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The Controversial Artist Who Just Won't Go Away

by M.H. Miller

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"Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh's Grave) X," 2016.

Credit © Julian Schnabel Studio. Photograph by Gary Mamay, courtesy of Pace Gallery.

Julian Schnabel has occupied many roles through the years: the default figurehead of the star-studded 1980s art world; the fall guy for that era's particular brand of monied hedonism; an Academy Award-nominated filmmaker; for some, the greatest painter of his time – and others, the most overrated. He's experienced ups and downs with critical and public reception: The critic Raphael Rubinstein has praised the "messy grandeur and devotional passion" of his paintings; Morley Safer, in a "60 Minutes" segment from 2008, dismissed Schnabel as the "poster-boy for the Me Generation." And now, after several years of neglect from American galleries and museums, Schnabel is having a bit of a renaissance, with a recent retrospective at the Aspen Art Museum, a solo show opening this week in New York at Pace Gallery and a new film project about Vincent

Van Gogh in the works. At 65, Schnabel has effectively transcended the sea of commentary that has surrounded him for the last four decades. He's not going anywhere, like it or not.

One recent afternoon, a more or less cheerful Schnabel sat at the head of a long wooden table in the kitchen of his West Village mansion, eating from four large plates of takeout. He wore sunglasses, a T-shirt and dirty sweatpants. His hands had food and paint on them. Spread out on the table in front of him were books of translated Van Gogh letters and the typed pages of dialogue between two characters, Vincent and Gauguin. He's been working on the script for the movie – his first since 2010 – with Jean-Claude Carrière, who collaborated on the screenplays for

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"Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh's Grave) VII," 2016. Credit © Julian Schnabel Studio. Photograph by Daniel Martinek Photography, courtesy of Pace Gallery.



"Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh's Grave) III," 2015. Credit © Julian Schnabel Studio Photograph by Dawn Blackman, courtesy of Pace Gallery.

Luis Buñuel's late, less surreal films, beginning with "Diary of a Chambermaid." Schnabel described the Van Gogh film as a movie "about painting, and not just about Van Gogh. There are a lot of things people think they know about Van Gogh, but I'm not making a biography." By Schnabel's count there have been dozens of movies made about the artist and, he said, "I don't know if there's one that I like." About his own film, he said, with somewhat uncharacteristic humility, "It's just a movie. But it would be nice to get it right."

"It's amazing when you think about it," he continued. "Do you know who the mayor of the town was when Van Gogh lived in Arles? Do you know who the president of the republic was? I don't know. But we know Van Gogh was there – a guy who was mistreated by everybody, and now there are souvenir shops selling posters of his paintings. It's interesting that someone involved just in the process of putting paint on a canvas would have this resounding ripple effect over the years."

His new show at Pace is connected: It features paintings of the garden at Auvers-sur-oise, France, where Van Gogh

is buried. They are plate paintings – Schnabel's signature style, which features canvas covered in shards of broken crockery and then painted over, a method Schnabel has worked with since 1978. Schnabel compared his use of broken dishes in his paintings to someone using oil paint. "It seems to work," he said.

This is Schnabel's first exhibition with Pace in about 15 years. Since 2002, he's shown mostly with Gagosian, Pace's arch-rival for commercial art world superiority. Asked about leaving Pace and then returning years later, Schnabel said, simply, "When I left, it didn't feel right, and then it did."

Despite the overlap in subject matter between the exhibition and his new film, he said he tries to compartmentalize painting and filmmaking. ("I don't want paintings to be movies and I don't want movies to be paintings," he said.) Still, the two are not mutually exclusive, and there is some anxiety that the one might take away from the other. "Making movies probably distracts people from the paintings," he said. "But in the long run you can't not do things because you're scared that people aren't gonna



"Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh's Grave) XIII," 2016. Credit: © Julian Schnabel Studio Photograph by Tom Powell Imaging Courtesy of Pace Gallery Credit © Julian Schnabel Studio. Photograph by Tom Powell Imaging, courtesy of Pace Gallery.

like you. You can't second guess yourself. And if you start doing that, you might as well just stop."

By this time Schnabel had finished eating, and he got up to walk around the house, pointing out various selections of his own work that hung on the walls. An early painting, from 1975, called "Jack the Bellboy or a Season In Hell," looked like a crude cave drawing; a portrait of the artist Albert Oehlen, from 1997, featured the subject dressed up like an altar boy, with what looked like a curious smile on his face.

Schnabel has made so many paintings that many of them sit in warehouse storage, and he won't see them for years at a time. He recalled seeing one of his early plate paintings at the show in Aspen. "It's interesting to see what I was doing when I was 26 years old," he said, "and what those paintings meant. And it's interesting for me now, at 65, to go back and look at those paintings. We're

talking almost 40 years ago. I have a different relationship to society than I did when I was in my 20s, when I was very unaccepted. I was really on the outside of something." He paused. After a long career, he said, "you can still be on the outside."

Later, Schnabel threw on a blazer and met his daughter Stella downstairs and they took a car to Pace Gallery, in Chelsea. Schnabel started talking about a basketball court he went to on a recent trip to Arles. The court was painted a sky blue, but had been scuffed up, revealing a pale white underneath. He took out his phone and started showing Stella pictures he took of it. One he described as looking like the tide rolling in from way out at sea. Another was like waves crashing into the shore. He seemed to earnestly contemplate using the pictures in a new series of paintings.

At the gallery, he watched his works being installed. They

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looked almost delicate, with swashes of pink and yellow depicting the sunlight falling on flower petals, but they were big, hulking things. Two very large men visibly struggled, their bodies shaking with physical strain as they held up one of the smaller paintings in the show, adjusting its alignment by an inch. In another room, it took six men to install one of the larger works. Schnabel became giddy as he looked at the show – it was the first time he'd seen the paintings all together like this. He moved around, examining them close – “it looks very abstract at this range,” he said – and stepping back to take in the full view, where the collage of shattered dishware seemed to have the texture of a bundle of leaves.

“Chaos,” Schnabel said, surveying the room with a smile and sounding quite satisfied. “Organized chaos.”



“Julian Schnabel Plate Paintings 1978-86” on view at Aspen Art Museum.
Credit Tony Prikrýl



Julian Schnabel, 2011. Credit Photograph by Steve Clute,
@Julian Schnabel Studio, Pace Gallery