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Michaelsen, Sven: *DUST into GLITTER*

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below: Schnabel's Montauk house is one of Stanford White's original Seven Sisters. The homes were built with the legendary landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, who picked the sites based on their views.
right: Schnabel has kept the residence in perfect original condition. Even the outside paint is original.

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His critics say his ego is "bigger than Manhattan." Julian Schnabel certainly knows how to market himself. At 26, he titled one of his paintings *I Don't Want to Be King, I Want to Be Pope*, and at 39, he told a journalist from *New York Magazine*, "I'm as close to Picasso as you're going to get in this fucking life." He later explained that it was just a joke, but the tabloids have had him on their radar ever since. And they have never stopped finding material – when Schnabel shows up at a society event in silk pajamas or cargo shorts, for instance. His wives have come and gone – all of them young, beautiful, modelesque – and Schnabel's unions have brought a total of seven children into this world. In the middle of Manhattan, he built his "Palazzo Chupi," a raspberry-colored Venetian palace that he has filled with the most expensive art.

Two years ago, when a journalist asked about the first thing he sees when he lifts his head from his pillow in the morning, Schnabel answered with an accountant's accuracy: "The last picture that Blinky Palermo painted before he died at the age of 33, three works by Joseph Beuys, Albrecht Dürer's woodcut *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, an Andy Warhol from his 'Shadows' series, a gouache by Fernand Léger, photos by McDermott & McGough, a drawing by Salvador Dalí showing the back of his wife Gala's head, a Picasso drawing from 1908, a Luigi Ontani photograph showing him naked as a devil, two drawings by James Narès, and my wax painting *Procession* from 1979."

I meet Schnabel in the afternoon. He is sitting in the studio of his summer house in Montauk on Long Island. Built in 1880, the house has been in his possession for 40 years. A mile-long dune beach can be reached in three minutes by bike. To begin, the 70-year-old reports that, earlier that morning, he taught his seven-year-old son, Shooter, to surf. For him, the ocean is an "anti-gravity machine," and there isn't anywhere else on Earth that he feels so unburdened and free from thoughts about his work.

Mr. Schnabel, your latest book – which weighs almost eight kilos and costs 1,500 euros – shows highlights from your career, spanning 1975 to today. Was working on the book a form of psychoanalysis for you?

No. Why are you asking me such a strange question? In 2016, David Hockney published a book called *A Bigger Book*, which is just as big as this one. He later said of the experience: "I've only dealt with my past once in my life. For my book, I spent six months going through 60 years' worth of my work. It was like a kind of psychoanalysis, which made me realize how much my artistic self had evolved. The journey through my past got me so worked up that I was unable to paint for half a year. That had never happened before. No matter how miserable I was, I could always paint."



Hockney and I are like night and day, even though I find some of his paintings quite good. If I were to compare my book with some other one, it would be with Marcel Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise*. Between 1935 and 1941, and in anticipation of the Second World War, Duchamp reproduced his most important works in formats that could fit in a small suitcase. Inside this transportable museum was Duchamp's entire body of work. My book depicts around 700 works over 570 pages, yet what you get is only the tip of the iceberg. But it's good enough to get a first impression of my practice. It's difficult to define the core of my work, since I've done so many different things in nearly 50 years. Why do I paint the same picture in different colors? Is there a unifying aesthetic that governs



long as I have, you also experience turnabouts that are quite moving. When Rudi Fuchs became the artistic director of *documenta 7*, in 1982, the first thing he did was to remove my name from the list of participants. Years later, he wrote flattering essays about my work. And today we're pretty good friends. In my experience, it's rather productive for a friendship to start with a battle. You are married to Louise Kugelberg, a Swedish interior designer who is four years younger than your eldest daughter. Your wife is

the co-editor of your book. Were there any arguments about which works would be selected?

Louise knows my work better than anyone else, which is why we didn't fight for even one second. Since I've been with her, it has felt like I have four eyes and two brains. But there was some friction with the publisher, Benedikt Taschen, at first. The book was discussed for five years, and it took three years to complete. Benedikt has very precise ideas about how things should be done. He wasn't a fan of my work, and it took him awhile to develop a deeper understanding of it. He once owned my painting *L'Heroïne* from 1987. He must have gotten rid of it, because Albert Oehlen owns it now. Although an artist doesn't like to see such transactions taking place, I consider Benedikt an admirable compatriot.

Is an XXL book like this a kind of tombstone?

I can see what you're trying to get at. If an actor or director receives a lifetime achievement award at the Oscars, then you start getting nervous: that was it, the story's over, nothing left but to throw the towel in. If you look at it like this, then the book is my lifetime achievement award, and I'm expected to die in the near future. I see things differently, of course. Have I said everything I wanted to say with my art? Not by a long shot! Will there be another book by me? No, there will be several! Down with the internet, long live the book.

What do you have against the internet?

If you can't see a painting in the original, then a book is second best. But screens are the death of painting. Showing a painting in an electronic medium is as

everything I do, or do I change my style every couple of years because I think that style is a prison? You might find answers to these questions if you delve into the book.

What did you learn about yourself as you traveled back in time through your work?

Let me begin with my fears. I was afraid that some of the works might be similar to the sins of adolescence, and that they would be embarrassing today. But the feeling of shame never materialized. On the contrary, my feeling is that if I were to die tomorrow, then I would have left my mark on art history. In selecting the images for the book, it was important for me to use installation photos to illustrate the scale of the work. There's a 12-meter-high and 13-meter-wide painting of mine that's been hanging in the foyer of the Opernturm [Opera Tower] in Frankfurt am Main since 2010. Even if it sounds like showing off: if you don't know the format, then you don't know the painting. Do you paint?

No. Why do you ask?

I want to know whether you understand anything about painting, since I've read incredibly idiotic things about myself.

In 2012, the famous art critic Robert Hughes wrote in the American magazine Time that "Schnabel's work is to painting what Sylvester Stallone's is to acting – a lumbering display of oily pectorals." Are you referring to damning reviews like this?

There have been even greater insults. One memorable review said, "Schnabel knows how to make garbage out of garbage." But when you've been around as



Schnabel and his dog at the artist's al fresco atelier. We are pretty sure this part was not there in the 1880s.

pointless as trying to turn dust into glitter. I paint on velvet and old wallpaper, as well as on secondhand truck and boat tarps. I throw paint-soaked tennis balls and tablecloths at my canvases and drag them behind a car to turn asphalt into oil paints. But you'd never get any of the physicality and surface textures of my paintings if you looked at them on a screen.

Does a painter understand as much about his own art as a bird does about ornithology?

No artist knows why he does what he does. I stop thinking when I paint. If the work is going well, then a color or form takes on a life of its own, and I'm only a witness as the painter. Thinking you can look at yourself from the outside and judge your own work objectively is delusional. I knew Andy Warhol pretty well. He was a sphinx, and during his lifetime he refused to interpret his work, even for a second. He talked about just about anything and everything, but not about his art. That was very smart of him, because secrets make careers and the shelf-life after retirement longer.

By the time your career took off in the 1980s, Warhol had lost his avant-garde reputation. His diaries from these years glisten with jealousy toward the "new kids": Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and you. On May 16, 1983, he wrote: "Called Julian Schnabel. Julian's following my philosophy of doing a painting a day, he's trying to be the new Andy Warhol, so that made me nervous so I left and worked very hard at the office until 8:00."

That's really flattering, isn't it?

On February 16, 1987, six days before his death, Warhol wrote in his diary: "Julian Schnabel was there ... he's being reeally charming. His book is coming out. Who does he think he is? He's just pushy and energetic. Well, but that's all life is, being pushy and energetic."

Maybe my behavior at the time reminded Andy of his own beginnings. Having talent isn't enough; you also need the talent to make something of your talent. Without determination and the willingness to spend money, talent is as useless as a refrigerator in the Antarctic.



Andy was no different. His relationship to Jean-Michel Basquiat was grounded in fascination and a tinge of jealousy. I often saw the two of them together. Although they were only nine years apart, it seemed like they were father and adoptive son. Once, Andy took me to the side and asked me in all seriousness to convince Jean-Michel to finally stop taking hard drugs. I didn't succeed. In 1988, he died of a heroin overdose at the age of 27.

Where did the idea come from to cast David Bowie as Andy Warhol in *Basquiat* (1996)?

I would have found it strange to have Andy portrayed by a professional actor. The whole time the audience would have been thinking, *That's not Warhol, it's just someone who's desperately trying to be like Warhol.* But if you see David Bowie portraying Warhol, then you're perplexed and ask yourself, *Is that Andy Warhol playing David Bowie or David Bowie playing Andy Warhol?* Bringing two art figures together and creating a doppelgänger effect seemed like a nice pop moment. And if I'm allowed to make an advertisement: I just made a black-and-white version of *Basquiat*. Only the credits and the scenes where he paints are in color. Bringing *Basquiat* to the theaters after more than 25 years is one of the greatest gifts I can give to my friend Jean-Michel.

What was the then 49-year-old Bowie like on set?

He was incredibly good in front of the camera for a layperson. The whole crew started laughing the first time he put on the famous Warhol wig. He suddenly looked like his own aunt. Bowie belonged to a rare

left: The tree was already there when Schnabel put the pool in. The addition is built around the greenery, below: Schnabel has declared the distinction between abstraction and representation a non-issue. "I think everything's abstract," he has said.

species of iconic superstars who can turn their world fame into charm and who try to be as easy-going as possible with everyone. The one question he kept asking me was, "Julian, did I give everything you needed today for your movie?"

In 1982, Warhol sat for you. Made with oil paints on black velvet, your portrait is 2.7 by 3 meters and depicts a naked Warhol wearing only a pink band around his waist.

He came to my studio, and we talked for five hours while I painted him. It was the first conversation between us that was worthy of the term; he usually uttered inconsequential blah-blah or chuckled shyly in the company of others. While modeling, he complained that critics didn't put him on par with Jasper Johns or Robert Rauschenberg, which was why he preferred making films to painting. I said, "You're a great painter. Forget the movies and concentrate on what you do best." As we all know, he didn't listen to me.

Why the pink waistband?

In 1968, a mentally ill assassin shot and critically injured him. He had to wear a medical corset to provide support for the scarred parts of his abdomen. For aesthetic reasons, he had them in a variety of colors.



After you painted Warhol, he returned the favor by making a 2.7- by 2-meter-high portrait of you. The basis for it was a Polaroid of you in work pants and a white undershirt.

The Polaroid was taken by my wife at the time ...

The Belgian fashion designer Jacqueline Beurang, the mother of your children Lola, Vito, and Stella.

The photo she took was done in Amagansett, 15 miles from here. I'm standing in a grass-covered dune landscape, near a barbed-wire fence and a bunker-like hole in the ground. For me, they were the perfect ele-

ments to depict me. I gave Andy the photo and said, "You want to paint me? Why don't you try it with this?" He cut the Polaroid into three pieces and got to work.

Did you like the result?

I'm more delighted the more I look at the picture – even now. It's also the largest portrait he ever painted. Three versions of the painting are hanging in my house in Manhattan, one in pink, one gold, and one lavender. As far as I know, there are nine originals.

You turned 70 in October. Did that give you an occasion to look back on your standing as an artist? Success on the art market depends on criteria that often have nothing to do with art. Vermeer's genius was only proclaimed 300 years after his death. I worry less and less about how the critics and the public judge my art. Many think this is arrogant, but in reality it's about no longer wanting to please anyone. Today, my stubbornness is stronger than my desire to succeed. Not in a million years would I have thought that I'd be painting roses on broken china stuck to canvases today. Have I gone off the deep end? Have I become a decorative artist? No, painting roses is an act of freedom and autonomy. Nothing could better express the optimism I currently feel inside me.

Last November, a few days after your 70th birthday, you became a father again. You named your daughter Esmé Ingrid Esther Kugelberg Schnabel. Shall I tell you how I think about children? I made a screenplay out of Nick Tosches' 2002 novel *In the Hand of Dante*. There's a sentence in there: "A child who has lived for only a day under the infinity of the sky may have lived longer and more fully than a king who has lived for a hundred years." The thought of death has been one of my obsessions since my early youth. I make a stand against death with each new child and painting. There are four films I still want to make before I die.

Of your six films to date, the best known are *The Diving Bell* and *The Butterfly* (2007) – which won two Golden Globes and had four Oscar nominations – and *At Eternity's Gate* (2018), a film about Vincent van Gogh and starring Willem Dafoe. What are the other films you're planning besides *In the Hand of Dante*?

I think Tom Tykwer's adaptation of Patrick Süskind's novel *Perfume* is a real failure. That's why I wrote a screenplay, 20 years ago, which unfortunately still hasn't gotten the green light from producers. You're German; do you know Daniel Kehlmann's novel *Tyrl*?

Yes.

right: Schnabel's *Untitled (Shiva)* (2011) is made with inkjet print, gesso, oil, and spray paint on polyester.

Over the past months, Daniel and I have turned *Tyll* into a screenplay. We're also working on a new version of the *Perfume* material. It's possible that the project will turn into a six-part miniseries for a streaming provider. The film business always reminds me of that Marlon Brando line, "If you think it's about art in movies, then you're going to be bruised." The accountants call the shots. If I want to make a movie for 15 million dollars, they say, "No problem." But if I need 30 million, they'll ask: "Do you have a big star to fill the theaters?" It doesn't take much schooling to learn how these people think. The good thing is that I have a superstar, Joaquin Phoenix, who really wants to play the lead in *Perfume*. With his name on the cast list, I'd even get the money to finance a film where he plays Mickey Mouse's neighbor.

How did you meet Kehlmann?

Through my friend Max Hollein, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Max is Austrian and loves German literature. That's why he invited Daniel to a dinner party. After Daniel and I talked, I invited him and his wife out to Montauk. A friendship of two married couples arose out of that.

What is the fourth film project you have planned?

I'm a great admirer of Luis Buñuel's autobiography *My Last Sigh*, which was published in 1980. Buñuel's ghostwriter was my friend Jean-Claude Carrière, who died in February. The last paragraph reads: "Frankly, despite my horror of the press, I'd love to rise from the grave every ten years or so and go buy a few newspapers. Ghostly pale, sliding silently along the walls, my papers under my arms, I'd return to the cemetery and read all about the disasters in the world before falling back to sleep, safe and secure in my tomb." In 2011, 26 years after Buñuel's death, Jean-Claude published *Le réveil de Buñuel [Buñuel's Awakening]*. In that book, Carrière descends into Buñuel's grave with newspapers and copious amounts of red wine to discuss the changes the world has seen. I would like to make a film from these conversations with the dead. The role of Buñuel is to be played by Javier Bardem. I'm writing the script with Daniel.

A painter with four film projects on his hands: are you in over your head?

Even if I am, the worst thing that can happen is that I'll read from my *Perfume* script in some provincial bookstore for 30 elderly audience members. Due to Covid-19, I've been living in Montauk. Thankfully, there's a two-hour drive between me and the hubbub of the Manhattan art world. I paint, write, watch my

children grow up, and spend a lot of time with the woman I love. Is your life any better? There's this line in a Tom Waits song that could be my personal motto: "Life is a path lit only by the light of those I've loved."

Jerry Saltz, one of America's best-known art critics, has called for a new modesty in the art world following Covid-19: less ostentation and fewer glamorous parties, more concentration on what might be called art beyond the fashions of the market.

Does Jerry Saltz attend these glamorous parties? I don't. An artist's existence is that of the working class.

You're a multimillionaire.

Ninety-five percent of artists come from middle-class families where the parents told their children to keep their grandfather's cleaning business going. Like musicians or basketball players, young artists make a bet on their future with very bad odds: they bet that their talent is great enough to make it to the top, despite millions of competitors. They don't need advice from people like Jerry Saltz. ... Many critics now judge art as if it were an elitist form of moral engagement that is supposed to serve progress. They look to the artist for a desire to change the world that they either agree or disagree with. That's how critics turn themselves into influencers and activists. But what does the quality of a painting have to do with the moral compass of the painter? Does the fact that Caravaggio killed his opponent in a tennis match change anything about his genius? I don't like opportunistic artists who align themselves with whatever political climate is currently fashionable. Conformism and art are opposed to each other. In 1979, I called one of my works *Circumnavigating the Sea of Shit*. That's what we should do today: circumnavigate the sea of shit.

If you could sum up 50 years of being an artist in two or three sentences, what would they be?

I don't paint to illustrate what I know. Art is about having a question and endlessly pursuing it – while having the faint intuition that an answer will never be found. Someone who can endure this futility and stand in front of the easel every morning might one day become an artist.

