Julian Schnabel- Works on Paper 1975-88

Exhibition 26 May- 1July 1990
Admission free

Julian Schnabel is one of the most significant and controversial artists of his generation. Born in New York in 1951 he first came to prominence in the late 70's and early 80's. His initial success heralded a change in the entrenched assumptions about contemporary art and signalled the existence of a new generation who were ready and willing to challenge the established norms and parameters of the art world. Here was a feeling of energy and ambition and a new sense of freedom. This new aesthetic adjustment and challenge to conventional standards- even the appearance of art- was unlike anything that had happened since the rise of pop art nearly twenty years previously. Painting became bolder, livelier, less restricted- reduction and understatement were firmly and strongly rejected and overstatement and excess were welcomed and seen to be an integral, even positive and significant part of art activity.

For Schnabel, who was in the vanguard of these developments, the propensity for exuberance and excess was concentrated as much on the building up and creation of the physical surface of the picture as on the imagery. His works have incorporated a complicated and seemingly infinite variety of materials: antlers on pony skin, velvet, fur, blankets, tarpaulins and crockery. The works in this exhibition include postcards, monograms, maps, clippings from magazines and books, photographs, words and letters. The surfaces in Schnabel's pictures are raw, intensely dynamic areas of experience. Although his images look familiar we soon realise that we are seeing the elements and signs in strangely inverted and unfamiliar ways. The images seem to encourage a clear understanding, but there is no obvious context or sense of narrative to enable this to be achieved. Meanings are hinted at but remain evasive or ambiguous. Works deliberately eschew a pictorial reading and seem full of unstructured, haphazard gestures; as Schnabel has said in conversation, he simply aims to put the marks and words down on paper. But, through his apparently random and in some ways destructive use of image and language, Schnabel achieves a unique pictorial quality which endows the work with a sense of the obscure, the private and the spiritual.

Like Joseph Beuys (who was a great inspiration), Schnabel uses his materials and subject matter to construct a generic frame of reference which enables a wider audience to have access to his ideas. Yes his depictions should not be considered to represent actual things, but rather the emotional or psychological charge which they echo in our

consciousness. The graphic signs which often appear in the work are not intended to give clarification or direction. Their purpose is to involve the viewer to discover their own meaning, thereby opening up the opportunity for dialogue between the artist and viewer, changing given or traditional meanings and creating a new kind of visual vocabulary. His work is a fusion of the repulsive and the seductive. On the one hand we are repulse by the emotional turmoil, agony, desolation and melancholy I suggests. On the other we are seduced by its riotous nature which implies a passionate celebration of life, death, re-birth and commemoration, the release of powerful emotions and memories and the affirmation of personal identity and experience; the return to a state of direct response and primitive feeling.

Julian Schnabel studied at the University of Houston and the Whitney Museum in New York, the city where he now lives. While his paintings and sculptural work have been shown extensively in Europe and North America, this is the first comprehensive exhibition of his works on paper. The drawings in this exhibition are not preparatory ideas or first drafts for paintings but are independent works, distinctive for their spontaneity and directness. The exhibition, which comprises work produced between 1975 and 1988, has been organised by the Museum fur Gegenwartskunst, Basel. Later in the year it will tour to the Museum of Contemporary art, Chicago. This will be its only showing in Britain.

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