



In Julian Schnabel's studio

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An hour with Julian Schnabel, who shares with Art Media Agency reflections on the ground he has covered, the Plate Paintings series, surface and matter, film, sun and shade... An encounter in Manhattan.

Born in 1951 in New York, the city where he continues to live, Julian Schnabel has maintained a reputation as an undisciplined artist. Winning the attention of critics early on while refusing to be pinned down by any particular style, he also became known to the public in 1996 thanks to his film *Basquiat*. Ever since, he has continued to paint, sculpt and make feature films when he's not surfing near his villa in Montauk. And let's not forget: Julian Schnabel is also an interior architect... It was incidentally in his Venetian palace in the West Village, New York, that he received us - at the heart of the Palazzo Chupi, in which the artist has based his studio and apartment, with a view of the Hudson...

At the very start of your career in the 1970s, did you feel close to European movements such as the Italian Transavanguardia? In terms of style, we get this impression, but did you know the artists that made up the movement such as Francesco Clemente, Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi or Mimmo Paladino?

In 1982, when Harald Szeemann curated the "Settore Arti Visive" exhibition in which I took part at the Venice Biennale, Francesco Clemente was one of the artists. I then saw him again when Jean-Christophe Ammann showed us in Basel, along with Enzo Cucchi and Sandro Chia, and we started to keep up with one another. I particularly liked the work of Clemente, especially from that period, and we then became friends, but before this encounter, I didn't know who these artists were.

This was also the era of postconceptual and minimalist art. Did you react to this in some way? Did you set out to produce "Bad Painting" as this tendency was later defined?

That's right, this was a term that was created subsequently - in the same way that neo or postImpressionism was - and that helped to group together artists, possibly with Georg Baselitz as the figurehead. He was ten years older than I was, but we'd been shown together, namely at the "New Spirit in Painting" exhibition at the Royal Academy

of Arts in London, then the "Zeitgeist" show at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin, with a group of international artists who are often presented together. But in the 1970s, I lived in New York and painted spontaneously at a time that was dominated by conceptual art or performance - a state of affairs which could very well have relegated my style to past tastes.

And yet, you were noticed before you turned 30...

I was radically different from other artists, but it wasn't a type of reaction, because this isn't how I react, either as an artist or as a human. For me, art doesn't necessarily come from art but from having a well-filled life. In 1974, I also met Blinky Palermo, then Sigmar Polke, who'd come to see me at the studio. Through these German connections, I had an exhibition at the December Gallery in Düsseldorf in 1978. What's more, the gallerists made a mistake about the date of the opening, and the only ones to attend were those closest to me, namely Sigmar Polke, Imi Knoebel and my wife... Then, I also had a solo show at the Tate Gallery in London, in 1983, another at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in the same year, and in 1985, I was displayed at the Paris Biennale... I've always had very enthusiastic critics who've followed me whereas others have wondered why I was getting so much attention.

In 1978, you started the Plate Paintings. You picked these up with a second series, from 1981 to 1986, and you're working on them again. How is it important for you to go back on, or reread, your own work?

When I did the first piece, of course it wasn't a series, which by nature grows little by little. If you look here, in the studio, you'll see that I've created four *Lobster Girls*, and the latest ones date from the past year. The idea came to me one day when I was at a restaurant in a fish market and I saw a poster on a refrigerator with a girl and a lobster. So I produced a painting of a painting... the *Plate Paintings*, which I've picked up recently, were influenced by my observation of roses at my home, and also a visit to the Auvers-sur-Oise cemetery where Van Gogh is buried. It was then that I realised that plate debris resembled leaves, which was different from the first works in which the only thing that mattered was breaking up the surface. When I continue a work, I do it until I believe that it's exhausted.

You mentioned the surface. Isn't this the major topic of your work, along with matter? Can we say, for this reason, that your paintings aren't narrative? You also said one day that they're "mute"...

Even if a story accompanies a painting, the painting is never a linear illustration of it. When I was a boy, an art teacher said to me: "You think literally and not visually." I didn't see what he meant, but I've thought about it for 45 years, and today I understand that a visual painting is what you recognise immediately, or not, existing on the same horizontal line... If I go back to the girl and the lobster, I don't care whether you know the story or not. The colour red evolves while the white becomes water, or vice versa, and allows me to draw the legs with a certain materiality. It's something to do with the painting only. How to paint and what to represent...

Is the connection made through the gesture? Can this attention to the surface be viewed as a fleshy, bodily relationship?

I develop a very broad spectrum of painting. Sometimes, I feel the need to make a structure, but at other times, I find some fabric and spray it before representing a woman, or else I let ink flow... It's after they're finished that I try to make my works relate to one another. At the moment of conception, it's very intuitive and it's true that I use painting like a skin. My works are very physical and as I spend a lot of time in water surfing, many elements in my work relate to the idea of fluidity.

So this is far more important than the subject being represented...

I think that everything can be connected and become a subject for painting. Just as you can start off from a wonderful novel and make a terrible film based on it, or conversely, start off with a mediocre book and turn it into a great cinematic moment. You can always find something interesting in the image and develop it, like Francis Picabia, for example, who was interested in all types of sources, even if other artists are more obsessed by a particular theme.

But do you continue to make portraits, this "genre" that you've worked a great deal on? You also say that you like painting from live models.

It's true, I paint from life, and never from photography. Some of my works, in large formats and in a fairly classical style, can be liked to Goya. When I stopped big abstract paintings - a category in which the *Plate Paintings* fall -, I decided to take on portraits, also for this reason: I didn't know what they'd look like. Since 1997, I've been going to Venice to stay in a palace that I borrow, where many 18th century paintings are displayed. As I can't compete with

them, I've recreated my own painting, which is symbolically like striking a white mark on these works. But in the end, all works reveal a sort of interaction with everyday events. Certain "marks", for example, have come from the sun and shadows making marks on a painting one day in the studio, so I decided to paint them. I then stuck on a poster that I purchased on Rue du Cherche Midi in Paris. These different materials accompany the idea of different temporalities, which are always present in my work.

Are some of your works nevertheless a more or less direct homage to classical painting?

No, but it's interesting because Diego Velasquez also comes to mind. I also reemploy motifs from old printed papers that I reproduce on polyester, as this refers to the period in which they were very fashionable, while being inscribed, in my mind, on a temporal scale. I view things like a palimpsest, as if everything already existed and I react to it, following on from it, or otherwise. For example, the figures of this wallpaper were represented by someone else, but I don't dwell at length on the matter, so as to consider them as a pure raw material.

Even if your paintings aren't narrative, you've chosen very strong narratives or topics in your films, namely in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, inspired by the story of Jean-Dominique Bauby, the journalist who was completely paralysed except for his left eyelid. Are these stories that you don't want to tell in your paintings?

I think that part of my brain works as that of a scriptwriter or storyteller, but paintings aren't films. A film has an internal life of its own and by nature is more narrative. Perhaps if I painted different panels one after the other, I'd need to include a visual story. But when I make a film, I want to be able to speak in another language, and I spend quite a lot of time writing it. What I can't paint, I can write... or the opposite.

Do you think that the compositions of your paintings can influence the framing of your films?

I've long tried to analyse the question of the rectangle and the fact that things come from different angles. For example, in the film *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, the main character can't move his head. This offered me great freedom to experiment with what could be placed in the frame or not, even if this is an unusual situation. I have the privilege of being able to represent the world that I wish to construct... And this is all that matters to me.

You like the directors Andreï Tarkovski and François Truffaut, even if your films are very different...

I think that people can see in my work the influence that these directors have had on me, along with Gillo

JULIAN SCHNABEL

Pontecorvo, director of *The Battle of Algiers*. I also like Bertrand Blier's *Going Places* and the work of Jean-Claude Carrière, a very good friend of mine, with whom I'm thinking about a biopic on Vincent van Gogh at the moment.

Memo

At Art Basel, Julian Schnabel's works can be discovered at the stands of the Almine Rech, Pace, Blum & Poe and Sperone Westwater galleries.

"Paintings that I hope Philip and David would like". Until 14 August. The Glass House, 199 Elm Street, New Canaan (Connecticut), USA. theglasshouse.org

"Julian Schnabel". From 1 July. Hall Art Foundation, Schloss Derneburg Museum, Schlosstr. 1, Derneburg, Germany. www.hallartfoundation.org

"Julian Schnabel". From 14 September to 14 October. Almine Rech Gallery, 39 East 78th Street, New York, USA. www.alminerech.com