

JEAN-FRÉDÉRIC SCHNYDERBY JEAN-CHRISTOPHE AMMANN

(From the catalog)

Born in 1945, Jean-Frédéric Schnyder lived, until recently, near Thun, in the Uttigen district of Switzerland. His oeuvre is characterized by a holistic and decidedly radical approach.

Imagine someone who gets up every morning, packs his painting kit, climbs aboard a train, and travels to the remotest railway stations in Switzerland. Alighting at one, he sets up his easel and, from a well-considered vantage point, proceeds to paint the waiting room, before catching the evening train home. Regardless of how late he does return home, he gets up early the next morning to catch another train. And he does this for months on end (Wartsäle [Waiting rooms], 1988–89). Or, imagine someone who gets up every morning, climbs aboard a train, rents a bicycle at the station where he alights, combs the area for a park bench offering a view, sits down, and proceeds to paint whatever he happens to see. And he does this for months on end (Bänkli [Park benches], 1989–90). Whenever his fingers grow numb from the cold, the picture is, correspondingly, “clumsily” painted. Even more surprising is the view that unravels before the eyes of the painter as he sits on the bench. Often, the benches have been standing for decades, long since forgotten, and the views they afford have, over time, changed, for now they are obscured by skyscrapers, crossroads, and garbage containers.

In the railway stations, the number of things the observer may absorb is inversely proportionate to the size of the waiting room. The smaller the town the station serves, the homier the waiting room, complete with curtains, an Advent calendar, or a vase of flowers. As Schnyder paints in the “style” of whatever his gaze has settled on, his work is always true to life. (“The biggest joke of all,” he claims, “is to tell the truth.”) He produces many of his pictures using leftover paint. Just as the leftovers from dinner often are used for soup the next day, Schnyder consistently transforms the remains of paints into “leftover” paintings.

Since 1970, Jean-Frédéric Schnyder has developed a holistic approach that considers any style—popular art, naturalism, realism, kitsch, or abstract art—as an original form of expression. These concepts, however, are not intellectual starting points, for they automatically entail a prior act of evaluation and signification. This does not worry Schnyder; the concepts interest him only in relation to the pictorial language they utilize—as collective forms of expression that describe the world. By nature, he attempts intuitively to unite all the truths of pictorial language, subdividing them, thereafter, as a “catalog” of concepts. He does not quote these painterly forms of expression; he experiences them as genuine creative activity within himself, which he then exaggerates to reveal their absurdity. Schnyder denounces the meaninglessness of history when it is construed as the history of man, but, at the same time, exemplifies it in the creative ability of the individual. Each day, he transforms meaninglessness into meaning—an act of faith—with the discipline of a skeptic and the passion of a lover. Imagine someone who gets up every morning, climbs aboard a train, and rides to all the towns along the east-west Geneva-Romanshorn highway. Setting up his easel on a bridge over the multilane highway, he paints the traffic as it buzzes past below, in good weather and bad, at dusk or on a sunny afternoon (Wanderung [Walking tour], 1992). Schnyder’s choice of site is not coincidental; on weekends or public holidays, hordes of people stand on these bridges to watch, almost hypnotically, as the cars and trucks pass below.

Schnyder the painter not only puts a precise concept into practice, he consciously interprets things in a specific manner: the weather, the cold, the heat, exhaustion, daily moods, the motif—they are all treated democratically, as components of the painting. Consequently, his pictures are, at times, unattractive; indeed, they occasionally appear quite despicable, if measured against the masterpieces of painting over the centuries. Yet, one must not forget that Schnyder's painterly idioms are artificial constructs within a broad spectrum. Charged with his own unique intensity, they are transformed into something more than the sum of their parts.

I remember one picture, of a young man sitting at a table—one of his hands, resting on the tabletop, a veritable hodgepodge of color. When I asked Schnyder why he had painted the hand that way, he replied: "We were both sitting at the table chatting. I painted while we chatted. We were also drinking absinthe. By the time I got to the hand, I had drunk so much that I was no longer able to paint it." But Schnyder let the picture stand as it was. His holistic approach also makes personal demands, incorporating him as an essential element in the painterly process: The reaction of the absinthe coursing through his veins was comparable to the freezing cold that numbed his fingers.

Schnyder's "trivial" pictorial worlds are shaped by collective experience—waiting rooms, park benches, a view over a highway. His imagery conceptualizes, focuses, and individualizes what one might encounter there, inwardly or outwardly—the atmosphere, the sense of watching, waiting. There are places that time passes by or where it stands still; the same is true of certain notions—our images of security and protection, our wish for things to be readily understandable. Could anyone object? Schnyder deals with these in his formulaic paintings, and, consequently, they resemble invocations. The more he devotes himself to these pictures, the more they disclose their meaning—their importance. Because his credibility is unimpeachable, these notions become desperate, obsolete—they become warnings, images of trivializing violence. All too aware of this, Schnyder consciously embraces the conflict as paradoxical, as something whose roots lie within each of us. Will anyone grasp what he is saying?

Does anyone wish to live with this knowledge? It is the task of the artist to ask such questions.

translated by Jeremy Gaines