

MODERN LUXURY

Putting the Pieces Together: Julian Schnabel

by David Masello
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"Self Portrait by a Red Window" (1982), oil, plates, bondo on wood, 90 inches by 90 inches, by Julian Schnabel

While artist Julian Schnabel's iconic plate paintings are made of broken dishes, a landmark exhibition at the Aspen Art Museum presents them as whole—and enduring.

"A painting is dead until somebody walks in front of it and it gets turned on." –Julian Schnabel

If you passed by Julian Schnabel's studio in Montauk, Long Island, or in New York City in the late 1970s and early '80s, you might have thought there was a big argument in progress. The artist spent that period taking a hammer to white dinner plates, smashing them up. Whereas some choose to pulverize pigments to later apply to their canvases, Schnabel instead broke dishware that he later glued to wooden surfaces, then painted on and over the shards. In some cases, he positioned the plates on the surface to function as sources of light and shading. Thus were born what are now known as Schnabel's "plate paintings," 12 iconic examples of which are on display in the Aspen Art Museum starting this month.

As the artist said in an interview with Heidi Zuckerman, the museum's director and creator of this show, "I was looking for another kind of surface that could be on a

painting. I took plates and broke them with a hammer, and wanted them to be as much broken as I wanted them to be congealed. Once I covered the surface, I wanted to paint on top of those things. There's a battle between what's pictorial and what's an object."

Indeed, just when many thought everything had already been done in contemporary art, Schnabel, beginning in 1978 when he created "The Patients and the Doctors," his first plate painting, chose broken plates as both a new surface on which to express narrative works and a three-dimensional surface object itself. As Zuckerman points out, the enormously scaled plate paintings (some nearly 20 feet long) change depending on the viewer's perspective. "At a distance, they flatten out," she says, "but as you approach them, the surface becomes more three-dimensional and fractured. So much art we see now is too highly produced—clean and slick. To see Julian's works from the late '70s and early '80s is to see paintings that are raw, rough, dirty. They have a feeling of power, masculinity, structure." As for the plate material itself, she admires the honesty of the medium. "The plates are broken without a sense of self-awareness. There's not a fastidiousness."

JULIAN SCHNABEL

When Schnabel emerged as a young artist in the 1970s, he was lauded as a neoexpressionist, one of a next generation of painters who decided that minimalism and outright abstraction were, well, a bore. According to Schnabel, “a painting is dead until somebody walks in front of it and it gets turned on.” There is just no ignoring the plate paintings, many of which incorporate religious iconography, as well as personal references, such as his “Self Portrait by a Red Window” and “The Student of Prague” (which references his Czech-born father). “I like the narrative quality of his work,” Zuckerman says. “I feel that a lot of work made today also tells a story, but it’s less universal than what Julian conveys. I am a firm believer in the idea that the energy comes out of the art object itself.” Upon walking into the galleries, a collective energy is decidedly discernible.

Zuckerman had the idea to mount this exhibition, the first anywhere to highlight the plate paintings, after seeing a show of Schnabel’s “purple paintings” at New York’s Gagosian Gallery a few years ago. “I was making the rounds of the Chelsea galleries and was aware that the best things I kept seeing were his works,” she says. “I happened to meet his son, Vito, who led me to his father’s studio around the corner. Julian wasn’t there, but that was the start of a conversation that resulted in this show. There have been other surveys of his works, but I felt the need to do something really different, pointed and specific.”

In his filmed conversation with Zuckerman, Schnabel says of his work as a painter and a creator specifically of his plate paintings: “I just want to be awake. I want to notice everything when it’s happening. The simplest things are profound.”

Because of the inherent fragility and scale of the paintings, and their wide dispersion among museums and collectors, putting the pieces together, so to speak, proved a challenge, but one that was ultimately well-met. “Mounting an exhibition is all about the idea, who has it and who can pitch it,” Zuckerman says. “We’re fortunate to have secured these loans, and people here at the museum realized that the time is right for this show and they supported it.” Nov. 4-Feb. 17, 637 E. Hyman Ave., 970.925.8050