

“Rose paintings”—the title “rose” awakes many associations in art history and in life. In all cultures and religions the flower represents an important and multilayered symbol. The oldest known image dates back 4000 years and even today the most present association is that of love and deep empathy.

In recent art history we may think of Alfred Sisley, Claude Monet, Camille Pissaro, Henri Matisse, Vincent van Gogh and Cy Twombly, or of Sigmar Polke and Georgia O’Keeffe, to name only a few artists who painted roses.

Concerning the three rose paintings by Julian Schnabel shown here, which consist of broken plates mounted on wood overpainted in oil, it is interesting to link it to Baroque Netherlandish still-life painting and the use of a rose as a *memento mori*—a symbol of mortality, as it lies in the nature of the rose that it wilts just after the moment it blossoms in full. In this sense the Old Master rose representation is physically transformed here through the broken pieces into a craquelure of painted roses, which seem to allude the fragility of the things.

As is typical for Julian Schnabel, the new series of “Rose Paintings” arises from biographical inspiration. The motivation came from the roses Schnabel saw growing in the cemetery near Van Gogh’s grave in Auvers-sur-Oise near Paris. This venue gave the title for two of the three works in the Nicola Erni Collection exhibited here: *Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh’s Grave) II* and *Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh’s Grave) IX* (2015). The artist was fascinated by the obsession for roses of a close family friend, maybe himself thinking back to Goethe’s poem *Heidenröslein (Rose on the Heath)*, which symbolizes the blossoming, purity, and innocence of an adolescent girl.

The “Plate Paintings,” for which Schnabel uses broken porcelain as a ground, then painting on this irregular surface, distinguish his unique style and can be considered as his most important group of works. They triggered his first major success as painter. Now, 35 years later, he has returned to his origins, to his “Plate Paintings” of the ’80s, and extended the subject matter using the queen of all flowers as a motive. This move shows Schnabel’s distinct pride in his individuality: his art is challenging and his works are masterpieces worthy of that description. It represents a clever and self-confident gesture to stamp his art even more firmly into art history.

Looking at the three impressive rose paintings here, assembled as a singular body of work in the rooms of the Nicola Erni Collection, not distracted by anything else, the overall impression conjures up associations with the display in the Claude Monet water lily room at the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris. This Impressionist, serene, and calming experience, like wanting to immerse oneself in this endless atmosphere of soothing water, is the same as when looking at Schnabel’s joyful pink-colored roses, which peek out of the lush soft grass carpet.

Another reference to a major style in art history is the “all-over,” technique very present in American Abstract Expressionism, which is directly linked to Schnabel’s art that itself is ascribed to neo-Expressionism. Through this method the canvas is covered throughout, including all the edges and borders, as if the roses and grass wanted to spread beyond. The bird’s-eye perspectival composition gives equal attention and significance to all subjects, even though the roses cluster here and there like in the work *Untitled (Rose Painting, 2015)*.

All rose paintings invite your eyes to wander the canvas from top to bottom, following lines, shapes, colors, and shadows. In fact their three dimensionality—they measure 30 cm of depth as the crockery fixed on wood is thickly covered with lush viridian, sap green, and black oil paint, pink rose madder, violet and white layers—the surface has a haptic finish and lends the work the magic of a playful relief where light and shadow changes permanently. It is the ability of adaption which mosaics offer that Schnabel once discovered, being inspired by Gaudi’s unusual responsiveness to organic forms and his technique using ceramic pieces at the Park Güell in Barcelona. This broken homogeneity echoes Schnabel’s favor for dissonance in nature.

Last but not least the fractured surface imparts the work a certain Cubist style with the appearance of three-dimensional forms. Similar to this very important early 20th-century art movement Schnabel breaks up figures and reassembles them in an abstracted form. This opens up multiple viewpoints, creates a physical space in the works and represents the painted subject in a greater context. It is proof of Schnabel’s interest in surfaces and physicality: “Julian has always had surface anxiety in his work. A painting was never enough for him, and without knowing where it would lead, he was always doing more than just painting on them, to make

them physical presences. He would poke holes in them, build shelves on them... I see a logical extension of brushstroke and surface.”¹

There are two more plate paintings presented here: *The Walk Down the Hill* (2014) and *Portrait Nicola Erni* (2007/2016), which are radically different to the rose paintings because they have a specific focal point and fuse finally to a figurative Expressionist form: one mountain and one portrait. Both subjects have a personal connection between the collectors Nicola and Marcel Erni and Julian Schnabel. The portrayed mountain, Piz Mezdi, located in the Engadine, is one of the collectors’ most beloved in the St. Moritz area where they live and are at home. And it was not by chance that Julian finally got infected by Nicola’s and Marcel’s passion towards this “rock” and was impressed by the magnificence of the mountain after a long and intensive joint foot march. It was when Schnabel visited the Engadine in the middle of a challenging period in his life. As friends, Nicola and Marcel Erni took him on a mountain hike to the restaurant El Paradiso. At the end of an amicable and intensive day full of discussions, of mood swings between hurt, anger, and happiness, it was again the power of Piz Mezdi and the beauty of the countryside that Schnabel would never forget when they saw the incredible scenery again on their return downhill. A profound event which, as it typical of Schnabel, he wanted to preserve and therefore created this plate painting. The power can be felt in the work’s physicality as the result of Julian Schnabel’s enormous personal engagement and his emotional impetus when creating it. Like none other, this work is testimony to the very personal friendship between the three protagonists and of the attractiveness which lies in the naturalness of things.

The work *Portrait Nicola Erni* is a result of another very personal and emotional story. On the one hand, Julian Schnabel acts both as a stage director and cooperates with fashion designers like Azzedine Alaïa. On the other hand, the fashion world and fashion photography is a personal and professional attachment and focus in Nicola Erni’s collection. And not least of all, over many years, Nicola Erni and Julian Schnabel became friends. So it stands to reason that these mutual interests meet at one point which was in Paris in 2007, when Alaïa prepared his fashion show and Nicola and Julian met in Alaïa’s studio where her portrait was painted. A unique experience—being surrounded by the creative atmosphere of a fashion designer’s studio during fashion week in Paris. A literally electrifying instant having one’s own portrait painted by a person who knows you well in the middle of a totally creative environment—a glamor-full moment in the spirit of the time. Though in contrast to this time-based situation, the portrait remains and is meant to be forever. The fractured surface can be associated with classical portraits from Antiquity on walls, vases or in cemeteries, similar to an archaeological composition of randomly found fragments which are worth puzzling together, to keep and remember. An image remembered in a moment recalled that accompanies this specific portrait: Nicola, Marcel, and Julian: “It’s all about memory, and everything gets reduced. Everything I’ve seen becomes real once it becomes memory.”²

The work *Bob’s World* from 1990 is a memory-based work, too. The title *Bob’s World* includes two thoughts. On the one hand, looking at the left figure mounted on the transition from section one to two of the artwork, it reminds us of Bob Mason—Schnabel’s former assistant. On the other hand, it refers to Bob Williamson’s encyclopaedic mind. Williamson was an intellectual in the downtown, New York culture scene of the late 1970s, who shared the following words of wisdom with Schnabel: “If you declare something so, it is. Don’t lose your sense of yourself or forget the reasons why you started!”³ These words could be taken as a proclamation for all his activities and correspond to the analysis made here .

Technically Schnabel subdivides the surface of *Bob’s World* into three parts and mingles different styles and art historical references: broken plates on the narrow section on the left; a central purple panel with the mounted silhouette of a male effigy from Antiquity (Bob Mason), and two sculptural forms of twisted branches and leaves, which refer to the bronze plate created by Italian artist Giacomo Manzù on one entrance to the Rockefeller Center;⁴ and to the right a painted striding figure, probably derived from Van Gogh’s *Sower* or Francis Bacon’s later version of the same motif.

Schnabel’s ability to physically, visually, and contentually mold materials and surfaces is especially noteworthy. He made new versions, interpretations, or transubstantiations of known motifs, mutating them into his own painterly cosmos. With this method once again he anchors himself next to (generally) appreciated artists, positioning himself on the same level and thus bringing his own individual language to fruition. This self-awareness is self-assertion: he first gained international recognition when he unveiled his infamous broken-plate paintings, and fragmentation remains a recurring method in Julian Schnabel’s work, as he proved with the latest plate paintings.

Like no other, Julian Schnabel’s art has reached a synthesis of image, abstractness, and haptic. He has succeeded in introducing not only a new era in American art but also in developing a highly influential pictorial language of his very own.

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1 Rene Ricard, “About Julian Schnabel” in *Julian Schnabel*, Amsterdam 1982, p. 3.

2 Interview with Julian Schnabel by Carter Ratcliff “New Again: Julian Schnabel,” in *Interview Magazine*, published 01/06/16.

3 Julian Schnabel, *CVJ: Nicknames of Maître D’s & Other Excerpts from Life*, New York 1987, p. 149.

4 He refers to a bronze plaque called “Italia and the Immigrant” above the entrance of the Rockefeller Center at 626 Fifth Avenue, designed by Giacomo Manzù and donated by Giovanni Agnelli and Fiat in 1963. The grapevines, leaves, and shafts of wheat represent Italy and Italian-Americans. Manzù is renowned for the work he created a year before this piece—the bronze doors at St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican.



Portrait Nicola Erni, 2007/2016
Oil, plates, and bondo on wood



Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh's Grave) II, 2015
Oil, plates, and bondo on wood



Untitled (Rose Painting), 2015
Oil, plates, and bondo on wood



Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh's Grave) IX, 2015
Oil, plates, and bondo on wood





The Walk Down the Hill, 2014
Oil, plates, and bondo on wood

Bob's World, 1980
Oil, wax, bondo, ceramic plates, and
horn on wood and canvas







Fountain of Youth, 2012
Inkjet print, ink on polyester

Fountain of Youth

It is really imposing, the painting *Fountain of Youth* by Julian Schnabel, exposed here in its full length of 6.50 meters at the Nicola Erni Collection. The enormous canvas painting forms part of Julian Schnabel's "Goat" painting series. This 19th-century Dufour wallpaper depicts a history painting with the Battle of Yorktown in the American civil war when George Washington accepts the Cornwallis' surrender. It shows the Redcoat army marching through a rural valley creating both a specific and an abstract base for the painting. The base is its inkjet reprint on which Julian added an illustration of a large white goat. The goat itself, both in its size and pose, creates a direct association with Agnus Dei as a symbol for Jesus Christ or pretends to be a patriotic lion, typically for history paintings, though here materialized to a stuffed cuddly toy with a bunny on its head: "When Mike Kelley died, I wanted to make a painting for him. And I've always had this taxidermied goat in my studio with this rabbit on top of its head. And I thought, 'Well, you know, he liked stuffed animals, and I'd like to make something for him.'" ¹

In addition Schnabel has drizzled purple ink on the polyester. This appliqué recalls the illuminable quality of the sky. To amalgamate romantic

details like the goat or dreamy forms visualizes a certain spiritual or mystical knowledge and shows Julian's sense of magic in the rational world: "...when it all comes together—there's this magic that happens."²

The wallpaper, bought by his daughter Stella at auction, served him as an illustrative base: "... it could be burlap, it could be something that's pictorial—anything can be an image that you can paint on, anything can provide the architecture of a painting."³ The use of findings as the foundation of a painting recalls his early technique when he started to paint on tarps, Moroccan awnings, or on broken porcelain ("Plate Paintings").

The reproduction of the photographed wallpaper links to the artist Robert Rauschenberg also present in the Nicola Erni Collection. In the early 60s Robert Rauschenberg merged Abstract Expressionism with new media and similar to Julian Schnabel he pointed out, that through the changes in perspectives and the break of the story line, his artworks should appeal to the flexibility of the viewer's eyes. This had been Robert Rauschenberg's answer

² Interview with Julian Schnabel by Mark Grotjahn, in INTERVIEW Magazine, published 11/12/13, www.interviewmagazine.com/art/julian-schnabel/

³ www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-julian-schnabel-on-why-painting-is-freedom



to the permanent inflow of new media; today this principle continues due to the endless whelm of fractured images through multiple media, which since challenges painting as a medium.

The enormous length of the panel, the ability to impregnate the material, and the changes from one picture to the next, reveal that contrasting boundaries of medial, material, and content dissolve over time—what Walter Benjamin had proclaimed.⁴ Thus the convincing power of *Fountain of Youth* lies in the pictorial surface where the most varied techniques and ideas merge to create and negotiate an image that is fulfilled by the energy of everyone's own imagination and remains wild and endless like a fountain of youth.

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⁴ Walter Benjamin, Essay: "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction," in: *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 1936.