



Julie Heffernan, *Everything That Rises*, 2003

By DAVID COHEN

There is a noble tradition of Bad painting with a capital “B.” It is a modern spin on mannerism: Instead of merely accenting their work with distortions of perspective, color, composition, and so forth, some artists attempt to will themselves into a state of ineptitude. A noble tradition, and Julian Schnabel does *not* belong to it.

There are basically two branches of Bad: the anal and the incontinent. Artists of the first variety ape the hackneyed horrors of Sunday painters and thrift-store finds, and are essentially conceptual in their iconoclastic intent; Francis Picabia and John Currin are Bad painters of this stripe. Those of the second are more ambitious, expressive, and risky. (Sloppy-joe messiness is more ambitious because, beyond kindergarten, excesses with paint tend only to occur in a fine-art context. Mind-boggling meticulousness, by contrast, is a defining characteristic of Outsider art.)

The masters of fast-and-loose Badness are artists who have entered their “old-age style”: Painters such as Picasso and Philip Guston were proven masters before electing to become desperados. Like clowning, the appearance of goofiness requires a special kind of control.

However much Julian Schnabel seems to aspire to the beastly sublime, it is painfully apparent with his latest show of lethargic, gratuitously outsized doodles that he is merely bad with a forlorn, bedraggled, lower-case “b.” In his handling of the genre, neo-expressionism has ceased to

have any vitality or purpose. It has become, like cigarette smoking, a pathetic and outdated habit. Pace Wildenstein, at its Chelsea premises, is currently showing five of Mr. Schnabel’s recent “Indian” paintings – based on portraits of native chiefs from the early 1900s- and half a dozen gargantuan sculptures of the 1980s. Though the latter take up more space, and are grievously unoriginal in. Their faux-Dionysian bravura, they are somehow less offensive. Totemic turds crudely pierced with found-object heads and limbs have been done already, and far more convincingly, in the sumptuously primitive sculptures of Cy Twombly and Joan Miró. But any 13-foot-tall patinated bronze of vaguely archetypal shape and rough surface will make an impression. Not so smeared paint.

On every inch of his canvases, come of which stretch up to 9 feet high, Mr. Schnabel indulges in a hubris he wouldn’t tolerate from himself or his minions in a single frame of his finely crafted movies. (“Basquiat,” 1996, and “Before Night Falls,” 2000, are the pictures this artist should want to be remembered by). His new paintings revisit territory more than amply explored by Mr. Schnabel’s superiors in the neo-expressionist camp, namely Malcolm Morley and Georg Baselitz.

To explain what’s wrong with Mr. Schnabel’s paintings, it is not enough to say, for instance, that the drawing is limp and illustrative: Those are precisely the kind of dubious intentions and calculated strategies that, when purposive and thought through, can be interesting. Genuine mannerism is about testing endurance, twisting language, pushing against medium, and then suddenly capitulating to it. It’s about really good painting that goes bad, or vice versa.

Mr. Schnabel gives himself nothing to resist (not even some smashed up crockery, as in his trademark early paintings). He splurges blobs of paint over an underlying sketch that is itself nothing but a splurge. There is no push-pull between quality and mediocrity because with him it’s all the latter. He is like a B-movie karate fighter kicking at an open door.

There is welcome relief just across the street at P.P.O.W. Julie Heffernan is a “natural mannerist” – an oxymoron, of course, because mannerism is per se unnatural. Forced, stylized, strategic, and effect-driven, it exploits the received rather than the discovered. Yet within Ms. Heffernan’s camp idiom, she achieves genuine intensity and richness of expression. In this show, her third at the gallery, her technique is dazzling in a modern-academic kind of way. “Self-Portrait as Agnostic II” (2003), for instance, is a tour de force in its handling of reflections in a polished floor and a warped antique mirror. This may be John Koch rather than Velazquez, but Koch is a good place to start. Technique is inconsequential if not harnessed to vision; Ms. Heffernan’s most marvelously is. In golden, glowing, aristocratic interiors that date anywhere from the High Renaissance to the Rococo, mysterious dramas are played out: Gorgeously attired ladies spontaneously combust, birds descend in flocks, alchemical landscapes sprout from bedsheets.

All Ms. Heffernan’s paintings announce themselves as self-portraits. They are also allegories of sorts, engendering dialogue between touch and self, consciousness and imagination, style and expressivity. Best of all, Ms. Heffernan has the quiriness of magical realism without the sordid silliness of so much latter-day surrealism. With her, mannerism is definitely a price worth paying.

“Julian Schnabel: New Indian Paintings and Selected Sculpture” at PaceWildenstein until November 15 (534 W. 25th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-929-7000). Prices: the gallery declined to disclose its prices.

“Julie Heffernan: New Paintings” at P.P.O.W. until November 8 (555 W. 25th Street, second floor, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-647-1044). Prices: \$4,000-\$50,000