

Art in between. An interview with Julian Schnabel

by Arianna Testino
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An exhibition showing a new series of the celebrated "Plate Paintings" opened a few weeks ago at the gallery run by his son Vito. He is Julian Schnabel, the polymorphic artist allergic to generalizing definitions. Just like this interviewer, who touches on the salient points of a perennially transforming creativity. From painting to cinema, from the politics of fortunate meetings, the art and everything that happens between the observer and the viewed object.

On the 14th of February, an exhibition opened at your son's gallery in St. Moritz. What is it about?

It is about six paintings representing roses and made of fragments of broken plates. They're green, pink, white and black, about two meters high and one meter eighty wide. What makes them stand out is the fact that as soon as you step back from them, they assume a pictorial quality. Thanks to the use of the fragments and colors, it feels like

they're made of leaves and like you're not looking at a painting, but at nature.

I think the entirely white walls of the gallery make for an ideal background for these works.

In fact, I had never seen them with such a background, because I never hung them before. Because several of them I painted outside, and others in a small room in St. Moritz. To see them in the sunlight was rather impressive. There's no sky in these paintings. They seem directly cut out of the world. The flowers seem like islands. It's interesting how nature constructs its own anatomy and you don't know what is random and what is on purpose.

How was it to work with your son? How did you combine your father-son relationship with that of artist-curator?

I think that everything started quite some years ago, when he was a child. He didn't know what he wanted to do, I never pushed him in any direction. I think it happened by osmosis. When he was 14 he told me he had become an art dealer I asked him, "Are you crazy?" Obviously he grew up in the midst of all this, he was exposed to art. He grew up in the midst of an artistic community.

It was very interesting to see him in St. Moritz in the midst of a circle of people that I have known for years, and also his relationship with Bruno (Bischofberger, the owner of the gallery up until 2009 - note of editor) is truly special. Bruno is a godfather to him, he has been a great support to Vito from the moment he decided to take the gallery into his own hands. It's a small, refined space. Vito has done a great job including the space downstairs. He's duplicated the space. I think it's a privilege to be doing something together: beyond the fact that I'm exhibiting at his gallery, he is my son. It's important to have a gallerist you can trust. I believe he's doing an excellent job.

So do you think there will be other collaborations like this one in the future?

We're working on a lot of things together, it's not just about doing an exhibition. It's something that evolves from day to day. Would I repeat the experience? Yes, but I'd probably choose different works.



Julian Schnabel, *Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh's Grave) IV*, 2015, oil, plates, and bondo on wood, 182,88 x 152,4 x 30,48 cm

How do you combine your activities as a visual artist and those of a director and screenwriter? Are they two complementary perspectives?

I believe I am primarily a painter and I don't think of myself as a film director. I was simply a fan of the cinema. I like directing films and I also like the actors. If you give instructions to an actor as a painter, he's not likely to listen to you, but if you're a director, he is (smiles - note of editor). You can have an opinion of films, but if you're not a director it doesn't interest anyone. The first film I directed was about Jean-Michel (Basquiat - note of editor) and it was easy, natural, to realize. I wanted to create a kind of collaboration between the people, talking to them. I am also interested in music and in the way it interacts with the film's narrative. I'm greatly influenced by the work of many directors. Tarkovsky is first on my list. For me it was a great experience to show my films at the Festival del Cinema in Venice. I lived in Milan in 1977 and didn't have enough money to buy mozzarella. So when I found mozzarella in Giovanni Volpi's fridge, I thought I was living in a dream, beyond the fact that I could present my film etcetera (smiles - note of editor). Another exciting thing was to sit among thousands of people, wearing my pajamas, and watch my own film.

So you have a good relationship with Italy?

After having presented my first works in Venice I participated in other Biennials and had the opportunity to get to know Gino De Dominicis, who was a friend of mine. But also Mario Merz and Giovanni Anselmo, Pier Paolo Calzolari...I love Italian art, I adore Caravaggio, Duccio, Giotto, Piero della Francesca, but I think that Merz, Anselmo, Fontana were truly great artists.

I lived in Milan from the winter of 1976 to the spring of 1977 and one day I went into an eyeglass store in corso di Porta Romana and this woman, once she realized that I was a painter, told me that a collector lived right across the street. It was Giuseppe Panza di Biumo. The day after he called me and proposed that I come to Varese with him. We went and saw his collection and at that time I didn't show him my work: I considered it too messy compared to what he was collecting. Basically, a lot of extraordinary things just happened to me in Italy and I have the feeling that I grew a lot in your country.

Coming back to the relationship between painting and cinema...

A part of my brain is a storyteller: I write a lot, I also write screenplays that I then don't realize. The magnificent thing about painting and writing is that you can dedicate yourself to it all alone, so every once in a while I feel the need to make a film in order to communicate my art. I see the film in my head before I even make it. I think that the essential desire to make art can pass from one medium to the other, so I'm probably trying to address the same questions in different ways.

When I make a film, everything revolves around someone who is watching it and whether they will be receptive to it or not. Everything is variable. If someone is looking at a painting or watching a film, the interaction has a place between the stimulus and the person receiving it. That's the art.

Your concentration, as a painter and as a director, is focused on the reactions of the observer?

I don't make films for other people, but I know that if I make a film, sometimes someone could not understand, and so I try to be very clear in terms of the meaning of the film. But when I paint, the language that I use is so abstract - even when I'm representing something recognizable - that it's the public that has to act on its own account. They

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have to look at the painting, observe it, without external explanations. I paint that which surprises me, not what I already know. I want to use the medium of painting to see what I have not yet seen.

The same thing goes for my films: I make them to try to understand what I really think about the subject. William Carlos Williams said that truth is in the objects. And the desire to communicate can take on many different forms. It depends on the direction in which the wind blows, you never know what's going to happen to you after you wake up in the morning.



Julian Schnabel, *Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh's Grave) V*, 2015, oil, plates, and bondo on wood, 182,88 x 152,4 x 30,48 cm

How do you pick the subjects of your films? You have also confronted political subjects. Do you think that the cinema is a good means of talking about these topics, especially in a situation as complex as the current one? A lot of the films that I've made talk about artists. *Miral* was based on a political subject. I made it because I find the question of human rights is an important and everyday topic. But I also believe that anything can be political: when you write and someone reads it, it's political. My objective in making art is to make something I agree with,



Julian Schnabel, *Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh's Grave) VII*, 2015, oil, plates, and bondo on wood, 182,88 x 152,4 x 30,48 cm

and that makes those who come in contact with it see the world and its possibilities in a different way. I think that art is something that has a place between the object and the observer: the artist works on that which happens at that point in between.

In this way you offer the viewer the possibility of reading the world and reality in a different way.

Yes, but I am just another spectator. I participate and create something, but it's incredible how my own paintings have surprised me once they are exhibited in a gallery. Despite being something physical and real, born of an assembly of different parts, when you look at it, you can see it change and at the same time you change too. Art has something mystical, even if the subject is tragic.

I like the idea that an artist can be surprised by his own work.

As Christopher Walken said: "If you can't surprise yourself, how can you surprise others?"

Even the spectator is able to understand whether an artist is capable of surprising himself or not.

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Exactly. I don't want to repeat myself. I feel good when I work because I lose myself in what I'm doing. It's a pleasure and a privilege. I feel very fortunate.

Is there anything new you're working on?

I like to move things around, because then they appear in a new light. To leave the place where you live or work and then return completely changes your perspective on things. It always happens. It's as if the identity of every object is then newly clear. I believe it's a process.

I think that art brings you to the present, every time. When you look at a painting by Caravaggio, you feel like you're looking at it for the first time. This is the reason, for example, why people want to return to Venice, even if they've already been there. Why? Because there's something there to see. You want to return to see a work or a place because you want to feel the same way you felt the last time you saw it.



Julian Schnabel, *Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh's Grave) IX*, 2015, oil, plates, and bondo on wood, 182,88 x 152,4 x 30,48 cm



Julian Schnabel, *Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh's Grave) VI*, 2015, oil, plates, and bondo on wood, 182,88 x 152,4 x 30,48 cm



Julian Schnabel, *Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh's Grave) VIII*, 2015, oil, plates, and bondo on wood, 182,88 x 152,4 x 30,48 cm