Forbes

Julian Schnabel vs. Death At Pace Gallery Los Angeles

by Tom Teicholz
April 24, 2022

Julian Schnabel PHOTO BY LINNEA STEPHAN © BFA. COURTESY OF PACE LOS ANGELES

"All art is optimistic because it contains a denial of death" —Julian Schnabel.

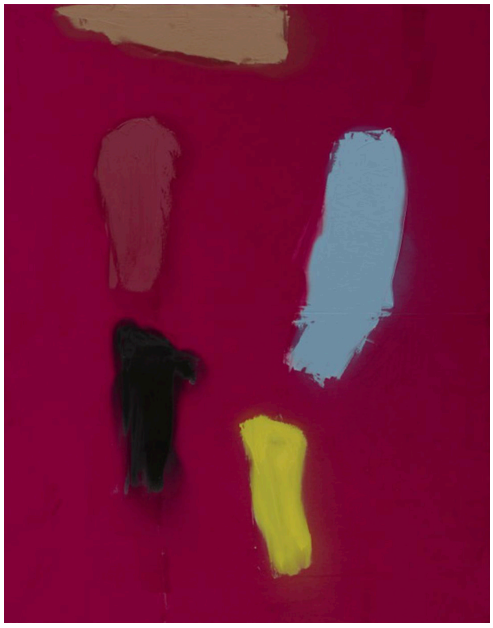
Recently, Pace Gallery celebrated the opening of their new Los Angeles flagship outpost, a partnership with Kayne Griffin, in their 15,000 square foot space on South La Brea, a former 1940s auto showroom whose building is now ivy-covered. The opening exhibition, *For Esmé – with Love and Squalor* presents 13 recent paintings on velvet by Julian Schnabel as well as a large sculpture in the gallery courtyard on which the name 'Esmé' is written.

At the opening, Pace's CEO Marc Glimcher and Bill Griffin of Kayne Griffin spoke to the assembled press, gallery workers and invited guests of their longstanding collaborations with artists from the California Light and Space movement, such as James Turrell, Robert Irwin, and Mary Corse. They also spoke to the entrepreneurial and creative spirit that links them and how their partnership adds global strength and local expertise and they spoke enthusiastically of the Schnabel exhibition inaugurating the new partnership's space.

Standing apart from this group, alone, on the red stone gravel surrounding his giant white sculpture was Julian Schnabel himself, wearing a white jumpsuit, zipper open enough to show ample chest hair, a floppy straw hat on, with a scraggly grey/white pandemic beard.

Schnabel is now 70, but other than his beard you would be hard pressed to guess his age. He is the proud father of a five-month-old daughter, Esmé, with his wife Swedish interior decorator and writer Louise Kugelberg, whom he married in 2019.

For Esmé with Love and Squalor is a short story by J. D. Salinger that was originally published in The New Yorker magazine in 1950 and was collected in Salinger's *Nine Stories* in 1952. Salinger's story concerns a teenage World War Two orphan in Britain, Esmé, who catches the attention of an American soldier, and whose later gift of her father's watch helps the soldier overcome his wartime trauma. It is a story about telling the truth about what we now call PTSD; and about being nonetheless optimistic about one's future (One could certainly read bringing a child into the world during a pandemic as fitting the bill).



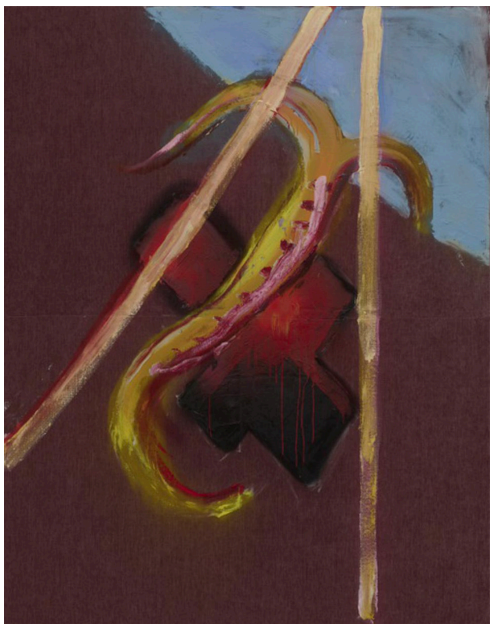
First Painting, By Julian Schnabel 2022 © JULIAN SCHNABEL / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS) NEW YORK

Seeing Schnabel standing alone, I went over to introduce myself (*of course I did!*). What happened next was that as Glimcher and Griffin addressed the gathered crowd, Schnabel led me on a private tour of the exhibition, as well as of other of his art works hidden behind closed doors throughout the gallery.

Schnabel was born in Brooklyn and grew up in Texas. He arrived back in New York in the late 1970s. I remember seeing those early shows of his work, particularly his Mary Boone exhibition, and his career-making "Plate Paintings" — works of tremendous energy and expressiveness that captured the chaos of late 1970s New York in "tatters' (to quote the Rolling Stones' "Shattered" which literally and figuratively encapsulates Schnabel's work at the time), made at a time when graffiti street and subway artists such as such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat were becoming painters and art world sensations.

What was most striking about those early Plate Paintings was that although they were made of materials not traditionally seen in paintings (i.e. the shards of plates held together with auto body putty and dental plaster) Schnabel's work read very much as paintings. In some ways, Schnabel's work already existed in an art historical context following in the footsteps began by Rauschenberg a decade earlier and linked even earlier to works by Kurt Schwitters and the Surrealists most notably Marcel Duchamp, and even to early cubist, collage, and sculptural works by Picasso. However, the energy, the creativity, and the confidence his paintings expressed were all Schnabel.

The 13 Paintings in the PACE LA exhibit are all large canvases (each painting is two large canvases with a seam joining them), painted on velvet fabric of assorted colors that combine paint, modeling paste with spray paint on top in ways that create depth and a lively quality to the large abstractions. Schnabel pointed out certain brushstrokes in his paintings that were, in his telling, suggestive of movies, books, other artworks and even one of his earlier paintings, 1986's *The Migration of the Duck-Billed Platypus to Australia* where we first see the paint shapes that appear on many of the current canvases.



Andrei Rublev by Julian Schnabel, 2022. © JULIAN SCHNABEL / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS) NEW YORK

So, for example, *Andrei Rublev*, is named for the famous Russian Icon painter of the 15th Century who was the subject of a film by Andrei Tarkovsky. At the painting's center one can see a black cross that appears blood-stained, overlaid with yellow brushstrokes that recall the gold of Rublev's icons. Rublev's best known work is his *Trinity*, and in the

curves on Schnabel's paintings we can imagine the halos of Rublev's figures. Painted on burgundy velvet, the texture adds a depth to the painting's seeming rough brushwork.

Pandora and The Flying Dutchman by Julian Schnabel, 2022. © JULIAN SCHNABEL / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

Another painting, *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*, is also the name of a 1951 James Mason/ Ava Gardner film shot in Spain with some sets designed by artist Man Ray, a tragedy-riddled story that ends in the death of the two protagonists. Here, there is an hourglass, the top of which may suggest the Spanish coast and the sea, the bottom of which is empty, but which sits atop a pink, red, and black mass of paint, which may represent the eventual tragic deaths. To me, the painting also has echoes of work by Salvador Dali, suggested by the hourglass and by the sand and sea.

Discussing his early works, Schnabel told me that when he found that he could investigate "the space between materials and the pictorial" he found the arena for his art – which he has pursued in the decades that followed from the pictorial to the abstract, in large scale works and sculptures that continue to investigate the properties of different types of paints, different surfaces as canvases, incorporating different materials such that Schnabel has added to the vocabulary of contemporary painting in an ongoing conversation with art history and his own works. A 2011 exhibition at Museo Correr in Venice, Italy, curated by The British Art Historian Norman Rosenthal was called, aptly, *Julian Schnabel: Permanently Becoming and the Art of Seeing*, which could well stand as a summation of Schnabel's painting ethos.

Walking around the exhibition with Schnabel, I was struck by two things: Schnabel's deep knowledge not just of art history but also the techniques of individual artists; and how much Schnabel lives in this creative flow of consciousness and perception that mixes past and present artistic practice.

"I see paintings everywhere," Schnabel has said, and even in what seem like the most casual of marks on his paintings there are references to other artists and to Schnabel's own works. There is a saying that to a hammer everything looks like a nail; To Schnabel, everything he sees is an artwork or an art installation.

At one moment, Schnabel pulled me aside and into a closed room off the exhibition to show me some of his other work, wall-sized large-scale portraits of a blonde woman in a peter pan collar (sometimes with a band of paint obscuring her eyes), whose coloring and warmth recalled Picasso's portraits of Marie-Therese Walther. Schnabel also showed me some recent paintings that were completely abstract, color fields interrupted by bands of black and/or white that recalled Warhol's late career Shadow paintings.

Over the last several decades, Schnabel has taken his protean creativity into a wide variety of forums and mediums, including architecture and interior design, real estate development, furniture, and most notably film. Schnabel has directed 5 narrative films including films about painters such as *Basquiat*, and *At Eternity's Gate* (about Vincent Van Gogh), and the highly acclaimed *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, for which Schnabel won Best Director at the Cannes Film Festival, as well as a documentary on Lou Reed's *Berlin*. Schnabel has writing credits on *Basquiat*, *At Eternity's Gate*, and *Before Night Falls*, the film about Cuban poet Reinaldo Arenas that launched Javier Bardem's American and International career beyond Spain.

ESME by Julian Schnabel, 2020. Pace Los Angeles Opening Party. PHOTO BY LINNEA STEPHAN/BFA.COM, COURTESY OF PACE LOS ANGELES

When Schnabel's Esmé sculpture was first installed in the PACE LA courtyard, it was surrounded by grey gravel. To Schnabel this didn't look right – it looked like pollution, so he asked that instead red gravel be found, red that reminded him, Schnabel said, of the red dirt roads of Rajasthan.

The sculpture itself consists of several parts reconstituted from the molds of earlier sculptures, *Ahab*, *Vito*, and *Macbeth* (if I got that right) recombined to new effect and usage. Although I found the sculpture more striking than successful (the sculpture's parts don't seem to add up to an integrated whole), it does look better surrounded by red gravel. And the confidence expressed by the sculpture, the same confidence present in all Schnabel's work from the plate paintings on, remains undeniable.

So, for example, in *First Painting*, which appears to be the simplest of the paintings on display, four vertical brushstrokes (light blue, yellow, red, and black) sit atop a red velvet background, looking like track marks across the canvas, with one small tan horizontal smudge at the top. However, *First Painting* is not simple at all, as its elegance calls to mind works by Joan Miro and Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman's Onement, and works by Hans Hoffman and Helen Frankenthaler. It is a great painting that at the preview elicited the most favorable response from the attendees.

Similarly, I was taken by *Painting for Fred Sandback*, in which a black blotch of paint intersects a green square that itself sits atop of various color blocks and brushstrokes between them. Sandback was an American artist who died in 2003 and was best known for his sculptures made of yarn that created artworks out of the space the yarn divided. Perhaps, the green square is Sandback's thread and the black signals Schnabel's act of mourning in engaging with Sandback's work in Schnabel's own.

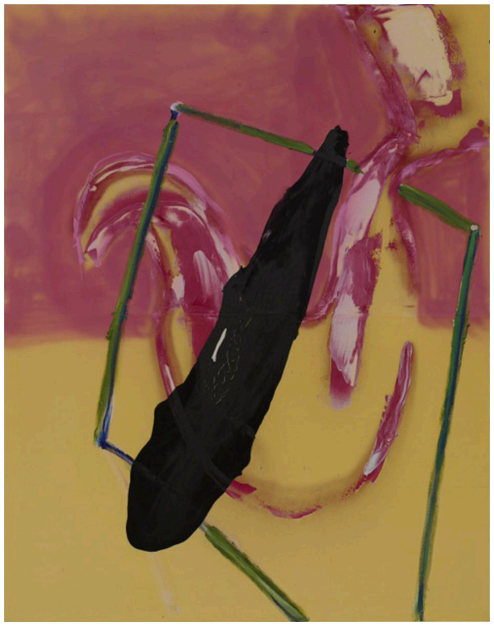
One more important fact about the new paintings needs to be noted: Schnabel confided that they were all painted with his left hand, not his right. More than 40 years of painting had so damaged Schnabel's ability to raise his right arm that he had to have surgery on his right shoulder/rotator cuff. He is still healing and does not have full mobility in his right arm. However, Schnabel said he found no difference in painting with his left hand rather than his right.

But, perhaps, I do. If, as Schnabel said to me, "All Art is optimistic because it contains a denial of death," then a 70-year-old artist with a 5-month-old daughter, painting with his left hand, is certainly evidence of optimism.

A century ago, two seemingly vastly different novels appeared: *Ulysses* by James Joyce and *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust. Although stylistically as different as can be, they both shared the same thesis – that the way of transcendence was through art, and the path to immortality by becoming an artist. In the act of creation, both novels seem to say, we attempt to reach the eternal beyond time. From my short impression of him, this is the flow in which Schnabel exists; he lives and creates in this timeless river.

In his introductory remarks at the recent vernissage, Schnabel said that despite living through recent times "when everything is so f*cked" and where, to quote Jean Renoir's famous dictum, "in this world, there is one awful thing, and that is that everyone has his reasons," Schnabel said, that with his daughter, Esmé, he found "a glimmer of hope."

In Esmé (the story character, the 5-month-old, the sculpture, and the art exhibit), Schnabel has found a potent symbol of the denial of death that his art represents.



Painting for Fred Sandback by Julian Schnabel, 2022 © JULIAN SCHNABEL / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK