

VOGUE

A Warhol Confidant Curates His First-Ever Show in St. Moritz

by Tania Farouki
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Borna Sammak, *Untitled*, (2016)
Photo: Argenis Apolinario / Courtesy of JTT, New York

It's safe to say that Bob Colacello's life has never been ordinary. He began his career as a film critic for *The Village Voice*, and it was a review of Andy Warhol's *Trash* (which he called a "Roman Catholic masterpiece") that soon led him to edit Warhol's *Interview* magazine from 1971 to 1983. For those 13 years, Colacello took on multifaceted roles as managing editor, art director, columnist, photographer, and art dealer, while forging a close bond as an aide and confidant to Warhol, all of which is documented in his acute 1990 memoir, *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up*, rereleased in 2014 by Vintage Books.

Post-Pop domination, Colacello became a *Vanity Fair* contributor in 1984, settling in as special correspondent in 1993 (a position that he still holds), for which he has amassed a considerable bevy of notable profiles, ranging from Nan Kempner and King Constantine of Greece to São Schlumberger and Eli Broad. But as of this Sunday, it's not his reporting but his curatorial eye that's being celebrated.

For the first time, Colacello is curating his very own group show at Vito Schnabel Gallery in St. Moritz, Switzerland. Featuring the likes of Jeff Koons, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jeff Elrod, and Warhol (naturally), the exhibition looks into the increasingly blurred lines of figuration and abstraction, which Colacello has dubbed "The Age of Ambiguity." And the timing, considering the current sociopolitical climate (and the current American tendency for echo chambers) couldn't really be better. "I mean if I give a party, my motto is [ages] 19 to 91. It's important to have all the generations, all the nationalities, all the sexualities, all the professions," says Colacello.

"That's what makes things interesting. Whether it's a party or life. It is boring if dentists only see dentists, or Italians only see Italians, or gays only see gays. And I've never lived my life that way."

Below, *Vogue.com* caught up with the writer-cum-curator to discuss his newfound calling, Warhol's enduring

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Jonas Wood, *Clipping J2*, 2015, Oil and acrylic on canvas. 88 x 69 in (223.52 x 175.26 cm). Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Brian Forrest



Julian Schnabel, *Ascension III*, (2015)
Photo: Argenis Apolinario / Courtesy of Vito Schnabel Gallery

influence, and his belief that art and beauty will save the day.

Let's start from the beginning: How did the idea of curating the show come about?

I'd become very friendly with Vito [Schnabel] about seven or eight years ago. I knew his parents [Julian and Jacqueline Schnabel] and his sisters [Stella and Lola Schnabel] a little bit. I ran into him at a party, then we started having lunch. He's such a nice, smart young guy. And after a while, he told me, "You know, I think we should work together. You give me good advice about people, about collectors." He also thought I should curate some shows. I said "Well, let's see, I've never done that." So I guess I officially started working with him three years ago, and then about a year ago he said, "Look, I have the gallery in St. Moritz now; I think you should do a group show for next year." And I love St. Moritz. I have a lot of friends there, and have gone, if not every year, maybe every other year. It's high up, on the sunny side of the Alps, the Italian side! The art

scene adds a lot to the allure. When you have quite a few galleries and people like Norman Foster living there, it brings a whole cultural aspect. The gallery space actually belonged to Vito's godfather, Bruno Bischofberger, a very active dealer of Basquiat, Schnabel, and Warhol.

So I went to see the gallery at Christmastime for the opening of Urs Fischer and the Sterling Ruby installation [at the Kulm Hotel]. Then I went back for the opening of Julian Schnabel's plate paintings of roses. Long story short, Vito said, "Come up with some ideas." It's kind of like having a whole new career at 69 and a half!

Why did you call your show "The Age of Ambiguity"?

Well, the theme is abstract figuration/figurative abstraction, the blurring of those lines. And I was going to call the show "Blurred Lines"—that song kind of stuck in my head—but one day, driving in from East Hampton, I came up with "The Age of Ambiguity." I'm very sociological in my approach to things, and in the way I write. I tend to place



Rashid Johnson, *The Crowd*, (2016)
Photo: Martin Parsekian / Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

things in a social context. This whole idea that gender is now a gradation or a scale, and politics and entertainment are virtually inseparable. It just seems to me that maybe it makes sense that artists don't want to be pinned down too much, whether it's realism or pure minimalism.

Why do you think that's so appealing to this current generation of artists?

Because I think we do live in an age of ambiguity! We live in a very mixed-up, confused, even chaotic time. It's much harder for artists to have one style of painting. It's too limiting for the world artists are operating in today and [in the world] that we're all living in. The Impressionists started abstracting real life. Then you had Cubism and [Pablo] Picasso. It's ongoing. [Willem] de Kooning's women personify what I think I'm talking about in today's art, but today is much more this mixing of the real and the unreal,

the definite and the vague. It is very widespread, wherever you turn. And even an artist like Jeff Koons, whose work is clearly an image of something real—a dog, or in this case, a flower—he's abstracting to such a degree that it becomes an icon, a symbol. It's not a depiction anymore. Photography has made hyperrealism kind of antiquated. I mean, there is still some hyperrealist work that I like, but I don't see much of it being made anymore.

Some artists [in the exhibition] I've known from before, like Koons and Julian [Schnabel], but most everyone who is in the show I really met and got to know through Vito, like Rashid Johnson, Jeff Elrod, Sterling, Jacqueline Humphries, Jonas Wood. And as I kept seeing these artists' works, it occurred to me: One thing that tied their work together was that it was both abstract and figurative. I remember Andy [Warhol] always saying, "How can I make



Jeff Elrod, *Double Lost Horse*, (2016)
Photo: Argenis Apolarifio / Courtesy of Luhring
Augustine, New York, and Vito Schnabel Gallery



Adam McEwen, *Untitled*, (2015)
Photo: Courtesy of Art: Concept, Paris

a painting that's abstract but not really abstract?" And he came up with these shadow paintings and the camouflage paintings. We have a great camouflage piece in the show, which is an abstract painting, but is also a representation of military fabric.

Each [of the artists in the show] is so completely individualistic. If you look at Borna Sammak's work, it's so different from Jeff Elrod's. But I think they are all playing with the same thing artists always play with, which is the balance of form and content. I think they're all trying to say something, but not in too obvious a way. For example, Rashid Johnson's work on one level is about race, but that's not all it's about. He might start with that, but he makes incredibly beautiful paintings that also have all kinds of influences. I think a common thread in a lot of art today, and it's been so for some time now, is the filtering and the elaborating on art history and art historical works. The Bruce High Quality paintings that are in the show are actually based on [Nicolas] Poussin landscapes. You can see in all the works an acute awareness of the history of art, and an ability to absorb it and take it a few steps further.

As you were putting the show together, did you find yourself wanting to convey one idea in particular?

Well, I'm a big believer in beauty in all of its forms, and I hope the first reaction people have when they walk into the gallery is: "What beautiful paintings and how beautiful they look together." I'm hoping, by juxtaposing the works of these great artists, to create an aesthetic sensation, an emotion, really. I think we live in a time where there's too much information, too many facts, too much politics, too many conflicts. I think the aesthetic side of life is a refuge. I'm all for objects, but objects with ideas. For me, a great work of art is usually a beautiful object as well as being grounded in some really interesting ideas.

How do you measure the power of an artwork, of its ideas, its messages?

I think an artwork's power, first of all, has to be visual. Any message should be subtle, secondary, and complex. Great art is complex. Great art doesn't lend itself to a single interpretation, and if it does have a single and simple message, then for me, it's not art. It's a form of journalism, propaganda even. The primary power of art is visual and can be emotional, can be spiritual, can be full of ideas, and ideas that relate to politics and sociology. You have to

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be careful not to overdo the message. I don't like movies where you feel like you're being fed a message. Because life is complex and art is one of the ultimate forms of human expression. Human beings are complex and we're not all just one thing. We're all living mosaics of many elements, including religion, nationality, race, profession, origins.

Art is about individualism, and artists are individualists. They tend to be a bit selfish, a bit egotistical, and they sort of have to [be], in order to achieve the degree of concentration it takes to elevate art to another level and to make works that are both beautiful and full of energy and ideas. I think there is so much pressure to do things that are new, and the works in the show all have a newness to them. What I hope is that by putting this particular group of works together they energize one another, and have an overall effect of multiplied energy. And in that respect, you could say it shows the diversity of America or the world. If you put various elements together, each very individualistic, when they're all together, it's like a party! That's exciting. I mean, if I give a party, my motto is [ages] 19 to 91. It's important to have all the generations, all the nationalities, all the sexualities, all the professions. That's what makes things interesting. Whether it's a party or life. It is boring if dentists only see dentists, or Italians only see Italians, or gays only see gays. And I've never lived my life that way.

You've lived and seen so much. What are your thoughts about the art world then versus now?

What I really love is that I'm old enough to remember

when I started working with Andy, how the serious, intellectual museum curators and critics all said, "Painting is dead. Maybe minimalism is okay, it's all conceptual art." Suddenly in 1980, a whole new generation of young artists came out of graduate schools, and they all started painting again. And that's Schnabel, [Ross] Bleckner, [Eric] Fischl, [Francesco] Clemente, Keith Haring, and they all painted in their own way. Basquiat, too, though he didn't go to art school. They didn't care if their professors were telling them they had to do conceptual art. They wanted to make paintings that you'll hang on the wall.

I did a story on Balthus when he was 90 years old, and he had a great line: that "today there are more museums than artists." He himself insisted on being called a craftsman, not an artist. He said history would decide who the artists were. That was rather refreshing, actually! Look, any change has an upside and a downside. I think the upside is that art is so much more accessible to the masses and to kids growing up anywhere. It's a way for them to achieve another level of expression. It's been shown even with kids who were fighting in the child armies in African wars, that they cannot talk about what they saw and did, but they can draw it, they can paint it. So I think that's wonderful. The downside of this huge global business is that it becomes too much of a business and too much of a market. It used to be that collectors kept artworks for at least 20 years, passing them on from one generation to the next. Today, so many collectors are quasi-dealers; they're traders. I think we have to be careful not to go too far in that direction.