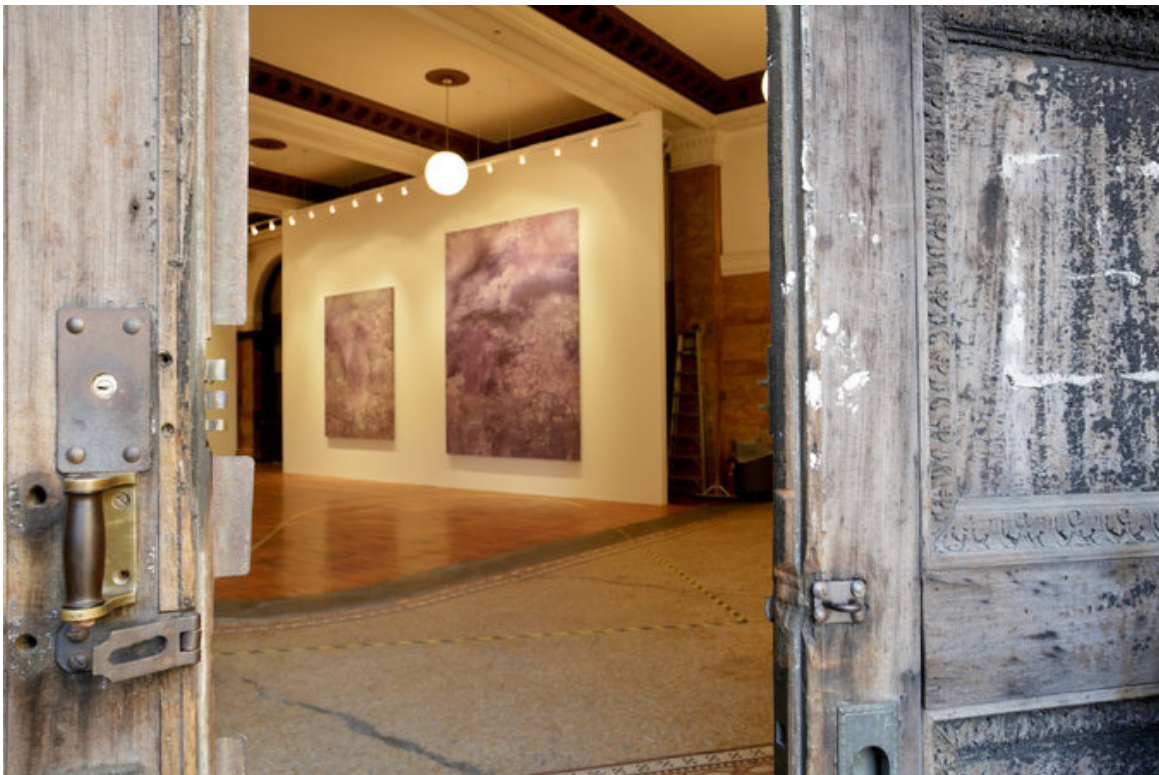


The New York Times

A Look Inside Vito Schnabel's Bowery Bank Show

by Melena Ryzik
May 27, 2015



Two untitled inkjet and spray paint works by Julian Schnabel in "First Show/Last Show," at 190 Bowery, at Spring Street.
Credit Willie Davis for The New York Times

For decades, a hulking former bank building at 190 Bowery has been a canvas and de facto gallery for graffiti artists and fans, one of the last places in SoHo where street art was allowed to flourish. Now the building is a showcase for a far more rarefied art installation, offering select visitors a tantalizing glimpse inside for just two weeks.

"First Show/Last Show," organized by Vito Schnabel, is a group exhibition in the former Germania Bank building, an 1898 landmark that was once home to the photographer Jay Maisel. The six-story, 38,000-square-foot building has been closed to the public since 1966, when Mr. Maisel bought it, its interior a mystery.

"I walked by it, like everyone else, for my whole life and always wanted to go inside," Mr. Schnabel said. He got a tour six years ago, starting with the basketball court that Mr. Maisel had installed just inside the ornate front door. "You walked into the back of a hoop," Mr. Schnabel recalled.

The outlines of the court remain, but now that front room holds paintings by Dan Colen, Jeff Elrod and Mr. Schnabel's father, Julian. Vito Schnabel put the exhibition together after the building was sold, for \$55 million, to the real estate developer Aby Rosen last year. The show, which ends on Friday, was slotted in before a renovation begins. (The building will house offices and perhaps stores, though its tagged-up facade will remain.)



The exterior of 190 Bowery, at Spring Street. Credit Willie Davis for The New York Times

The 14 pieces in the show, including new work by Harmony Korine and never-before-seen pieces by Ron Gorchov, came mostly from Mr. Schnabel's collection. Only a few were for sale; his idea was simply to hang art that he wanted to see together.

A pair of purple Julian Schnabel paintings, made this year, are displayed opposite an old church pew. "They're images of his studio floor that he painted these purple clouds over," his son said, "and when I saw them I kind of felt like I was looking at Earth from a satellite."

One of Mr. Colen's sculptural trash paintings, with a traffic cone, a laundry cart and other detritus suspended on canvas, nods to the Bowery's grittier era, before it became a bastion of chic clubs and multimillion-dollar apartments. Mr. Elrod's black-and-white acrylic "Dream Machine (for Brion Gysin)" looks a bit like the scribbled graffiti that still dots the block.

The redevelopment of the area has galvanized some artists. Early Tuesday, a street artist known as GILF! hung yellow caution tape outside the building. "Gentrification in Progress," it read.

What was initially billed as a public opening on May 16 quickly became a V.I.P. affair when hundreds of people showed up. Mr. Schnabel and his staff decided the crowd was too large, and had security guards and hostesses turn many of them away, while friend-of-Schnabel guests were welcomed, including the art patron Agnes Gund, the actress Dakota Johnson and Heidi Klum, Mr. Schnabel's girlfriend.

Mr. Schnabel said his concern was only protecting the space and the art; to help regulate the crowds, the exhibition has since been open by appointment through Mr. Schnabel's website.

"We've had a great turnout," he said. "There's been a couple of thousand people who have come through, and some educational tours." While the art was a draw, some were "obviously people who just wanted to get inside the building," he acknowledged.

Mr. Schnabel built out a few walls and added some lights but otherwise tried to keep details of the space unchanged. The 19th-century woodwork, tile and crown moldings are intact. Only the ground floor and a bit of a mezzanine are



Works on display in "First Show/Last Show." Credit Willie Davis for The New York Times

on view; Mr. Maisel lived on the fifth floor with his family and kept the rest of the space as studio and storage. There was a library, and rooms for collections of cameras, stamps and vintage Playboy magazines. His darkroom was the bank's vault.

Mr. Maisel did not attend the opening, but the show's guest book reads like a cultural Who's Who. "First show, last show, great show," the art patron Yvonne Force Villareal wrote. Patrick Carney of the Black Keys came by, as did the artist Rashid Johnson. So did tourists: "Thank you – from Arizona."

When a security guard left the door open for a few minutes on Tuesday afternoon, a small crowd snapped photos through the wrought-iron gate.

"Very honored to step in the building that has been such a mystery to me," a visitor named Anthony wrote. "My favorite NYC landmark."



A security guard at 190 Bowery.
Credit Willie Davis for The New York Times