

JULIAN SCHNABEL

THINK BIG

“The end of painting”—a post-war reaction against all forms of expressive painting—had been proclaimed at the time Julian Schnabel started his career, and that was exactly what the artist did not heed. Schnabel believed in the vital energy of painting, in the desire to paint, and the devotion to beauty. For him, the prevalent contradiction between abstract and figurative art was never an issue; instead he combined opposites and brought a certain sense of freedom into artistic understanding, which resulted in his becoming the leading figure of the “Neo-expressionism” art movement and one of the most controversial painters of his generation. To understand his unique ambition and self-confident thinking means understanding his roots, which merge his early experience in Texas, his intellectual aspiration while on an Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the art scene at that time in New York, and his interest in European culture—besides being American he is half Czech through his father.

Schnabel’s style is not only free; he even invented the now famous “plate paintings”—shattered plates directly affixed to wooden supports, embedded into and covered with paint. The Nicola Erni Collection shows a very early and important work of this type: *Bob’s World* of 1980. The idea to incorporate broken ceramics in his paintings came after he had seen Antonio Gaudi’s wild mosaics in Park Güell in Barcelona, although the correlation between the plates and Schnabel’s painted images could be more closely related to the surface of Richard Artschwager’s Celotex paintings, Georg Baselitz’s fracture paintings, or to a general Cubist characteristic than merely to the pattern and decoration of Gaudi’s mosaics. Similar to Artschwager’s use of Celotex, the broken plates provided a texture on which to paint and break the image into countless geometrical fragments. As a result, the texture of the plates and the image exist simultaneously and force the viewer to see the work at once as a figurative and abstract piece.

Bob’s World goes even further by subdividing the panel into three parts: a narrow left panel covered with plate fragments, a central, purple panel on which two twisted, sculptural flowers and a silhouette of an antique, male effigy are mounted, and to the right a striding figure, probably derived from van Gogh’s “Sower” or Francis Bacon’s later version of the same motif. Schnabel retakes art historical images but transforms these into his own painterly cosmos. With this method 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 theme in Julian Schnabel’s work.

If the title *Bob’s World* does not refer to Bob Mason—Schnabel’s former assistant—it might stand for Bob Williamson, 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!”¹ These words could be taken as a proclamation for all his further actions.

Shortly after the first plate paintings were created, Schnabel started to utilize other atypical materials—a characteristic which would become a core element of his work—such as found, used, weather-beaten, or historical objects. On large, ragged, and opulent surfaces such as velvet, burlap, and sail—or tarpaulin as in the painting *Untitled (Purple Painting)* of 1990—he could employ outsized gestural forms. With thick, thin, fast, slow or large engaging areas, a free, pronounced, bodily engagement is evoked: an informal and expressive style absorbing the art of the time, especially German Expressionism, as well as that of Cy Twombly, Robert Motherwell, and Antoni Tapies. Schnabel however later moves beyond these styles as his art progresses.

In *Untitled*, a solid, purple form has been placed on the lower right which seems to mark a center of attraction or a point from which everything flies or splatters outward—a first suggestive expression on the expansive power of form that he is still developing to this day. The purple focal point, a compact form, recalls an amorphous shape which can also be found in the paintings of Cy Twombly, of whom Schnabel is a great vocal admirer. Schnabel adapts Twombly’s painterly gestures, the rhythm of the image and the application of words, as illustrated in the works *Adieu, Milton* or *Ozymandias*.

The ground and surface are important elements in Schnabel’s art. He has continuously developed its handling and appearance, for example by

¹ Julian Schnabel, *CV: Nicknames of Maitre D’s & and Other Excerpts from Life*, New York 1987, p. 149.

exposing surfaces to the elements or dragging them across the ground, joining two large sections of velvet or cloth together, making sure the seams or anything pushed through the stretcher frame are visible. The idea behind these elements left visible is to prove some kind of genuineness and allude to a storyline. The indicated cross on a rag—a symbol similarly found in Antoni Tapies’s work and shown in the work *Adieu* of 1990—occurs in various formations in other works by Schnabel. Given that a cross, apart from the many symbolist interpretations possible, has taken on several forms and is the inspiration for many more—it could be a shape for expressing something spatial, or a sign of the unlimited—we are lured into seeing many purple crosses, for example in the work *Untitled (Purple Painting)*, or into interpreting the cross coming out of the blue in the work *Adieu* in a spiritual context.

The word “adieu” has been inscribed on the surface. The use of words has been an important element in Julian Schnabel’s art since the early seventies, reaching its height in his “Recognition” series of 1987: “Letters are real. For me they’re pictorial elements that also have a sociological connotation and a historical, temporal connotation.”² The textual element in *Adieu* in fact suggests a story in the future, although a meaning can be applied to this work as well. In 1995, when Schnabel heard that his friend and former studio assistant, Paolo Malfi, had been run over on a road outside Rome, he painted the series “The Conversion of St. Paolo Malfi” in his memory and inscribed the word “Adieu” on the works. The series thus became a pictorial response to the death of his friend and shows Schnabel’s subtlety: emotions and concerns integrated in his art are a characteristic specific to this artist. As *Adieu* dates from 1990, it is ahead of its time and coaxes out the painter’s inner voice.

The writing in his work, be it in the form of several words or phrases, often has a private connotation, alluding to specific moments, places, friends, and family members. Schnabel lets us be part of a personal story. The work *Milton* of 2010, for example, is a homage to his deceased dog. The dog’s name is stamped like a seal in a natural brown color on an untreated cowhide, leaving the appearance of the animal skin as it is. Only in the middle field did he paint a spine-like form, maybe adding emphasis in this way to his thoughts. The artistic use of things which still retain traces of their own stories provides the work with a temporal dimension—or connotation—seen in the light of the quotation above. This earthy concept connects Schnabel to the Arte Povera movement and to one clearly unquestionable, major source for his art—Joseph Beuys. Beuys was a master of describing the elemental components of our fugacious world with materials like felt, grease, and animals such as coyotes, as something human. Schnabel shared this idea, constituting that it is something very human, when things and time correlate.

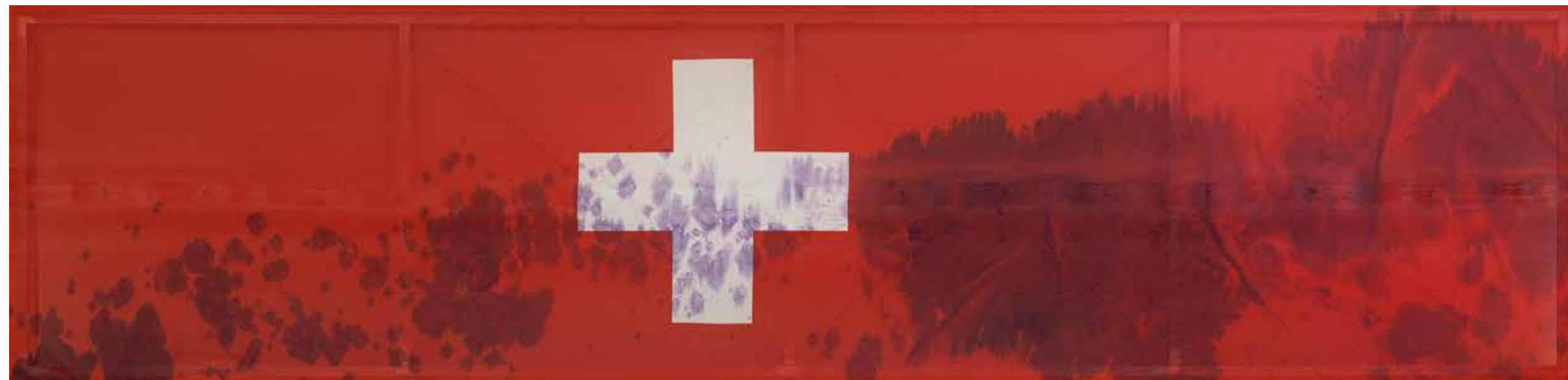
² Amnon Barzel (ed.), “With Schnabel, About Schnabel: An Introduction and Excerpts from an Interview” in *Julian Schnabel* (exh. cat.), Museo d’Arte Contemporanea, Prato 1989/90, p. 21.

The works mentioned previously employ writing both as an aesthetic composition and as a sign with a meaning. In the enormous and beautiful painting *Ozymandias* (1990) it serves as the subject matter itself. The title references two sonnets on the same topic with the very same title published in 1818 by two English poets: Percy Shelley and Horace Smith. In 1817, a large fragment of a statue of Ramesses II had been acquired by the British Museum in London, and *Ozymandias* was an alternative name for the Egyptian pharaoh in Antiquity. Both poems explore the impermanence of prominent figures and empires and, in general, the ephemeral nature of glory. Thematically heavy like the broken statue in the poems, the painting is full of fragments, with strips of leather glued on the surface. This concept forges a link once again to Tapies’s works, which extended the formal vocabulary of Art Informel, with allusions to imagery within a primarily abstract language, through the use of thick impasto paint into which other sometimes unusual materials were added. In fact both artists are correspondingly associated with the art term “matter-painting.”

The white shape dominating the surface could be an outline of the shattered bust of the pharaoh. Like the poems, the artwork is as weighty in its huge physical span, it being one of the largest pieces Schnabel has created. Typically for the artist, it was executed *en plein air* on the site of a ruined neoclassical building during a stay in Florida. The expansiveness seems to absorb mental and physical power: as if in cosmic gravitation, the center of the work appears to have a centrifugal force that attracts free-flying particles. Both the physical size of the work and the vast landscape depicted show Schnabel’s relationship to material and the imagination: “They are large because that’s a necessary part of the content of the painting. The scale and size of the painting has a physical reality that affects its meaning.”³

With the work *Untitled* of 2013, in ink on polyester, we are confronted

³ Giancarlo Politi, “Julian Schnabel” in *Flash Art International*, no. 130, pp. 45–53, Milan 1986, p. 51.



Untitled (Swiss Flag), 2013

with the ideas of a picture within a picture, with history and the present—a work of art in which the structure of the photographic composition can only be seen because of the white edges. Schnabel developed the idea of incorporating used material as supports by appropriating photography that carries a representational moment as a background motif, thus bringing a real place and time into a merely aesthetic reality. Once again, the artist is telling us his own story, not in an allusive way this time, but by underlining the importance that a truly existing being has to wander through the work of art: “I want my life to be embedded in my work, brushes into my painting . . . If the spirit of being isn’t present in the face of this work, it should be destroyed because it’s meaningless . . .”⁴ Through the medium of photography Schnabel is subsequently able to complete the image, laying an amorphous shape of light purple over it, a looming, undefined form, here like a drop upside down. The recurrent biomorphic forms which emerge appear like symbols or signs for engaging life’s grand themes, possibly indicating birth, death, sexuality, obsession, suffering, redemption, and belief.

Furthermore, this type of image extends into the contemporary digital world: image making, Photoshop and the film-making process. Schnabel incorporates the experience of digital languages he gained when working in film, lending his work an abstract reading through the application of paint, on the one hand, so that the viewer can complete the story line, and on the other hand giving it a simultaneous quality. Instead of seeing art history as a continuous, chronological narrative, he recognizes that art in all ages and in all cultures is part of our artistic heritage and draws on all sources available. In this way, Schnabel juxtaposes the past and the present, the far and the close, through the use of reproduction and overpainting.

In 2013, eleven new works were executed on flags or banners, some incorporating national colors, as in *Untitled (Swiss Flag)* shown here. Using

⁴ David Moss and Bruce Ferguson, “Notes on Julian Schnabel’s *Untitled (Surfer) Paintings*” in David Moos, *Summer Julian Schnabel, Paintings 1976–2007* (exh. cat.), Milan 2008, p. 57.

found flags as an empty canvas, Schnabel challenges the flags’ inherent language as a representative symbol of a nationality or of other social structures. The artist takes these objects of identification for cultural, religious, or corporate identities and subverts their meaning with expressive, brisk strokes of paint. In addition, the physical alteration of the Swiss flag shown here—stretching it beyond its natural length—pushes the act of political identification into a more material dialogue and lends it a different quality. In its strict, elongated rectangular shape the work—left red with the white, equally balanced cross in the center of the work—alludes to the exact aesthetics of minimal art. After Schnabel’s radical shift in painting from a heroic scale, with gestural brushstrokes and figurative subjects going far beyond the coolness of Minimalism and Conceptual Art, could it be that, after over forty years of intense production, he would make an about-turn? Despite the first impression this flag gives, it is nevertheless a passionate artwork due to its painterly, all-over treatment and to its romantic or heroic content. Schnabel remains true to himself: always thinking big, emotionally and subjectively. The Swiss flag, proudly revealing where the Nicola Erni Collection is located, demonstrates the collector’s spiritual affinity with the exceptional artist and personality, Julian Schnabel.

Florentine Rosemeyer



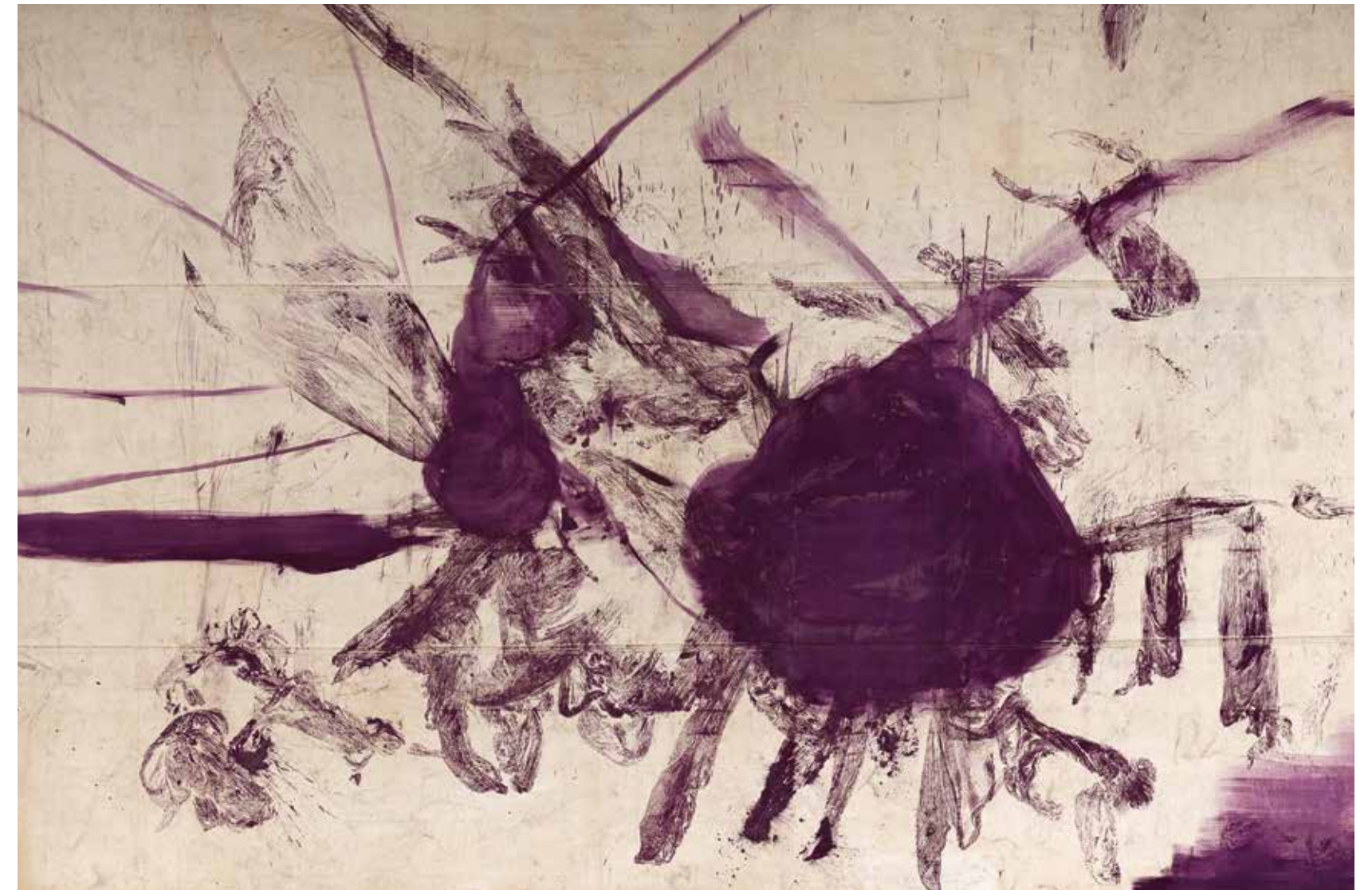
Bob's World, 1980



Untitled (Amor Misericordioso I), 2004



Milton, 2010



Untitled (Purple Painting), 1990



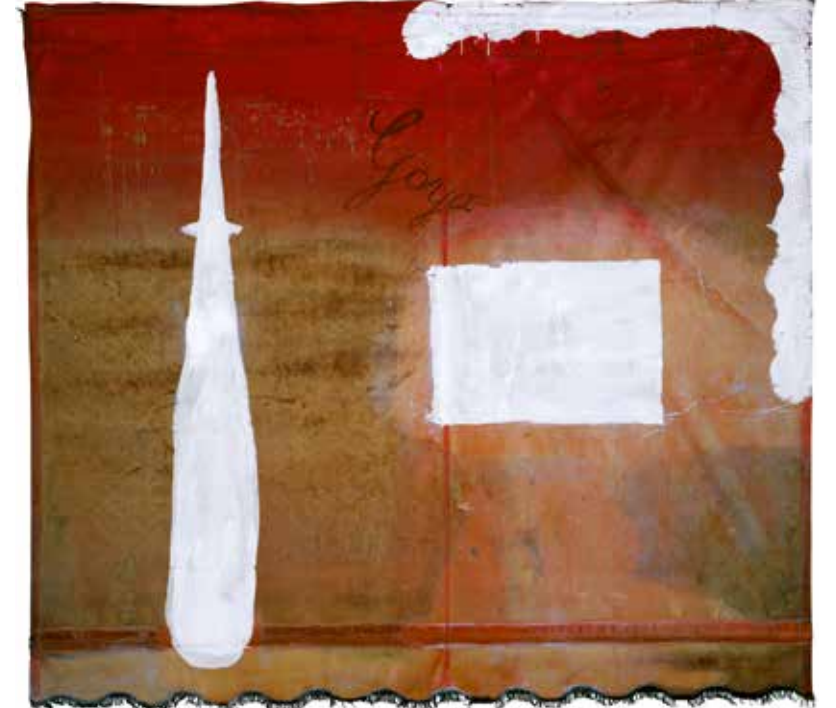
Adieu, 1990



Duende, 1992



Zeus and Duende, 1992



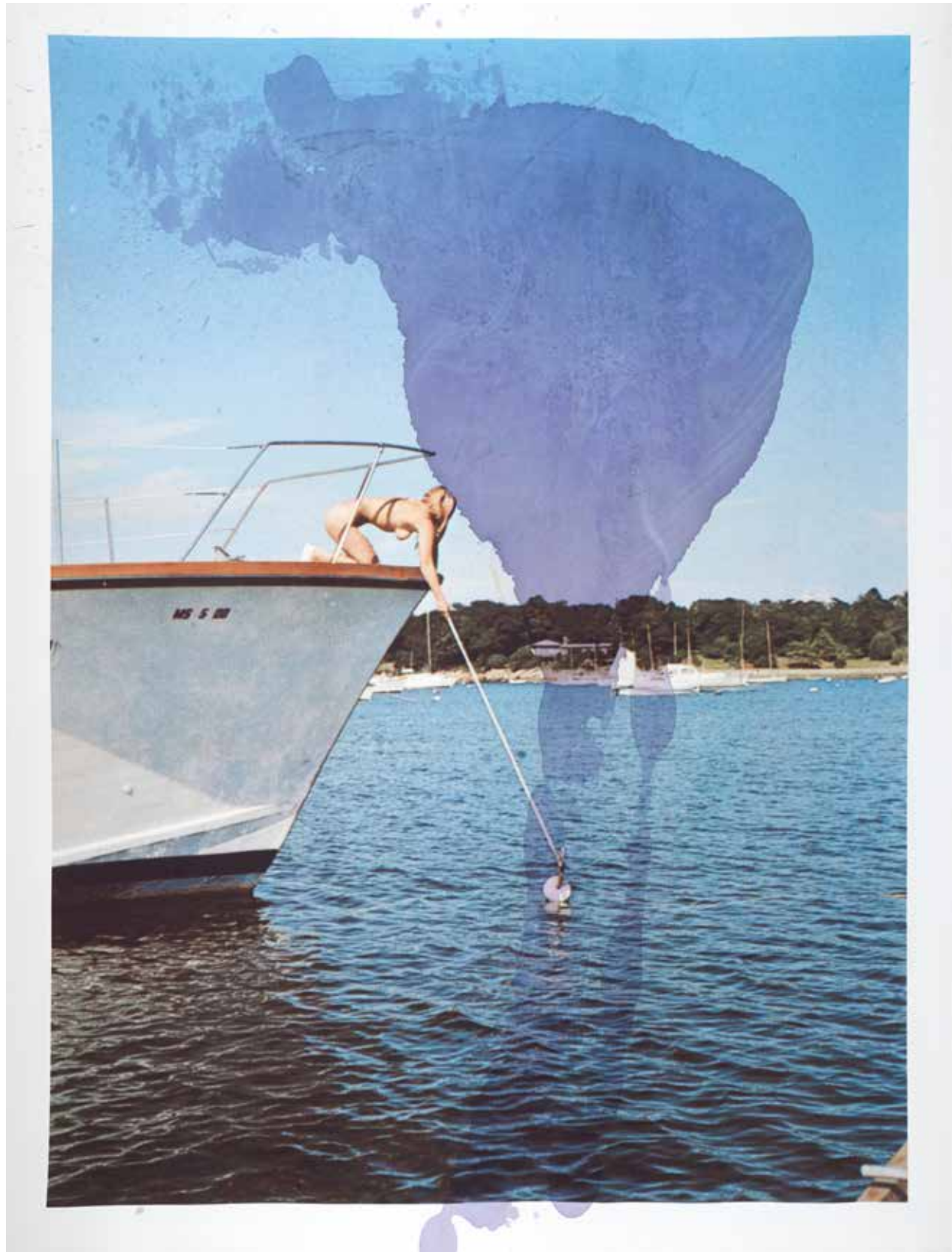
Goya, 2006



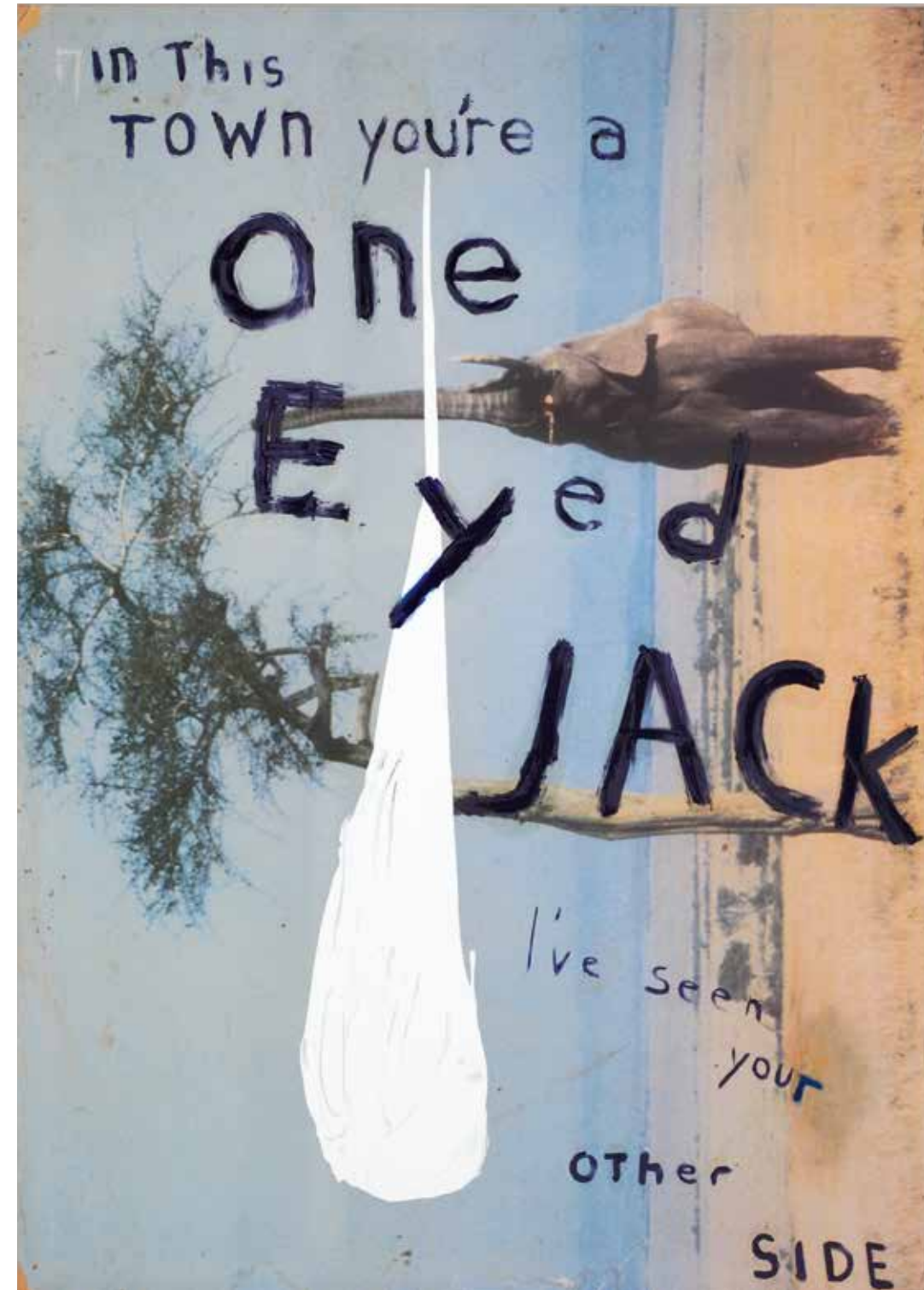
Ozymandias, 1990



Painting for Malik Joyeux and Bernardo Bertolucci (Surfer), 2006



Untitled, 2013



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



Untitled (Geisha), 2004



Untitled (Goat), 2012