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Grey, Tobias: Julian Schnabel and the Great Painters, Side by Side

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By Tobias Grey

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PARIS — A game of brinkmanship began when the Musée d’Orsay here invited Julian Schnabel to choose paintings from its 19th-century collection to exhibit alongside his own works of art.

“At a certain moment the museum said: ‘You can’t have this or that painting,’ so I said ‘I can’t do it,’ ” Mr. Schnabel said in a recent interview at the museum. “I thought, if I can’t pick the paintings, there’s no reason for me to say that I picked the paintings.”

The American artist and filmmaker, 66, had his eye on works by four artists in particular — Vincent van Gogh, Claude Monet, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Paul Cézanne — which the museum did not want to move from their usual places.

Mr. Schnabel credited Laurence des Cars, who was appointed director of the Musée d’Orsay last year, for “moving heaven” to get him what he wanted. Or almost what he wanted: There remained a Cézanne that couldn’t or wouldn’t be moved.

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Mr. Schnabel's "Rose Painting (Near Van Gogh's Grave) XVII" (2007), on display as part of "Orsay Through the Eyes of Julian Schnabel."

Julian Schnabel Studio/Adagp, Paris, 2018; Photograph by Tom Powel

The show, "Orsay Through the Eyes of Julian Schnabel," which opens on Wednesday and runs through Jan. 13, juxtaposes 13 paintings from the museum's collection with 11 works by Mr. Schnabel from the last 40 years. There are several of his signature paintings done on broken plates, as well as other surfaces, such as tarpaulin and black velvet.

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“What the surface of a painting can be is an obsession of mine,” Mr. Schnabel said. “If you see how the plate paintings function, it’s very three-dimensional, both physically and spatially. I like dealing with physical problems and rudimentary concerns about trying to stick things to a surface.”

The earliest of his works in the show is the large-scale “Blue Nude with Sword” from 1979, the first figurative, as opposed to abstract, plate painting that Mr. Schnabel made. It hangs alongside Cézanne’s much smaller tableau “La Femme Étranglée” (“The Strangled Woman,” 1875-1876), with which it shares a similar red, white and blue palette.

The hanging of the exhibition, which was overseen by Mr. Schnabel and his partner, the Swedish interior designer Louise Kugelberg, also explores connections in style, content and scale.

Mr. Schnabel, who is known for his gargantuan pieces, selected two of Toulouse-Lautrec’s largest paintings — both night life scenes featuring the Moulin Rouge dancer nicknamed La Goulue (the Glutton) — where the canvases have been stuck roughly together. “If you get up close you can see all these seams that someone might think look like a mistake,” he said. “But it’s part of the artist’s intent and about his attitude towards the materials.”



Willem Dafoe, left, as Vincent van Gogh in Julian Schnabel’s film “At Eternity’s Gate.”
CBS Films

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The most recent work in the exhibition is a delicate plate painting of roses and foliage Mr. Schnabel did in 2017, inspired by a visit to van Gogh's grave in Auvers-sur-Oise, near Paris.

The Dutch master, whose sublime "Portrait de l'Artiste" ("Portrait of the Artist," 1889) features in the show, has been on Mr. Schnabel's mind lately. In September he premiered his latest film, "At Eternity's Gate," — about the final, helter-skelter months of van Gogh's life — at the Venice Film Festival.

The movie, which stars Willem Dafoe, who won the best actor prize at Venice for his portrayal of van Gogh, will close the New York Film Festival on Friday. Its development dates from 2014, when Mr. Schnabel and the French screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière visited a Musée d'Orsay exhibition that paired paintings by van Gogh with drawings by the avant-garde poet Antonin Artaud.

"Every van Gogh painting we saw was a vignette all of its own," said Mr. Schnabel, who wrote the screenplay for "At Eternity's Gate" with Mr. Carrière and Ms. Kugelberg. "Seeing the exhibition was an accumulative sensation. The movie functions like that: It's a gallery of emotions, a gallery of scenes that possibly could have happened, and ways of talking about painting and life."

Mr. Schnabel said that, for him, van Gogh is "the most modern painter" because of "the freedom and clarity of what he established." Like van Gogh before him, Mr. Schnabel paints quickly, completing a work in a matter of hours, not days. He is also an outdoor painter, who said he prefers to contend with the elements than with the dark interior of a studio.

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Mr. Schnabel looking at a self-portrait by Vincent van Gogh at the Musée d'Orsay. The exhibition was like "a letter that is written from one painter to the next," he said.

Julien Mignot for The New York Times

His enthusiasm for painting "en plein-air" dates from when he did his first plate painting, while working as a cook in New York in the late 1970s, he said.

"When I saw that painting, which I'd done in my studio taken out into the street, I thought it looked terrible," he added. "Since then, I've always thought that painting outside is better because you can really see everything."

Mr. Dafoe, who has known Mr. Schnabel for over 30 years, said in a telephone interview that "At Eternity's Gate" "is filtered through certain events and certain things that Vincent said, but of course, it also says a lot about Julian."

Mr. Dafoe, who took painting lessons from Mr. Schnabel to prepare for the role, often felt as if he were standing in for the artist himself.

"It's like he can't do it because he's got to be behind the camera, so he needs someone else to be his creature in front of the camera," Mr. Dafoe said. "The opportunity to be in such a personal film was a great gift."

Mr. Schnabel said he had similar feelings about the exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay. "It's a great privilege," he said. "It's like there's a letter that is written from one painter to the next, which is handed off through the paintings."

Orsay Through the Eyes of Julian Schnabel

Oct. 10 through Jan. 13 at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris; musee-orsay.fr.