motionless and orderly, painted like a “billboard-sized icon”. He captured her on thirteen canvases, like an “American Goddess”. The images, which are of different sizes and colors, have one thing in common: the eyes disappear behind a bar, a strong, fast, brush stroke from left to right. “Why no eyes?” asked an interview, “So people will look at the paintings and not at the eyes”, answered the artist.

Rather than the power of attraction of the eyes, which would have captured the beholder’s gaze, now, attention is directed at the painting—in the same way that Baselitz turns his figures upside down to erase the figurative in favor of the painterly. When one looks at the painting as something other than a face, it seems nearly abstract: the blue like the

blue of the sky, and the zigzag of the collar line is no longer a dress. Like in the majority of his works, abstract and narrative blend here: how many associations are there with “not-seeing”, “blindness”, without the eyes as the mirror of the soul, unsettling and simultaneously fascinating. Aren’t the eyes of the goddess of justice also bound?<sup>6</sup>

Also beyond the art world, a large audience is familiar with Julian Schnabel who is present everywhere. Whether with his feature films *Basquiat* (1996), *The diving bell and the butterfly* (1995), *Before Night Falls* (2000), *Miral* (2010) or his video and stage design productions for Lou Reed concerts in Berlin and New York, his interior design for Ian Schrager’s Gramercy Park Hotel, his collaborations with fashion designers (Azzedine Alaïa) and with photographers (David Bailey), or as contributing editor to *Interview*.

For Nicola and Marcel Erni, it is important that art touches them, amazes them; is intuitive and inventive, tells stories, sparks associations, but also that it poses existential questions. Julian Schnabel’s works appeal to emotion and intuition. We learn a great deal about love, death, about freedom, truth, and much more. It is thus no surprise that this extraordinary artist is represented in such a multifaceted way in the collection.

Ira Stehmann

<sup>6</sup> Robert Rosenblum, “Schnabel’s Violent America”, in *Julian Schnabel. Big Girl Paintings*, ex. cat. Gagosian Gallery, New York 2002, pp. 7–12.



*Head on a stump, 1990*

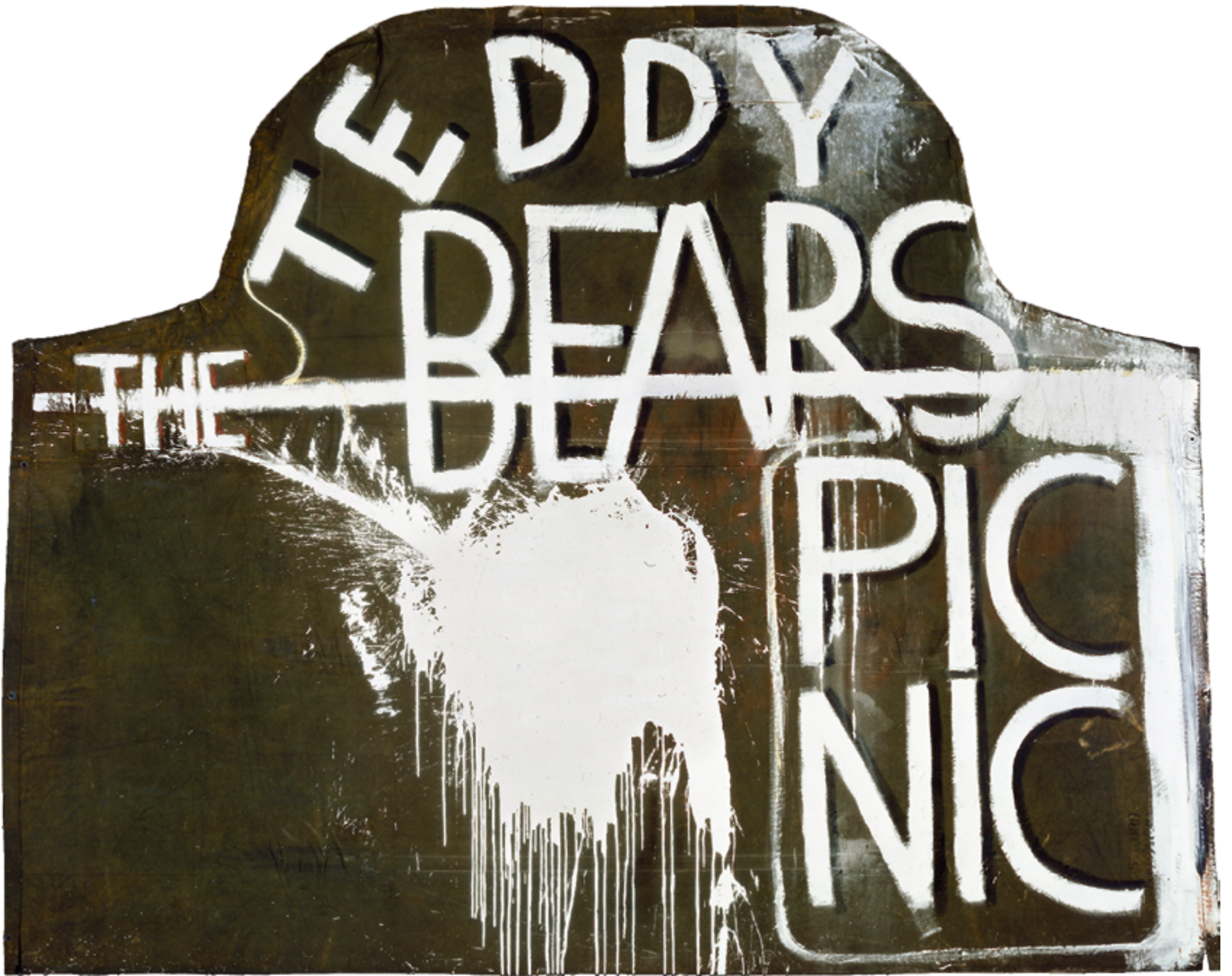


*Portrait Nicola Erni, Paris, 2007*



*His Last Time in St. Moritz, 1989*





*The Teddy Bears Picnic, 1987*



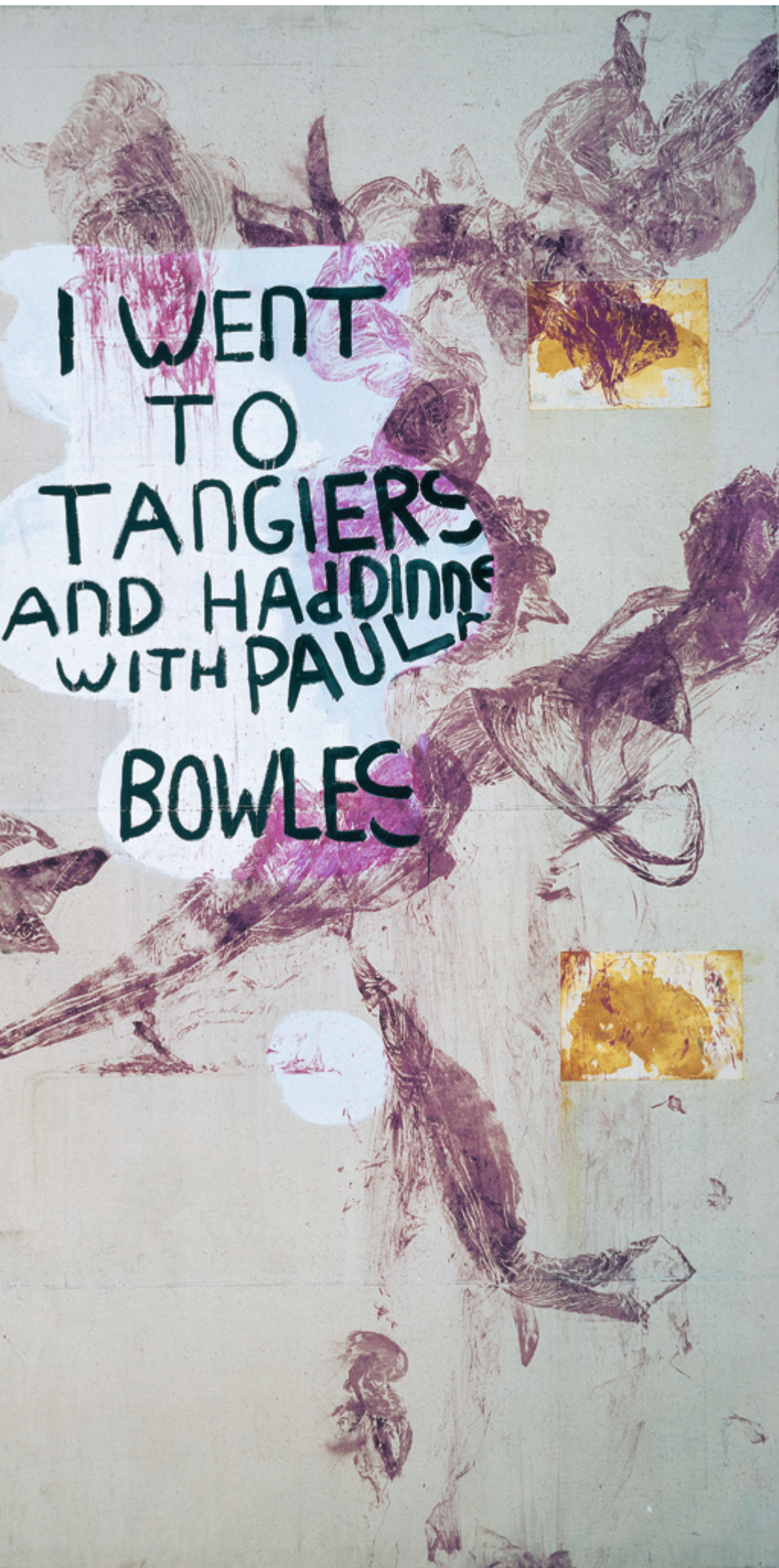


Jane Birkin, 1990



*I went to Tangiers and had dinner with Paul Bowles, 1990*





*Untitled (Los Patos del Buen Retiro I), 1991*



LOS PATOS

DEL

BUEN

RETIRGO





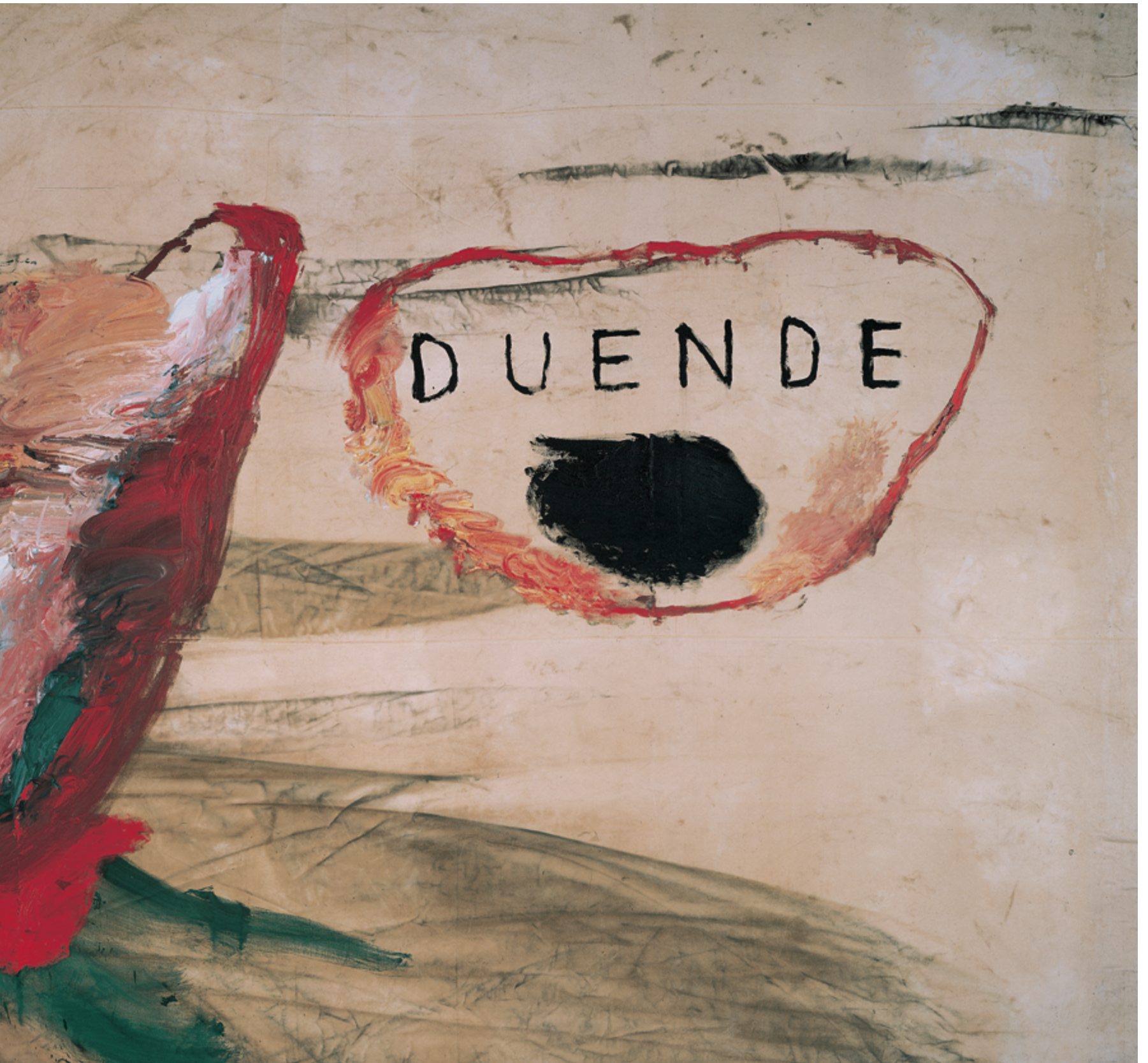


Loz Voz de Antonio Molina, 1992



*Duende*, 1992









Zeus and Duende, 1992

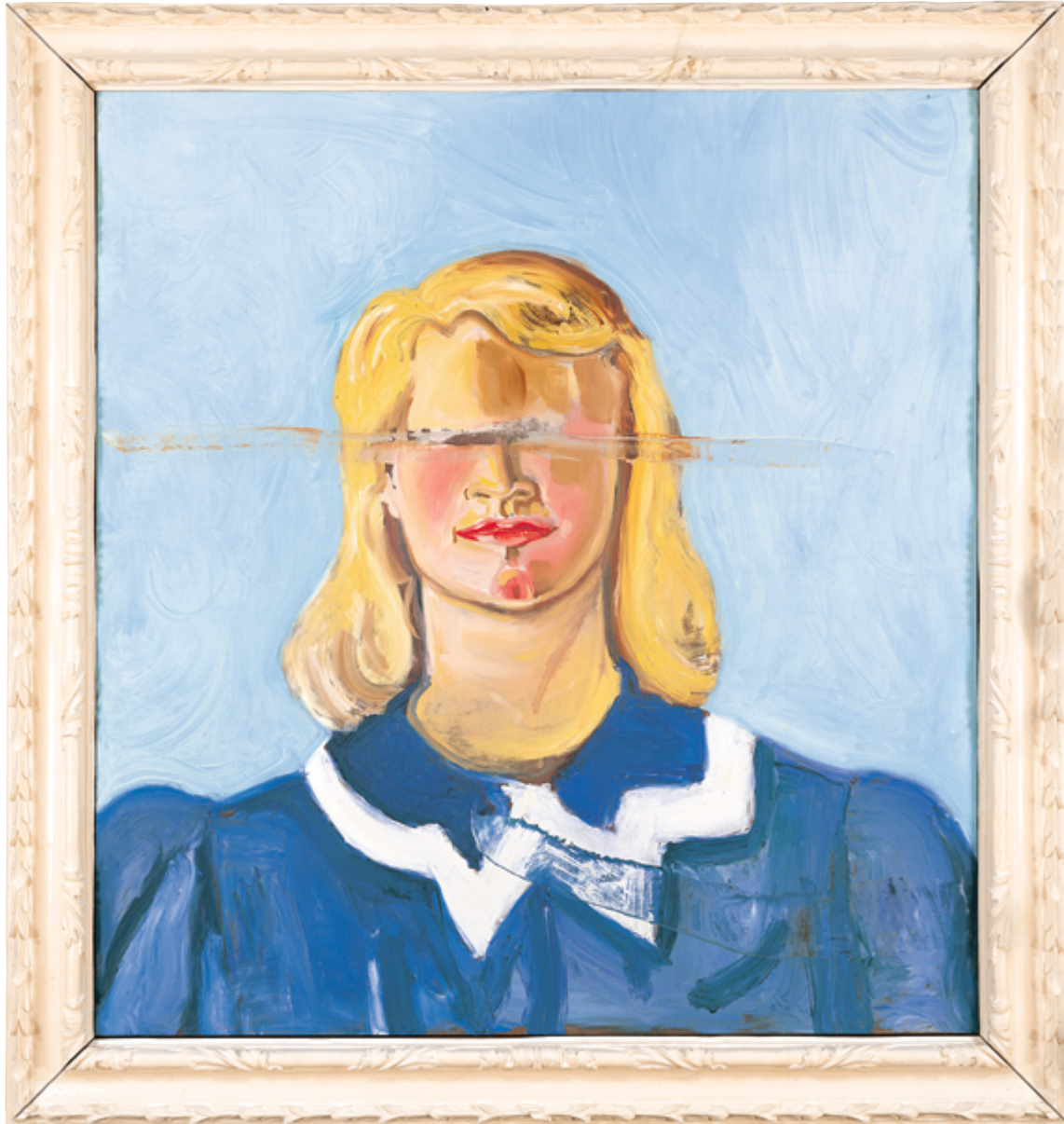


HAT

FULL

OF

RAIN



*Untitled (Girl With No Eyes), 2001*

OPPOSITE

*Hat Full of Rain, 1996*



*Untitled (Amor Misericordioso I), 2004*



Another Small Dog, 2002

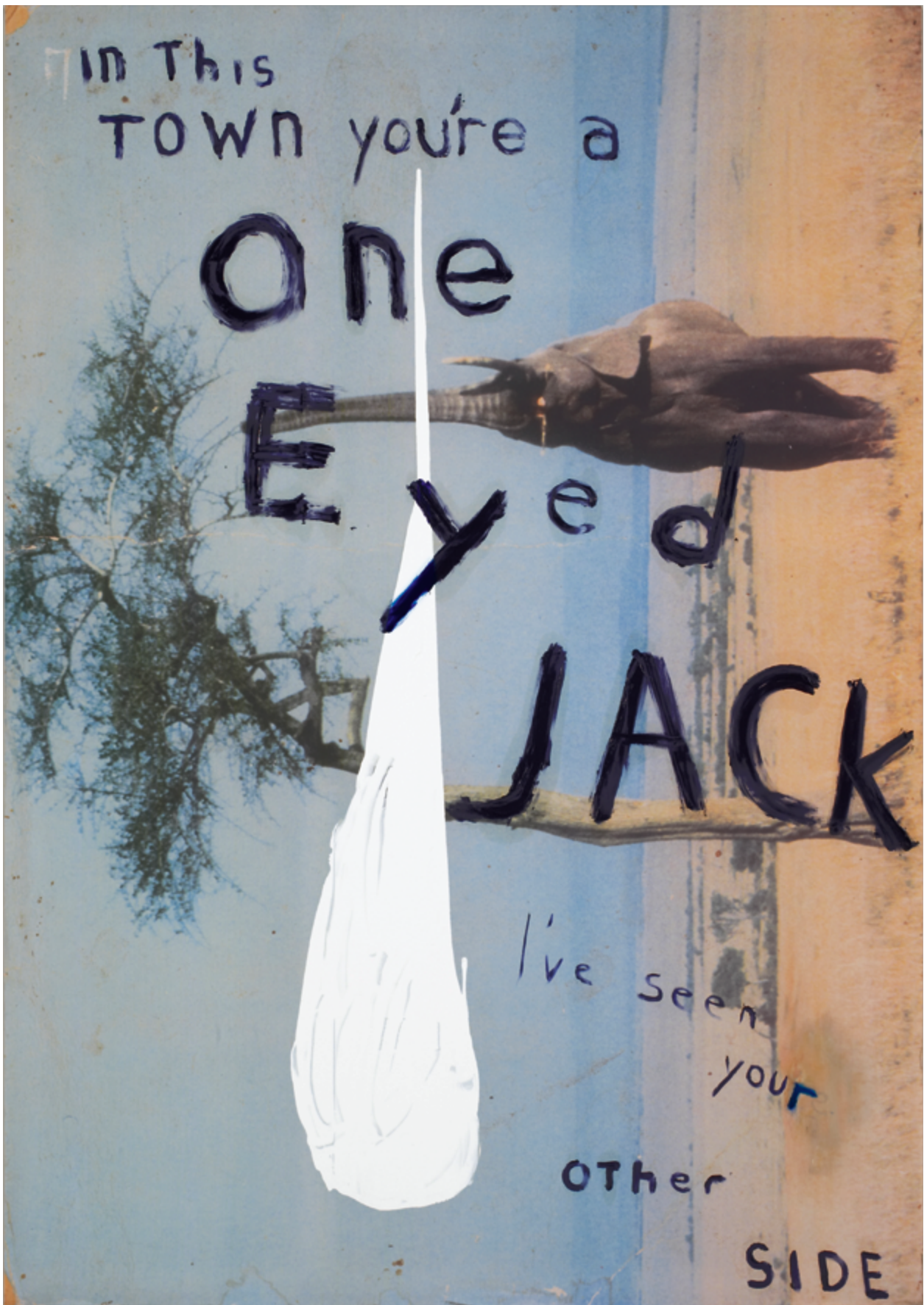




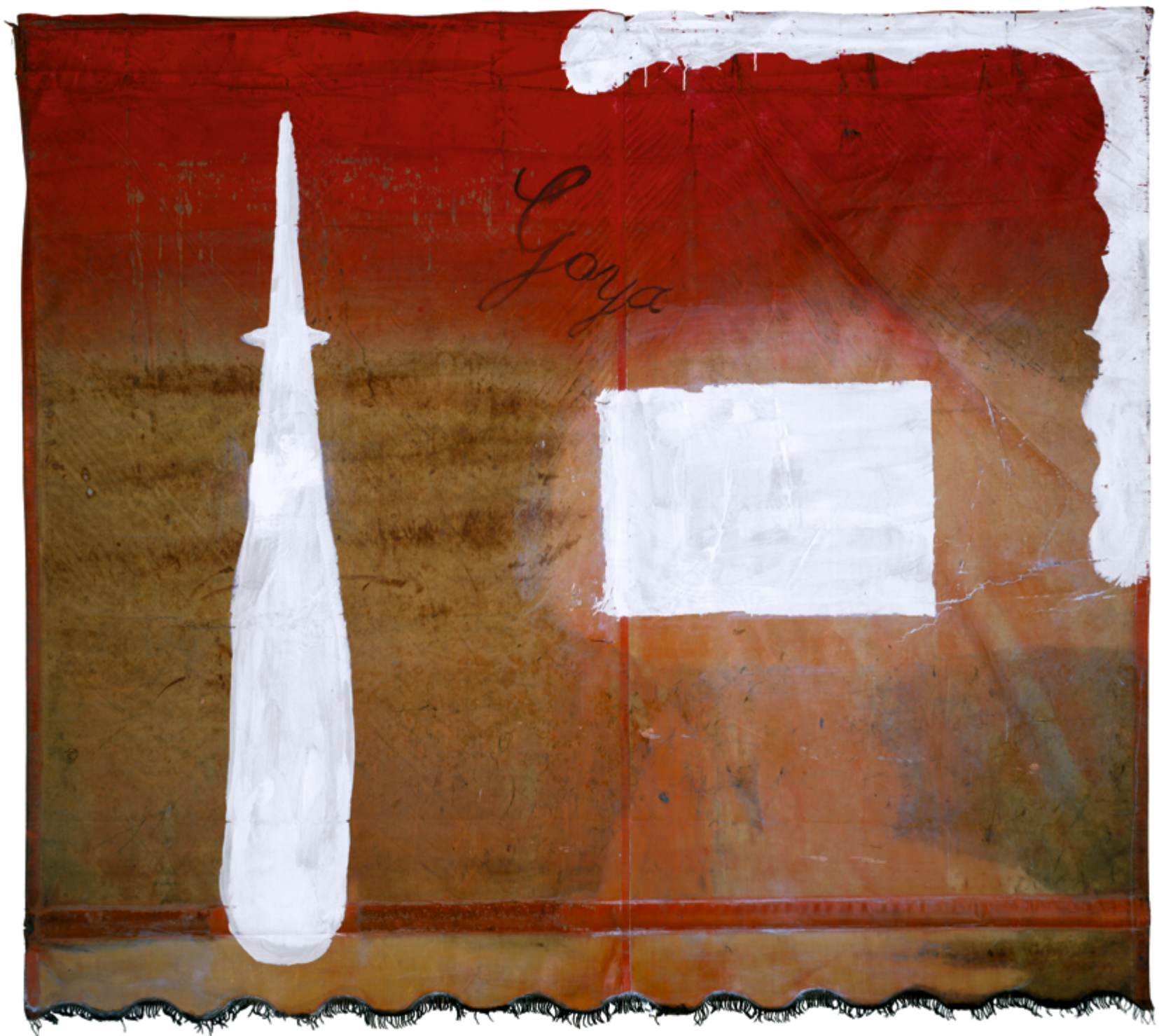


Untitled (Geisha), 2004

*In This Town You're a One Eyed Jack (I've Seen Your Other Side), 2005*







Goya, 2006





*Painting for Malik Joyeux and Bernardo Bertolucci (surfer), 2006*







Untitled, 2012