



JOHN MAGGIOTTO/HALLWALLS

Julian Schnabel's "Tower of Babel"

... nixing painterly refinements

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"IN 1969, painting was forbidden."

So said painter, Gregoire Muller at a recent panel discussion at Hallwalls Gallery.

HE WASN'T citing a proclamation in the land of the Philistines or recounting the history of an anti-art dictatorship.

What he was doing was talking about the climate that prevailed a decade ago in the major art center of the world — New York City. This was the climate in which most of the country's artists lived no matter where they were, as long as they had a mailman to deliver their monthly copy of Artforum.

Everybody was shouting, "Painting is dead!" It was practically a chant. A Broadway musical could have been made out of the subject with all the critics and avant-garde artists in New York City singing in the chorus.

The loud theories which were bounced off of "the quietest of the arts" (as someone once described painting) kept subtracting what painting could use and still be major art — no illusion, no line, no shape, no thick paint. Finally, painting, out of boredom, went to sleep.

ONE OF THE severe technical problems of many who tried to paint under these strictures was how to keep from nodding off during long hours of required scrutiny and spilling the hot cup of coffee balanced on the knee.

As Muller says, "Theatricality psychology were eliminated," and everyone felt the "heavy imprint of formalism." But even in this austere atmosphere, Muller and the other members of the panel, painters Ross Bleckner, Julian Schnabel, and Jeff Way and critic Valentin Tatransky all agreed that good — even great — painting was done during the period.

THE PANEL'S discussion of the topic, "Painting In New York Today," suggested that painting has survived all blows to its dignity and the exhibition in the Hallwalls Gallery by the four-painter panelists, proves it.

Muller, the author of the book "The New Avant-Garde of the Seventies" and earlier, one of the harshest anti-painting zealots, shows paintings which are committed to the standard

rectangle and make variations on, of all things, later Picasso figure painting.

Just to *think* of doing this is heroic. Picasso's paintings of the fifties were often cutely laden with curlicues and showy strokes. Muller puts a veil over all the mannerisms with a judicious

mixture of Abstract-Expressionism's painterliness and the cool reserve of the art of the sixties. In the thin space of Picasso's later images, Muller has sandwiched layers of recent art styles — and somehow avoided having his painting look mannered itself.

ON THE OPPOSITE end of the spectrum, both literally and figuratively, is Jeff Way.

"I'm interested in excess," he says.

There is one of Muller's elegance in Way. He merges styles just as Muller does, but keeps everything blunt and crude.

He's a believer in painting as something bordering on a magical gesture. He's the shaman who shows folks how to feel right and let out all that bottled-up emotion. According to Way, "All that's bogus is the theory around painting," not the painting itself.

Way's painting thrives on appearing dumb but still holds distinctly to being painting. Even with his pop-movieland subject-matter — a gorilla knawing on a human leg, cartoonish faces, doubled and twisted — he uses thick paint like an expressionist. Like a good primitive, he displays clumsiness as a badge of authenticity.

BUT AS A MEMBER of the audience asked at one point in the discussion, "Is it enough to tell people to be authentic to themselves" and nothing more. Then, again, shamans are noted for their social irresponsibility and occasional self-indulgence. These are two different viewpoints to weigh.

Ross Bleckner shows the only totally abstract paintings in the exhibit. They are made up of planes that tilt and overlap in a dark and ominous blue-black space. Fine white lines follow edges or curl off on their own into the surrounding space.

Each work is painted with the care of an early 20th century abstract artist who still has the echo of his old master training in his touch. Because of this, there is an oddly nostalgic mood to Bleckner's paintings.

BLECKNER'S compositions feel like a reissue of earlier abstract ideas which have mellowed with time and have begun to appear "classical." But the artist does this reaching back without the slightest self-consciousness. Unlike Muller with his *sauve* reshufflings, Bleckner keeps an innocent eye on the past.

As the painter notes, "Style is (only) a fringe benefit of painting."

JULIAN SCHNABEL shows large aggressive, thickly painted works with three-dimensional recesses and projections, following the tone of his painting, Schnabel expressed his opinions in an aggressive but convincing manner. For him, style, the thing so consciously deployed by Muller and Way, was "just the matter-of-fact way you do anything . . . like the way I put on my clothes. A lot of painting is about style and has no content."

The content in Schnabel's painting comes in the form of life-size brick walls (looking as heavy as the real thing), vase-like forms that threaten to transform themselves into headless figures, and various "primitive" symbolic forms reminiscent of branches or Indian headdresses. With paintings like Schnabel's, all the refinements of style and approach so necessary to many paintings, seem mere genteel accoutrements. His work is blunt and powerful.

Schnabel is equally blunt in his opinion of art critics. All they do, he says, is "confuse the audience" and distort the "artist's position in the world." They write criticism, he contends only in order to (1) get money (2) see their name in print and (3) get people to act nice to them. In short, critics, according to Schnabel, are "parasites."

IN REBUTTAL, someone on the panel offered to list 10 artists who were parasites. A person in the audience suggested that "criticism happens — it falls out from seeing and thinking." (No one mentioned the stubby fingernails of most critics.)

If these four painters are any indication of the future, artists will probably be spreading pasty, brightly colored stuff on flat surfaces for eons to come. One thing to remember though, is that if we are one day forced back into the caves of our ancestors — oil paint will not stick to damp surfaces. We certainly don't