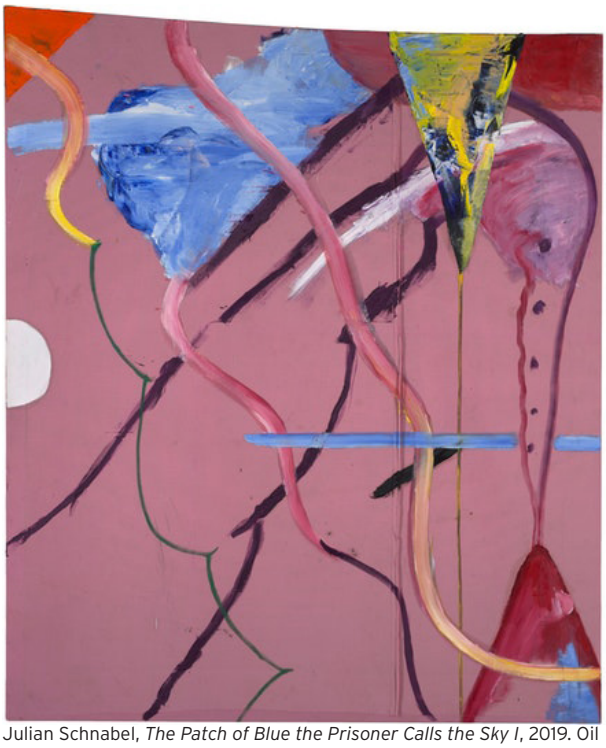
THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Julian Schnabel: *The Patch of Blue the Prisoner Calls the Sky*

by Alfred Mac Adam
April 2020



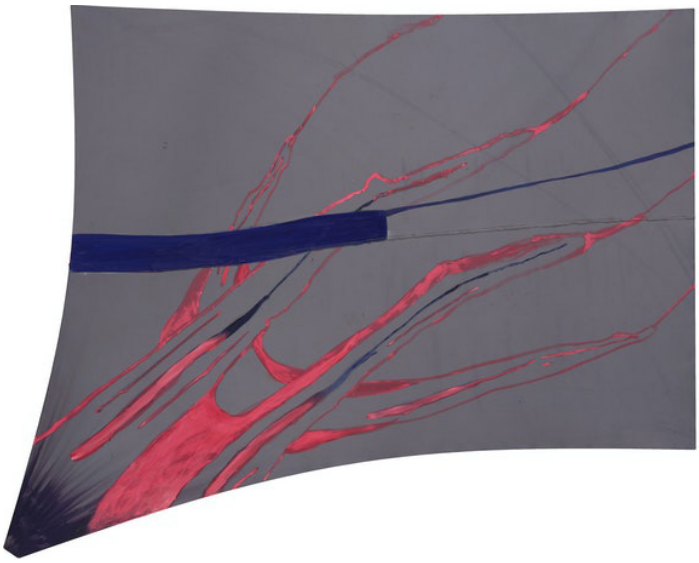
Julian Schnabel, *The Patch of Blue the Prisoner Calls the Sky I*, 2019. Oil on found fabric, 108 x 90 inches. © Julian Schnabel.

The Patch of Blue the Prisoner Calls the Sky is Julian Schnabel's first show in the new Pace Gallery, and he knocks the viewer for a loop. His title derives from Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898), either a misquotation or a faulty memory of the original. Wilde famously wrote the poem when he was in prison for "gross indecency," but while he was there, a fellow prisoner was hanged for murdering his wife. In the poem, Wilde slowly identifies himself with the murderer, eventually coining the famous line, "Each man kills the thing he loves."

The relationship between Wilde and Schnabel's 13 paintings is mysterious, even though three of these brilliant works are titled *The Patch of Blue the Prisoner Calls the Sky* (2019). The relevant passage, about the wife-murderer, appears four times in the poem:

I never saw a man who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky,
And at every drifting cloud that went
With sails of silver by.

The metamorphosis of Wilde's "tent of blue" into Schnabel's "patch of blue" is important because it speaks directly to Schnabel's artistic recycling of found material, both in the sense of ideas and in the sense of real substances incorporated into the work. In Wilde, the line refers to the murderer's lost freedom, but for Schnabel, it becomes a recurring motif: all three paintings include a patch of blue, obfuscated by "drifting clouds" of white. So, the poem is simultaneously present and absent in the paintings.



Julian Schnabel, *Lagunillas II*, 2018. Oil on found fabric, 140 x 176 inches. © Julian Schnabel.

Out-of-context quotation in art and architecture is characteristic of the postmodern condition, but Schnabel's relationship with antecedents is complex. Here, he alters a line to fit his intentions, but elsewhere he shows himself to be a past master of painterly parody. His "Big Girl" (2001) pictures are a send-up of portraiture and his "rose paintings" (2015) mock floral still lifes. But they are all tour-de-force enterprises in themselves. So, Wilde's "little tent of blue" comes home ironically to roost in these works, all made from "toldos," weathered cotton awnings Schnabel bought from produce vendors near his Mexico studio in Troncones.

The 13 paintings here fall into three discrete groups: five untitled works of uniform (84" x 65) size, three "patch of blue" paintings, also uniform in size (approximately 108" x 90"), and five large-scale paintings, four titled *Lagunillas* (2018) and one *Preschool and Afterschool* (2018). In the gallery, the eight smaller works stand apart from the large ones and are really creatures of a different order.

James Nares, in his touching and insightful catalogue essay, points out that five of the eight are made from two pieces of fabric sewn together and that the stitch line "evokes a horizon." This line, created by chance, turns the painterly space into a de Chirico-like land or cityscape. In *Untitled I* (2019), for instance, masses of color interact like characters in Joan Miró's Dutch interior paintings of 1928, also reworkings of "found" material. But where Miró retains figurative elements, Schnabel lets color do the talking. The weather-beaten awnings come bearing colors, but Schnabel enhances them and departs from them in yet another metamorphosis.

The "patch of blue" paintings contain no horizon lines, so they are a playing field for color masses. In this case, the matter of rhythm, the careful placement of certain shades, is of primary importance. *The Patch of Blue the Prisoner Calls the Sky III* (2019) is a dialectical struggle between yellow and pink, with blue and white seeking to mediate between them. Gestural without being violent, this painting captures an instant of artistic illumination.

The very large paintings are all irregularly shaped because of the found nature of the awning material. The most fascinating is the last, the strangely titled *Preschool and Afterschool* (2018), a huge 128" x 213" irregular rectangle. The found fabric, painted with oil and gesso, is primarily in a pinkish mauve, interrupted by black and white. The white, rectangular swath we recognize as the same that covers the eyes of the "big girls"; the black shapes are variously biomorphic and abstract. Here, Schnabel "signs" the found fabric surface with marks related to himself, the supreme alchemist.

Way back in the '80s, Julian Schnabel took, in the words of Mick Jagger, more than his "fair share of abuse." He has not only survived, but prevailed.