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Benschop, Jurriann: Stop Thinking

May / June 2018

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# STOP THINKING



Julian Schnabel on  
life, death and art

Julian Schnabel at Max Hetzler Gallery, Berlin, 2018  
Photo: Holger Niehaus

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JULIAN SCHNABEL

A couple of months ago, Julian Schnabel was in Berlin to install a joint exhibition with fellow painter Albert Oehlen at Max Hetzler gallery. The two have known each other for years, and the show features their mutual portraits – separated in creation by nearly two decades. DAMN° walked through the exhibition with Schnabel, where along with talking about the great pleasures of painting, he spoke about the way it handles his fears, void filling in a way that also connects him to the subject of his upcoming feature film, Van Gogh.

TEXT

JURRIAN BENSCHOP

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Untitled, 2017  
Oil on found fabric  
274,3 x 201,9 x 5 cm



In largely empty pink canvases, green forms spread their tentacles. It's a scene that formed the focus of Julian Schnabel's work on view at Max Hetzler, in a new series that points to Schnabel's decades-long interest in objects as they are, before they become art, and the way they transport a history of former use. Schnabel had found the pink fabric in Mexico. Diluted as a landscape, the biggest canvas in the show had blue marks on it, plus a white horizontal band. Not a regular rectangle, it had curving sides. And in a previous life protected the outdoor fruit market of Zihuatanejo from the sun – its rays leaving their mark long before Schnabel got his hands on it. He painted the works in his studio in Montauk, on Long Island. 'It is an outside studio, the size of a squash court, without a roof, so you feel you are in nature. The walls are green, so as not to have harsh white light, which would annoy,' he tells.

Montauk is a place that has previously been known through the work of Willem de Kooning, who also used to have a studio on Long Island, and liked the light of the Atlantic coast. 'The light is okay,' Schnabel says, 'but I was always wondering what de Kooning was talking about. In Arles,

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Untitled, 2017  
Oil and gesso on found fabric  
325,1 x 542,3 x 5 cm

it is quite a bit better.' He has just spent months in the French Provence to work on his new movie about Vincent van Gogh, *At Eternity's Gate*, with William Dafoe in the main role. 'The light is more radical and changes all the time. The sky is amazing, the wind too. You see vines growing on top of trees or wires, creating different kinds of forms...' Even though Schnabel's paintings cannot be said to depict clearly recognisable motifs, the forms can be associated with nature. Or rather, they seem to hesitate between being a depiction and just an immediate mark, the trace of an inner state or energy. Does the artist feel the forms are in some way symbolic? 'Symbolic would mean they are emblems of something else, which is not the case. But maybe the whole painting is a symbol of actual life.' Schnabel is reluctant to give a specific meaning to the forms. 'I don't know where they come from. Would you ask Miles Davis where his notes come from?' he reflects, quoting a line from his own movie *Basquiat*. 'I don't make any hierarchical judgments about what is or could be in the painting. As you paint, something pops up and you transfer it to the canvas. I certainly do not have an image in mind when I start out.'

Schnabel had his first major solo exhibition in 1979 at Mary Boone Gallery in New York, and from there his star rose quickly. For his so-called plate paintings, he used shards of ceramics as an irregular surface to paint on. His practice is broad, not only as a painter moving through different styles, at times using words or figures, in other cases abstractions, but also as the director of four feature films. The first was *Basquiat* (1996), about the intense life of the American artist Jean Michel Basquiat, who also had a meteoric but tumultuous rise, and died at the age of 27. Basquiat is, apart from a life story, also a portrait of the New York art world of the 1980s, with its hunger for fame and money, and the appearance of David Bowie as Andy Warhol



Exhibition view, from left to right:

Albert Oehlen  
Untitled, 2017  
Oil on canvas  
250 x 250 x 3,5 cm

Julian Schnabel  
Untitled, 2017  
Oil on found fabric  
274,3 x 201,9 x 5 cm

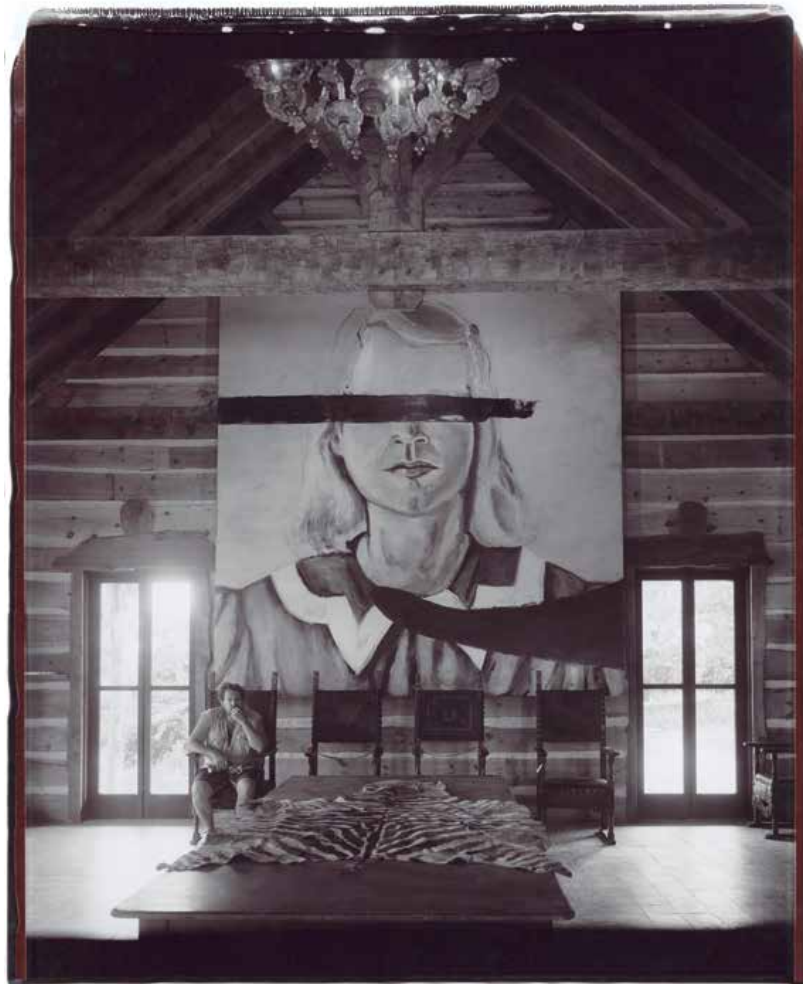
Albert Oehlen  
Untitled, 2018  
Oil on canvas  
230 x 180 x 4 cm

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JULIAN SCHNABEL



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Untitled (Self Portrait with Big Girl, Montauk), 2004  
20 x 24" Polaroid camera  
Approx: 53.8 x 55.9 cm

The word that most comes to mind looking at Schnabel's work is freedom. It seems the result of a continuous quest for freedom, sometimes presenting the evidence of actually experiencing it, in other cases offering the perspective of being locked in, or suppressed, which produces a longing to be free from restraints. In his film *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007), the main character is paralysed and can only blink with his eyes to communicate a yes or no to the outside world. Striking is how the director managed to physically involve the viewer in the limited sight field of the main character. In *Before Night Falls* (2000), the story of Cuban novelist Reinaldo Arenas is told, including the humiliations he suffered as a gay man and as a writer who took the freedom to speak freely, even though it saw him imprisoned, persecuted, and censored under an authoritarian regime.

What gave Schnabel the courage when he started out in the 1970s to paint so bold, big and uninhibited, a time in which expressive painting was rather overshadowed by pop art, conceptualism and other movements? 'It comes from my parents,' he jokes, 'they were very nice to me,' and continues: 'My painting pissed a lot of people off. It also encouraged people to do things. That comes with the territory. Nobody was painting like I did. When I made *Jack the Bellboy* (1975) I had not seen Joseph Beuys, Georg Baselitz or any of the German expressionist painters. I first went to Europe in 1978. *Jack the Bellboy* was painted in Texas. Back then I did not understand the importance of the wide flat space there, living close to Mexico. But my paintings are essentially figurative paintings.' For Schnabel, his years in Texas seem more formative than the art historical context at the time.

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*Basquiat* was Schnabel's first movie. It was still closely connected to his work as a painter. Later he surprised with narratives far removed from art, such as *Miral* (2010), about the life of a girl who grows up in an orphanage in Jerusalem and as a teenager gets involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Based on the novel of Rula Jubreal, who also wrote the screenplay, the eponymous protagonist finds herself caught between pacifism and militant revolt. As in his other films, Schnabel acts as an ambassador of the individual perspective, not an activist film-maker with a political agenda. His films are about people trying to create circumstances in which they can be themselves. And this approach could be connected to his recent paintings, which, in their abstraction cannot be pinpointed to one story, but seem to evoke effort, reaching out, and also suffering. They are existential marks, restrained in appearance, with awareness of the big void.

'You can't love without suffering,' Schnabel says, who likes to point at both sides of the coin. 'I have a great pleasure in painting. It is funny, you make a mark and you feel like there is perspective. Forms go from being flat to being round. If you have a vertical painting, you have a figure. If you have a horizontal painting, you have a landscape. But there is also something idiosyncratic or painful about the work, maybe about the way these things hang together. I have this huge fear of death and non-existence, but while painting, there is an opportunity to fill up that moment in time and space. That is how I can handle my fear. That is what I get out of it, to enjoy the logic inside the painting.'

Was it out of admiration that Schnabel decided to make a film about Van Gogh? 'I admire his paintings, for sure, but maybe the film is more about what it is to be an artist. When Francis Bacon was painting Van Gogh, mid-Fifties, he selected a quote



Untitled, 1975-1984  
Oil and ink on plaster  
212,7 x 187,3 cm



Jack the Bellboy / A Season in Hell, 1975  
Joint compound, Rhoplex, oil, plaster, wire mesh on canvas  
182,9 x 121,9 cm

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– JULIAN SCHNABEL



Portrait of Albert Oehlen, 1997  
Oil, wax, resin, and enamel on canvas  
226,5 x 213,5 cm

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from Van Gogh that said “How to achieve such anomalies, such alterations and re-fashionings of reality; so what comes out of it are lies, if you like, but lies that are more than literal truths.” If you get that,’ Schnabel says, ‘you can make paintings like I do. And you can make a movie that is not a forensic biopic. You know that it is fiction. For me, the opposite of truth is not so much lies – but reason. Because once you start to explain a thing, it is not the thing anymore. That is also how I see my paintings. What you see in the exhibition is about as accurate as I can get about what a painting should be, in that sense they are true.

Van Gogh said, when asked what was the reason why he was painting: to stop thinking. For me it is the same. I paint to stop thinking. And then I become part of everything that is inside and outside. Maybe at that moment when that happens, you are at peace with whatever there is. Painting is about death. It is about life too, but it is definitely about death. There is a moment in the film when Van Gogh says: “When I see a flat landscape I see nothing but eternity. Am I the only one to see it?”

Julian Schnabel: The re-use of 2017 by 2018. The re-use of Christmas, birthdays. The re-use of a joke. The re-use of air and water, Pace Gallery, London, 17 May – 23 June, [pacegallery.com](http://pacegallery.com)

Julian Schnabel: Symbols of Actual Life, The Legion of Honor Museum, San Francisco, until 5 August, [legionofhonor.famst.org](http://legionofhonor.famst.org)

[JULIANSCHNABEL.COM](http://JULIANSCHNABEL.COM)  
[MAXHETZLER.COM](http://MAXHETZLER.COM)

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