

When asked for biographical information, Jean-Frédéric Schnyder simply proffers that he was born in Basel in 1945. The implication is that the work speaks for itself, and that the artist's education and experience are irrelevant. As an artist whose output often refers to the "unschooled" creative genres of kitsch and folk art, Schnyder's approach seems appropriate. He is a working artist who will have us believe that he is unprepossessing in talent and ungraced by training, and has

of fine art. His earliest pieces were sculptures and installations informed by pop and conceptual art, and, perhaps, most important, by Marcel Duchamp's "anti-art" example. His work from the sixties deliberately incorporated synthetic, kitschy material in an effort to expose what he regarded as a false belief—that art was able to reflect and transmit emotional states.

Shortly thereafter, Schnyder taught himself to paint, and thus opened new avenues for paradox. He



Figures 3–9

3. *Egelmösl*, 1982
65 x 48 cm
4. *Bern*, 1983
45 x 60 cm
5. *Bundeshaus* [The Parliament], 1983
45 x 60 cm
6. *SBG*, 1983
45 x 60 cm
7. *Allmend* [Common land], 1983
42 x 57 cm
8. *Murtenstrasse* [Murten Street], 1983
45 x 60 cm
9. *Unterführung Schönberg* [Schönberg underpass], 1983
42 x 57 cm

an aesthetic sensibility geared to the replication of nature and the presentation of images already imbedded in mass-cultural consciousness. Schnyder has, in fact, explained his preference for the apparently prosaic by noting that it allows him to "avoid the pressure of inventing something new."

Schnyder's modest self-appraisal, however, is belied by the metamessage so evident in his work and the growing body of scholarship and critical interest it has attracted. Therefore, while the artist's own approach to autobiography is not to be discounted, it would be unfortunate to deprive the work of biographical context.

After coming of age in a Bernese orphanage, Schnyder began (and ended) his formal training with a three-year photography apprenticeship completed in 1965. Although he did work as a commercial photographer, his professional interest turned to the world

turned to oil in the late sixties and early seventies, a time when the medium was widely reported to have lost any relevance to contemporary life. Considered particularly outmoded was the kind of overt representationalism that defined his oeuvre, for he focused on the landscape, still life, and occasionally the human figure. His output, moreover, held no evidence of individualized approach and technique, and, in prescient postmodern manner, was presented, instead, in a wide range of already established artistic styles.

Schnyder's earliest paintings were accomplished by adding color to outlined forms supplied by his wife, Margret, who had studied graphic design at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Basel. The simplified composition of these early experiments, combined with the naive painter's typical lack of realistic shading and perspective, lent the rendered objects a floating, mystical quality—a trait that Schnyder's work has retained. From

these inauspicious beginnings, his compositions grew increasingly complex; however, with subjects like sad clowns, flamenco dancers, and an ongoing interest in hearts and simple bouquets, they also remained childlike. By 1978, he was producing works of monumental scale and iconographic density such as *Apocalypse* (fig.1). Throughout this evolution, Schnyder's emphasis on representation remained constant.

In the early eighties, the artist shifted gears and began working in series. The earliest example of this new approach was a group of still-life paintings made in 1984 and 1985, featuring objects from the artist's home. Next was a more whimsical, but still observation-derived, cycle depicting his dog, Dritchi (1985–86) (plates 2–9).

Finding himself temporarily without a studio, and with a growing "zeal for collecting images," Schnyder initiated a series of landscapes whose subject matter was simultaneously repetitive and seemingly random. He journeyed by bicycle each day, equipped with a canvas of a manageable size, and chose his subject. By the day's end, the painting was completed. This method allowed Schnyder to capture serialized images of train-station waiting rooms (1988–89) (figs. 41–52) and views from park benches (1989–90) (figs. 53–60). Displaying Swiss practicality, he concurrently painted a series of abstract works with each day's leftover paint.

Schnyder has continued the serial approach with a group of paintings he refers to as landscapes (*Landschaft*) (fig. 61), but which he has described as "little houses and trees." In ironic contrast, he followed this with another series of landscapes which was, in fact,

a study of excavation sites (figs. 62–75). These paintings are as uniformly brown and blurred as the "little houses" are bright and geometricized. Schnyder's latest series presents the autobahn as viewed from its numerous overpasses (1992) (figs. 76–89). The aggressive, mundane images in this group join Schnyder's ever-growing range of familiar subjects. Seen in light of his corresponding methodical, workmanlike approach, they posit the iconoclastic argument that art can be as normal as life.



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11



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Figures 10–12

10. *Münster* [Cathedral], 1983
65 x 48 cm
11. *Lorrainebrücke*
[Lorraine bridge], 1983
60 x 40 cm
12. *Niesen* [Mount Niesen], 1983
48 x 64 cm