



by Sophie McBain
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Photograph: Jonathan Becker/Getty Images

Julian Schnabel in his studio in Montauk, New York with two of the 13 works from his Big Girl Paintings series (2001-2002). This year, Schnabel returns with a new collection of outsized art and a broad-strokes biopic of Vincent Van Gogh. Here, he tells Sophie McBain why history is a lie that frames the truth - p152

JULIAN SCHNABEL

Art

A year in the life of Julian Schnabel

Twelve new calendrical works and an impressionistic Van Gogh biopic confirm the versatile precocity of the maximalist master of the Eighties

Story by Sophie McBain



'March' and 'October' (2017) by Julian Schnabel

The famous artist and award-winning filmmaker Julian Schnabel really does not like to give interviews. It's not that he's shy or retiring – quite the opposite, in fact – but he's been laying bare his feelings through his vast, expressive paintings for four decades and he doesn't see why he needs to keep on explaining himself.

"Everything I have to say is in that painting," he declared when we met, gesturing to one of several large works displayed in his studio in Palazzo Chupi, the burnt-pink Italianate mansion block Schnabel built in New York's West Village. A hirsute, barrel-chested bear of a man, he was wearing blue-tinted glasses, baggy trousers and a denim shirt and he regarded me with the polite weariness one might reserve for a trip to the dentist. "People always want you to say more, but really the horse's mouth is the art. The horse is the artist," he said.

The 66-year-old painter first thrust himself onto the New York art scene in the Seventies, when his big, emotional paintings broke with the prevailing minimalist mood and launched neo-expressionism. The movement captured and distilled the brashness of the Eighties and got rich quick. By mid-decade Schnabel's plate paintings – canvases encrusted with smashed crockery he bought from the Salvation Army – were fetching six-figure sums and Schnabel was a fixture on the New York social circuit.

He wore pyjamas in public, feuded with critics and pronounced on his own greatness. "I'm as close to Picasso as you're going to get," he once told *New York*.

By the Nineties the art market had cooled and his work fell out of fashion. Schnabel was upheld as the poster boy for Eighties excess. "There seemed to be a critical boycott of my work at some point," Schnabel told me, though he said the period wasn't as bad as people make out. He kept on painting. "I don't know what people tell you about the Nineties. I did some of my best work!" he said, leafing through *Julian Schnabel*, a coffee-table book he keeps to hand. He also started making films. While his paintings divide critics, his films are almost universally acclaimed. In 2008, he received four Oscar nominations and won a Golden Globe for *The Diving Bell And The Butterfly*, based on the autobiography of a French journalist paralysed in all but one eyelid after a stroke.

Schnabel considers himself a painter above a filmmaker and an artist above everything else. "I've always been an artist," he said. He was an artist as a child, when he sketched under his parents' kitchen table in Brooklyn. His father was a meat wholesaler who emigrated from Czechoslovakia at 15 and his mother headed a local Jewish volunteer organisation and tried her best to understand her son's exotic aspirations. Schnabel

was an artist in high school in Texas, where he grew his hair long and learned to surf and felt like his family were the only Jews in town. He studied art at the University Of Houston and then won a place on the Whitney Independent Study Program, having submitted slides of his work between slices of bread. He was an artist when he was a chef, waiting for his break. In 1979, when the gallerist Mary Boone gave him his first solo show, he told her he'd make the cover of *Art Forum* magazine within five years. It took him two. Journalists tend to make much of Schnabel's sizeable ego, but no one could make the kind of art he does, or enjoy the kind of career he has, without deep reserves of self-belief and resourcefulness.

That said, he almost fell into filmmaking. His first film was the 1996 biopic of his friend Jean-Michel Basquiat, the graffiti artist and painter who died of a heroin overdose in 1988 at the age of 27. "Someone was interviewing me about Jean-Michel and they were a tourist and I just thought, 'I should get this right. I owe it to him,'" Schnabel said. "I never thought I was going to be a movie-maker, but I did that to speak to him, for him."

Basquiat opens with the line "Everybody wants to get on the Van Gogh boat" from the poet and artist Rene Ricard. Now, Vincent Van Gogh is the subject of Schnabel's latest film, *At Eternity's Gate*, due to be released later this year. Willem Dafoe will play the lead. I wondered how long the project had been germinating. "Things are very connected. How long did it take to make this painting? And you could say, 'Sixty-six years and five minutes.' Everything is linked," said Schnabel, whose conversation can be much like his painting: expansive and sometimes abstract.

In May, he will be exhibiting a collection of his paintings in London's Pace Gallery. An assistant brought them out to show me and leant the 12 paintings, each two metres tall, against the studio walls. Schnabel instructed the assistant to move one a touch to the left, another a touch to the right. Encircled by his art, his mood brightened and relaxed.

He paced in front of the dozen enlarged 19th-century calendar prints, which he has painted over with dark-green amorphous shapes, bringing to mind spindly winter branches, twisting vines, cracked ice, blooms of mould. He said that as he was painting, he felt as if he was communing with the bucolic scenes beneath. He likes the idea that as you move chronologically from month to month, your mind searches the abstract marks for a sense of progression. "You read it like there's some kind of narrative. There seems to be a story

or voyage that has occurred," he said. I asked about a faint paw print in the thick, glossy paint and Schnabel craned towards the canvas and concluded, "Yeah, the dog probably walked on that." He likes to paint outside so that nature can leave its imprint on his art.

Then Schnabel moved restlessly around his studio, testing ideas out loud, "Is that what an artist does? You do something you think might help people in some way? Well, you do it for yourself really." He grew more solicitous. "You should make up whatever you want to write," he offered. His phone rang almost constantly. He is preparing for exhibitions in Berlin and San Francisco this spring and is currently editing *At Eternity's Gate*.

"I'm not nostalgic about the Eighties at all. I'm much happier now," he said. His girlfriend, the designer Louise Kugelberg, is helping him on the film. Kugelberg, like all the women with whom Schnabel has been romantically linked, has model good looks. "She's incredible," he said, sounding momentarily like a lovestruck teenager. "I mean, she's very perceptive... It's like having eyes at the back of my head."

Schnabel's work often involves his family. He has six children: three with his first wife, designer Jacqueline Beaurang; twins with his second wife, the actress Olatz López Garmendia; and a four-year-old son with the model May Andersen. The oldest five all work in creative industries.

"There was a training that made all my brothers and sisters and I very brave," his daughter Lola once said in a documentary. She said he taught her to ski by taking her to the top of a black slope and asking her to follow him. "That's not true, but it makes a good story," Schnabel said. "You realise when you hear something like that that history is all a lie and everyone's got their own version of it and it's true to them but not necessarily to you."

Schnabel doesn't intend *At Eternity's Gate* to be a factual account of Van Gogh's life. "It's not a forensic biopic. It's an invention," he said. He wanted to capture what the Dutch postimpressionist once described as the "inaccuracies" that make a portrait "more true than the literal truth". The film concerns itself with Van Gogh's final period, when he painted prolifically and descended into madness, cutting off his own ear and, two years later, killing himself. Yet ultimately, Schnabel said, it will be a film about painting. "Anyone who thinks they know the truth about what happened to Van Gogh is a bigger liar than I am," he said. But, he promised, "You'll see the movie and you'll believe it."

AT ETERNITY'S GATE WILL BE RELEASED LATER THIS YEAR. JULIAN SCHNABEL IS AT PACE GALLERY LONDON FROM 18 MAY TO 22 JUNE. PACEGALLERY.COM

Photographs: Tom Powell/Imaging; Julian Schnabel/ARS, New York/Dacs 2018