

Tendencias

del Mercado del Arte

Painting as Genesis

by Inés Martínez Ribas
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Foto: Weston Wells

Protean creator, painter, sculptor and filmmaker, Julian Schnabel, believes that art is optimistic and acts as a beacon in dark times.

Julian Schnabel (New York, 1951) wears his bright yellow glasses. He wears one of his black waterproof jackets from The Blind Surf Club, the sports club he founded more than fifty years ago and whose motto is Groucho Marx's maxim: "I would never belong to a club that would admit someone like me as a member". Behind his back he carries one of his *Big Girl Paintings*, those large-scale serial paintings that always depict the same pretty blonde girl with her eyes veiled by a brushstroke.

The glasses and the garment protect Schnabel from the weather and the rain that cover the city of Malaga with a reddish mud, and at the same time they are two declarations of principle: you have to look at the paintings and not at your eyes. The situation is tragicomic: nineteen of the twenty-three large paintings that are part of the exhibition *Schnabel and Spain: Anything can be a Model for Painting*

(Schnabel y España: cualquier cosa puede ser un modelo para pintar) are held up at the port of Algeciras due to the carriers' strike. The opening was scheduled for March 25, the day this interview was made, but finally took place on April 8. The exhibition can be seen until June 12.

Even so, Schnabel is exultant: he marvels at each of the absent works as if they were already hanging - instantly recognizing the exact location, even if the white walls are empty - and stops at the four that have managed to arrive on time. This great exhibition at the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo (CAC) in Malaga brings together twenty-three paintings made between 1997 and 2021 by this individual American creator, who is alien to any label. In these works -some of them more than three meters high- there is a mixture of techniques, objects, symbols and materials linked to his individual history and to the history of Spanish art and culture. In his own words: "I don't think the battle between figuration and abstraction is even an issue. Anything can be a model for a painting: a poplar tree, another painting, a patch of earth".

Malaga was Picasso's homeland, what does this exhibition represent for you?

Malaga is in Spain, the birthplace of Picasso, but also of Velazquez and Goya. In this country there is a great pictorial tradition that has had a great impact on me. I have been here several times. One of the most significant was more than thirty years ago [in 1988], when I exhibited in the old barracks of El Carmen, in Seville. I like Malaga very much. The city has changed. And today it's pre-tired, with this dust that comes from the Sahara and dyes my hair red, giving it a crazy look. It looks like Cuba, with this rain in the middle of the hurricane. And the fact that Picasso was born here is an added plus.

There are only four of your paintings hanging.

I'm very happy to be here, even with only four of my paintings hanging. They are the ones that belong to private collections in Europe. The other nineteen, from the United States, are being held in Algeciras because of the strike. Sometimes I cross the ocean to see just one of my works, so I am happy to be able to see these four, which I have not seen in a long time. The space at the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo de Málaga is great and I can get a very clear idea of what the whole thing will look like. It's a *force majeure*, so it's fine as it is. I'm in a very good mood.

How did the idea for the exhibition come about?

My son Cy asked me to organize this exhibition of mine, something I was very happy to do. He opened a gallery in 2020 in my old studio in San Sebastian, in Villa Magdalena. It's a very atypical space (a 40-square-meter narrow rectangle with a seven-meter-high ceiling that contrasts with the typical 'white cube'). Cy is more of a writer than a businessman and he interacts with artists so he can write about the work and the relationship with the public, which is an admirable activity. I am very proud of him. There are many painters in this area of Spain who have not had the opportunity to see my work live and I think it is important that they do. Well, I don't know if anything in the world is important now with the situation it's in (alluding to the war in Ukraine), but for artists here it might be interesting to see my work without having to travel to New York.

Like the portrait of José Ramón Antero?

He was the owner of a bar (the now defunct Taberna Etxeberria, in the Antiguo neighborhood) that was near my house when I lived in San Sebastian. His face has such a Spanish air about it; and then there's his nose, bigger than Pinocchio's. I needed to come to this country to find faces like his. I did the portrait in two hours and then asked him for an extra ten minutes to paint his shoes. I never talk about inspiration, but living in Spain enlightened me in many ways.

Even before you moved here.

Yes, in 1978 I came up with my first plate painting when I traveled to Barcelona and discovered Antoni Gaudi's mosaics in Park Güell. Then I thought: "Maybe the surface of my painting could be made of broken plates". When I returned to New York I bought porcelain plates at a charity store, broke them and hooked them onto a surface covered with a putty. I wrote about it in *CVJ* (the book *CVJ: Nicknames of maitre D's & Other Excerpts from Life*, in which he shares his experiences as a painter and which he wrote as an early autobiography in 1987, the same year Andy Warhol, with whom he had a close friendship, died).



Julian Schnabel's *After Queen Maria Luisa on Horseback by Francisco de Goya - With White House Paint*, 2021. Foto: Tom Powel Imaging

Your relationship with Spain began in 1978. Since then, I have carried out several projects in Spain, many of them with great friends from here. Antonio Banderas was born in Malaga, and I've known him for years, and my relationship with Javier Bardem is crucial for me (Schnabel gave the Spanish actor his first starring role in an American film: *Before Night Falls* (2000), where Bardem played the writer and poet Reinaldo Arenas). I have a large family of Spanish friends. The painter Jorge Galindo and his wife, Felicidad Moreno, and Alejandro Garmendia (now deceased).

Your exhibition in Malaga also tells us about violence.

This exhibition is important because it is an expression of

freedom. All these paintings that I am presenting in Malaga have to do with freedom. When Matisse painted his nudes, Europe was in full crisis. All painting is political, because everything you say and everything anyone interprets is a political statement. The paintings are manifestos. I start from a place where I decide what I want to paint and what material I want to use; the rest of the connotations or opportunities or realities of the paintings are the result of the activity of making art.

All painting is political, but it is also autobiographical.

Of course it is. We all live in the world. We are responsible for our actions and for what we put into the world. I don't make paintings to sell them; I make them to exist. They are a confrontation with death. The difference between art and life is in the representation of life. In this sense, life contains death, but the representation of life does not. Art is optimistic. This is something the film director Tarkovsky said and I believe in. Art is optimistic even when the subject matter is tragic. It opens up a wide range of possibilities for images. It allows you to build works and films that you can leave in life for other people.

Is it because of this sense of temporality that the equestrian portrait of Queen Maria Luisa opens the exhibition in Malaga?

The Museo del Prado asked me to have an expert from Factum Arte make an exact high-resolution facsimile of Francisco de Goya's *Queen María Luisa on horseback* (1799), so that it could also be used for the conservation, study and dissemination of the original work. This company has the most advanced technology for color and 3D digitization of the great works of art of the past. One of its specialists had already produced for the Giorgio Cini Foundation in Venice a copy of the original painting by Paolo Veronese known as *The Marriage at Cana* (of similar dimensions, measuring 677 x 990 cm). Napoleon's troops took it from the Basilica of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice and deposited it in the Louvre Museum, where it has remained ever since. The copy is so incredible that it seems more real than the original. So, through that expert, I asked the Prado to make a copy of the *Maria Luisa*.

And you decided to paint a white mark on the facsimile?

I had no intention of doing so. I had the copy in my house for a long time, until one day I said to myself: "I think I'm going to do a direct action with Goya". And now this work (*After Queen Maria Luisa on Horseback by Francisco de Goya - With White House Paint*, from 2021) speaks with the others exhibited in this exhibition in Malaga. You can see the relationship between the two portraits I did of Tatiana Lisovskaia (shown together for the first time) with the Duchess of Alba in Goya's time. All these works are

in dialogue with each other, and even with the paintings exhibited where no recognizable images appear.

In a way, these twenty-three works allude to your different ways of applying paint to the surface.

Absolutely. This exhibition is about how to paint and what to paint and how to make surfaces and things that create different opportunities, rather than repeating yourself for the simple reason that people expect you to do a certain thing. I prefer to surprise myself.

How?

To repeat myself would be very boring, because it would be like copying myself.

Are your films, sculptures, architecture and furniture another way of painting?

My painting has an effect on all these kinds of other activities or objects or things that I have done over the years. Everything I do, in essence, comes out of painting.

There's a quote from your friend the singer Laurie Anderson in the great book that Taschen dedicated to you a couple of years ago that says: "When I think of Julian I think of love and how adept he is at reflecting passion in whatever he does: surfing, cooking, painting, making movies, writing, being a father, a husband, a friend". There is violence in your paintings, but also a lot of love.

Absolutely.



The Road, 2020. Foto: Tom Powel Imaging

JULIAN SCHNABEL

What is your opinion about the art market?

I'm not interested in the art market.

And to what extent has surfing influenced your painting?

I've been surfing all my life. I started when I was 15 years old and I still do it. Now I'm recovering from a recent operation; I injured myself surfing. I started as a teenager when I moved with my parents to live in Brownsville, Texas, near the Mexican border. Since then, I have maintained a very close relationship with my old surfing buddies. Some of them are older than me, like Herbie Fletcher (renowned Californian surfer and surf filmmaker), who is 73 years old. We go to Hawaii, Mexico... wherever there are waves.



Julian Schnabel

Does this relate to your painting?

In my painting, surfing is like a gravity machine. It keeps me alive. Surfing and being in the water is very powerful. It's bigger than ourselves. In that sense, water and movement have an influence on the way I paint. I feel better when I am near water. We have a house in Troncones, Mexico, and I often paint there.

Your pink canvases are reminiscent of Tàpies. Which Spanish painters have influenced you?

Picasso exerted a great influence on me. And I suppose some early works by Tàpies as well.

Miró is definitely a great artist. Of the artists who are working at the moment, I like the paintings of Jorge Galindo. Also those of his wife, Felicidad Moreno; in particular, the last ones she showed recently in the church of Santa Catalina in Badajoz, in dialogue with the frescoes on the walls (the exhibition *Liquid Skies*, from 2021). I think he is now getting into his own line. After the crisis in Spain and all the difficulties that have followed, the world is recognizing Jorge's work. He deserves it. The works he did with Pedro Almodovar are also great.

Do you have any new projects in Spain?

A film about Luis Buñuel. I read *My Last Sigh*, his memoirs after almost two decades of work and friendship with French screenwriter and playwright Jean-Claude Carrière. Sadly, Carrière died a year ago. With him and my wife (designer Louise Kugelberg), we wrote the screenplay for the film *Van Gogh, at the Gates of Eternity* (2018). I would like Javier Bardem to play Luis Buñuel in this new film. But first I have to write the script.

Do you want to add anything to this interview?

Yes, I would like the four paintings from the series *Los patos del Buen Retiro* (1990-1999; the title refers to the experience Julian Schnabel had on a previous trip to Madrid, when he wanted to row in the Retiro and stumbled and fell into the lake), which María de Corral bought when she was director of the Reina Sofía Museum and which are stored in a warehouse, to be hung so people can see them and, if not, to return them to me. That would be great.



Do You Know Who the Mayor of Milan Was When Leonardo da Vinci Lived There? II, 2021. Foto: Tom Powel Imaging

JULIAN SCHNABEL

Julian Schnabel was born in 1951 in Brooklyn, New York. Born to a Czech immigrant father and a mother from New York, in 1965 the family moved to Brownsville, Texas, near the Mexican border. His adolescence in this city full of violence, guns and drugs marked his character and psychology as an artist and director. After studying Fine Arts at the University of Houston, he returned to New York in 1973 to continue his training at the Whitney Museum. Attracted by European art, in 1978 he traveled to Italy, Germany and Spain, where he discovered the works of Giotto, Fra Angelico, Caravaggio and Gaudi in their original locations, rather than in museums. Schnabel rose to fame in 1979 with works made from pieces of broken plates, for which he was inspired after discovering Gaudi's mosaics in Barcelona's Park Güell. In 2003, the artist said of the 1970s, "I thought, if painting is dead, then it was a good time to start painting."

Julian Schnabel is the artist chosen by Pace Gallery for the inaugural exhibition of its new space in Los Angeles. Entitled *For Esmé - with Love and Squalor*, it includes 13 new velvet paintings and a large bronze sculpture. The title derives from a short story by J.D. Salinger that chronicles the chance encounter between an American soldier who must join the draft and a 13-year-old girl named Esmé. The unusual friendship that emerges between the two is a hymn to hope in dark times, an attitude shared by Schnabel, who vindicates optimism in the face of violence and despair.



Julian Schnabel