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On the right by Martin Engel

ART *at high altitude*

In recent years, we have seen that the art world has increasingly discovered elegant ski resorts. We can definitely speak of an accelerating cultural renaissance. This winter and spring, exhibitions have been mounted by top galleries like Hauser & Wirth, which is showing Louise Bourgeois's monumental sculptures at the unique Tarmak 22 space in Gstaad, while in St. Moritz you can enjoy Julian Schnabel's latest 'plate paintings' in an exhibition called *Trees of Home (For Peter Beard)* at his son's Vito Schnabel Gallery or see a selection of works by British artist Damien Hirst from his *Mental Escapology* exhibition, including a 12-foot sculpture called *The Monk*, which has been installed at the centre of the frozen Lake St. Moritz. And all this is, of course, combined with the spectacular beauty and bright sunshine of the Swiss Alps. The Engadin valley has always had a creative edge, with local artists such as Giovanni Segantini, Alberto Giacometti and Not Vital spanning both time and mediums. But over the years it has also attracted world-renowned artists like Julian Schnabel, Jean-Michel Basquait, Gerhard Richter and Richard Long, who came—and still come—to the Engadin to create new work. Undeniably, the legendary Swiss art dealer Bruno Bischofberger, who, with his vision and love of art, was the first to open a gallery in the town, back in 1963, is one of the people who have made St. Moritz what it is today.

JULIAN SCHNABEL

World-famous artist and film director, Julian Schnabel, talks about his latest 'plate paintings' in the Trees of Home (For Peter Beard) exhibition at the Vito Schnabel Gallery in St. Moritz, Switzerland, his love for the Engadin valley and life in these unprecedented times.

Mart Engelen: I have just seen your latest 'plate paintings' in the Trees of Home (For Peter Beard) exhibition at your son's gallery in St. Moritz. Please tell me more about them.

Julian Schnabel: Well, Peter Beard was a very close friend. I knew him for forty years; maybe longer. And he was my neighbour in Montauk. After I had made the film 'At Eternity's Gate', Peter had a stroke: he could still communicate but he couldn't really speak the same way that he did before. Anyway, I was over at his house during the summer a year ago. We were talking in the backyard; he had seen the movie and had marked-up some pages about these trees in a book about Van Gogh. But he couldn't find the book. He was very, very frustrated that he couldn't find the book that day. And I never saw him again. He died in March this year, before the summer. He wandered off in the woods and died out there—in the woods. His wife, Nejma, later found the book with the pages folded back. And when she showed me those pages, I remembered I had been to that place. There were trees that were in the film, and there were trees that I had seen and there were trees that were in those photographs. So I thought, well, I never saw him again but I am going to make a painting of those trees for him. Before the summer, I had these plate panels. I didn't paint over all the plates the way I did with the Rose paintings. I left them open because I thought that if I painted the trees with their dark kind of silhouettes on top of that surface, they would sparkle like light, like the sunlight hitting the ground or the light that was in the sky.

ME: Was it an avenue of trees in St Rémy de Provence?

JS: Yes, exactly!

ME: So, you didn't see Peter again. But did he eventually find the book before he passed away?

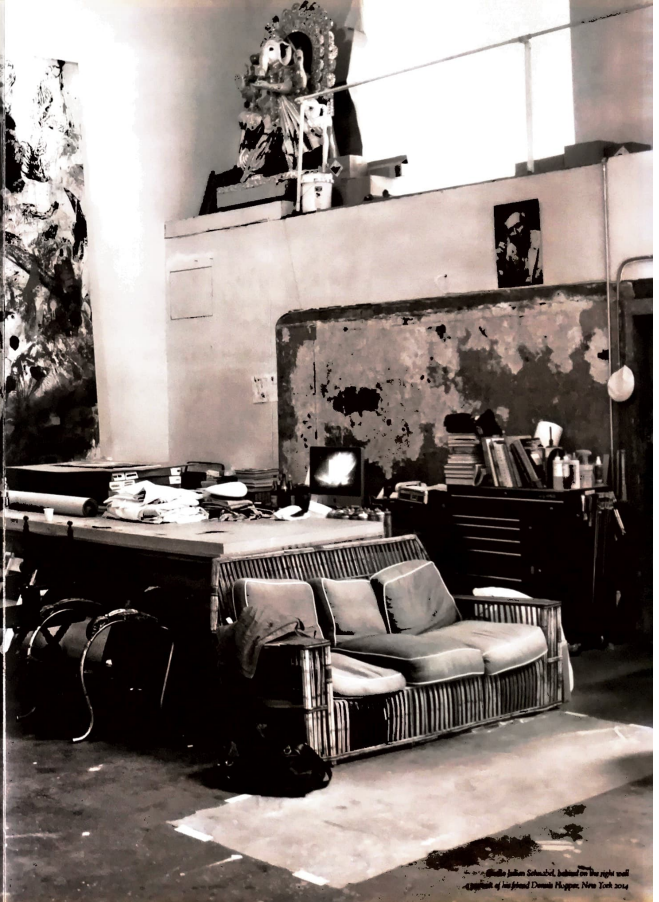
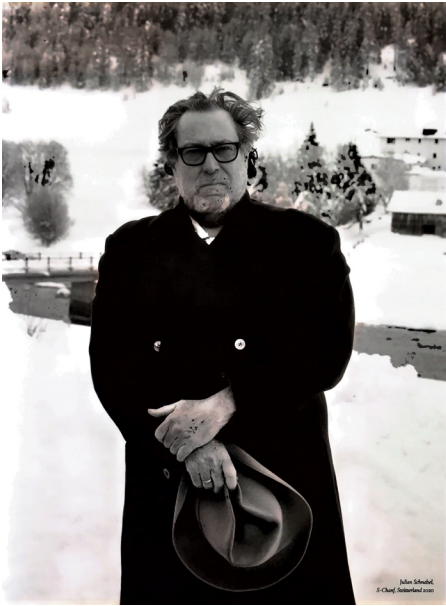
JS: No, it was Nejma who found it later. And you know they live less

than two miles from me in Montauk so we would see each other quite often. But it was great that she found the book and I just wanted to do this for him. You know, we loved each other. He was crazy but also very particular and extreme in his own way. But you know we never had an argument in all the years that we knew each other. It was a pleasure even when we didn't agree about anything.

ME: I had the pleasure of meeting Peter for the first time back in 1997, when I had just moved to NY. He did indeed have a unique personality and was very funny. How many Trees paintings are there?
JS: There are six. After making the Van Gogh film, I started to make portraits that were based on the paintings I made as props for the movie. So I made a painting of Willem Dafoe based on one I had made of Willem for the movie. Van Gogh used to make paintings of his paintings so I proceeded to make a series of portraits including fifteen of them are Van Gogh, three are Velasquez, three are Caravaggio and three are Frida Kahlo. The idea is portraiture and painting people who are dead but with live models being those people. My son, Cy, posed as Velasquez and Oscar Isaac posed as Caravaggio. So Willem poses as Van Gogh. Then I decided to paint Van Gogh as Van Gogh, Caravaggio as Caravaggio and Velasquez as Velasquez. I painted Cy, thinking I was going to paint the Christ of Velasquez but when I started to do it, it looked more like the dead Christ that Titian painted. So I painted my son Cy as Christ. But you can see them all in the new Taschen book. Anyway I guess that in a sense the trees are a continuation of these because they were a sort of surrogate for Van Gogh. The trees are a bit like portraits. They accompanied him in his journey down there in the South of France. They were witnesses and characters. Nature was a character in the movie and I think that the trees are characters: personifications really.

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JULIAN SCHNABEL



ME: Well, it's a beautiful homage to Peter.

JS: Thank you. That's why they are called Trees of Home (For Peter Beard).

ME: By the way, how did you experience this wonderful year 2020?

JS: Well, I think that I have been more privileged than most people because I can work by myself. In the course of this year, my wife Louise and I worked on two scripts. We rewrote a script for 'The Perfume' that I wrote seventeen years ago and one for this book 'In the Hand of Dante' by Nick Tosches that I wrote eight years ago. Martin Scorsese will be the executive producer. I don't know when we will shoot them but we will do it some time.

ME: So the first script is based on the book 'Le Parfum' by Patrick Süskind?

JS: Yes, I wrote the script years ago and it didn't happen, so I made 'The Diving Bell and the Butterfly' instead.

ME: So you have been very busy...

JS: We wrote those things and then I made paintings. I had a show in New York that opened on March 5th and closed on the 7th because of the pandemic. But I didn't care about it being open or closed. I saw how they were hanging there and over the course of the summer I made some other paintings. In September I had another exhibition at Pace, just up the street. Just changed it around a little bit and it was up. You can see this stuff online.

ME: I have seen it online. These paintings are totally different. What are they about?

JS: They are paintings on this material that I found in the jungle in Mexico: coverings at food markets that have been burned by the sun so just responding to what is in the material. I was working on that and then I was working on some other paintings out in Montauk. So I painted quite a few paintings. Obviously I was very disturbed that Donald Trump was the president. I was very anxious about all that because I think he is an idiot. Not even that. He is beneath contempt. I mean he is really a destructive force. It's amazing that people let him do anything that has an impact on other people. But that being said, the day he lost the election I made these paintings of roses called 'Victory'. And they are very different. Obviously I started painting the roses on Van Gogh's grave but they were beach roses that grew in the trees near our house. They were pretty optimistic even with this world on fire. So I had a different kind of experience. I had a nice productive summer of painting. I didn't come to New York until a week ago, so I had been out there in Montauk since March. And Vito wanted to show the Trees paintings up here. He was not there; he would have gone into quarantine but as I'd arrived a couple of days earlier I didn't have to do that so I was taking care of the gallery. I mean I just hang the paintings and Sara does the work. I didn't have an opening. I mean, it was open; but I don't miss that either. I am not interested in openings. I am old enough, I guess. When you are young you want a lot of people to show up, you know. And basically this place here, I don't want to say where it is. I mean on the one hand I never like to say where I am going or what I am doing because I don't want to see a bunch of people. Ladina Florineth owns this place; there are seven rooms. It's very beautiful and she taught me how to ski in 1979, so we have known each other for all these years and we are great friends. We come here pretty much every year. It's like coming home for us. I can also work here in a building a couple of houses down. I painted some of the Rose paintings here in the snow. We actually don't go into St. Moritz very often, we stay here. Take a walk by the river. In a sense, waiting out this pandemic. I mean I was in Montauk most of the time, and in New York City. If you are walking on the street, you hear people talking. You don't notice that when you are out in the country. You are not hearing all this stuff and you can just hear what's going on in your head, if it doesn't drive you crazy. It's a real privilege to be out there and to be able to breathe. Many people that live in the city—they can't

go outside, they're in an apartment. And that's difficult. I was very privileged to be out there.

ME: Same here. We stayed in Biarritz for part of the lockdown, and it's really nice to be in the open air. Surfers were able to do their thing. It's so different.

JS: Well, you also know Biarritz is the surf. And the land formation is very much like Montauk. I surfed all over that territory.

ME: Oh yeah?

JS: Yes, Bidart, Guéthary. And my son, Cy, surfs over there. And he was opening his space in San Sebastian. You should interview him; he is beautiful. He's so smart and he writes about the things he is interested in. He's not really a businessman, he's rather a curator. Just an art-lover.

ME: With pleasure, I will certainly visit him when I am back in the Basque country. Now, my last question, what does Engadin mean for you?

JS: Well, you know, the thing is that I met Bruno Bischofberger in 1979. He saw a painting of mine in New York; my first plate painting 'The patients and the doctors'. So I used to come up here and paint at Bruno's house. Jean-Michel [Basquiat] also worked up there. He had built a studio next to his house. And we skied then and it became a certain home-away-from-home, I had a lot of friends here that I just knew over the years. So for Vito (Bruno is Vito's godfather) and the fact that Vito has a gallery there (it's Bruno's gallery, you should say the Bruno Bischofberger gallery), now it's the Vito Schnabel gallery. He took it over and I think Bruno was very proud that he could do that. It was, it felt very familiar. Vito grew up here with many people that are grown-ups too now. They're a community of people that he has known since he was a kid. And for me, I am not particularly social or whatever, but I come here and like to stay down here. It's familiar. You know that in 1990 I had an open air show of fourteen sculptures at Chantarella.

ME: So it's a very good place for inspiration over here...

JS: Well, I like things simple. You know I can get up, walk next door, do something. Ladina is a great cook. It's just us, Louise, my wife, our dogs and Ladina. I like it quiet and, also now, it's kind of convenient in a sense because people should not be congregated. I don't miss that. It will be very nice when this is over but I think, I hope, in this case that people will learn from what happened. People are so damn busy all the time. Forget that. We have been forced to be with our families, all of a sudden you realise what's really important. Everything gets more simplified. But I have been very, very lucky and privileged throughout this process that I was able to work. I didn't feel impaired in any way but I'm very troubled by the situation in the US. I think the country is a f... mess and that guy is just an incendiary creep. He doesn't care if people get killed. There are civil servants being attacked for counting ballots. I mean people that just did their job. And these horrible Republicans won't stand up and say; you know what, we were wrong. This guy is a liar. Go home and take care of your family. Don't fight with these other people.

ME: Definitely! Apart from his lies and fake news, I think he is the worst example for younger generations who are already on their virtual platforms and don't even know what the real world is anymore.

JS: Indeed. It's very disturbing. By the way, Biden is a good man. He wants to re-enter the Paris accords. He has an American-Indian woman who is in charge of the lands, etc.

ME: So there is hope?

JS: I am very hopeful. It's going to be rough but the fact that this creep doesn't want to leave... they're gonna have to pull him out, kicking and screaming. But he is going!

ME: Thanks a lot, Julian, for this conversation.