

By Phong Bui
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JULIAN SCHNABEL with Phong Bui



Installation view, Hall Art Foundation, Schloss Derneburg, 2017. © Julian Schnabel Studio

Since I first arrived to New York City in the fall of 1985, in search of an artistic and bohemian existence, Julian Schnabel has been a figure with epic stature, always in the news, then as today. I remember at least three occasions at dinner parties where the consensus surrounding Schnabel's artistic production and legacy as a painter or filmmaker divided the guests into heated debates. Whether those who have followed his evolution agree or not, one thing all acknowledge is the stamina and fearlessness Schnabel himself possesses. He has in every direction created work that paves the way for others. What extent does it take to comprehend the complexity of human nature, let alone to be an artistic individual?



Portrait of Julian Schnabel by Phong Bui. Pencil on paper.

Sometime in late November 2008 the most subtle and hermetic artist Bob (Robert) Ryman declined to visit the Morandi show at the Met. He had seen enough of Morandi's painting as a guard at MoMA (1953 to 1960), he said. I still vividly remember saying to Bob, "But of all the artists we both know, you are the one who would be most sympathetic to Morandi's monastic sensibility." His response: "Morandi's painting makes me very anxious." My point is, look beyond the obvious. And Schnabel, as flamboyant ornate a personality as he's been known to be, is in that way no different. On the occasion of the artist's exhibition *Re-Reading* at Almine Rech in New York (September 14–October 14, 2017), Julian Schnabel invited me to his Montauk home/studio to talk about his work and motivations.

Phong Bui (Rail): It's very unusual to do a *Rail* conversation in a swimming pool. But here we are! Recently I reread Richard Wollheim's last talk called, "Painting, metaphor and the body: Titian, Bellini, De Kooning, etc." which was part his (A.W.) Mellon lectures in the mid '80s (at the National Gallery). It made me think of your work. He spoke of how painting acquires metaphorical meaning—I mean how metaphor accumulates on a painting through the making of it, but *not* through what the making of it means to the artist. There's always an object that the painting metaphorizes. At some point, Wollheim focuses on how De Kooning metaphorizes the sense of the body through his use of oil paint to evoke the perception of both volatility and sensuality. Infantile experiences of touching, smearing, sniffing, sucking, gurgling, swallowing, cooing, and whatnot in the paint handling fuses those two senses together, or subdivides them, though in most cases—especially those paintings that invoke the presence of the body—the sensations of sense and activity seem to be combined. In other words, the metaphor itself is transfused through the artist's body as it interfaces with the paint.

Schnabel: Right, something can be anthropomorphic or reflect that a body has been part of the process of constructing it; sometimes the body can be the subject.



Julian Schnabel, *Saint Sebastian*, 1979. Oil and wax on canvas, 111 × 66 in. © Julian Schnabel Studio

Rail: Exactly, in subtle or not-so-subtle ways. For example, how the two dissimilar marks in Ron Gorchov's paintings correlate with John Graham's cross-eyed punctures or wounds in his self-portraits and portraits of women. I remember Ron said it was Graham claiming he was using wound marks as a formal device like the way we use punctuation in a sentence, and that the crossed eyes were a way of trapping space. I identify that function in your early paintings, for example in *St. Sebastian* (1979): the explicit slash marks are prominently distributed throughout the body, and also a vertical rectangular hole punctured in the left thigh corresponds to the three vertical bars to its left.

Schnabel: The same can be said of another painting I painted a year before, *Accattone* (1978), which was inspired by (Pier Paolo) Pasolini's 1961 film, where this sort of mail slot-like form was inserted horizontally on the lower right.

Rail: Exactly, on a more minimal red field on the right.

Schnabel: Right. In fact, *Saint Sebastian* was initially started as a painting called *Man Ray on Mars* in 1975. It was part of a two-panel painting that I made at the top of the Mudd Club. A few years later I took one of the panels away and I put it on its side and painted it vertically, which became *St. Sebastian*. For me, at the time, I was looking for a body that the painting could be. The painting to me, at least during those years, was a body and the surface was the skin, and I also needed to make a receiver because I didn't want to make figurative work that was manneristic in some way, to where if you saw a particular figure made by me, someone would say "Oh yeah, that's like a Francis Bacon," or "that's a Richard Lindner," or "that's a Lester Johnson," or "that's the way that so and so paints a figure." I was searching for a surrogate for a figure; I didn't want to paint the human body directly, per se. I wanted to paint objects that could be figures, but that weren't just objects either. In other words, reduce it to a poplar tree, a torso; I saw similarity between veins and branches and cracks and the physiognomy of all things. I felt the potential reduction and combination of two things—like a poplar tree and a human torso—was possible. That was my motivation in those paintings.



Julian Schnabel, *Accattone*, 1978. Oil and wax on canvas. 84 × 72 in. © Julian Schnabel Studio

Rail: So in a sense you were conscious in creating a synthesis?

Schnabel: Yes, I was cataloguing these differences between natural and artificial forms, and cataloguing all types of surfaces in different paintings from different times, which is to say make a painting different from, say, European painting, where for a long time they kind of accepted the rectangle and just painted images on this given format. In American painting this self-conscious thinking about the surface and form—whether it came from (Robert) Rauschenberg and (Jasper) Johns, or then to Brice Marden, among others—was very receptive to both older art and making it anew. As far as I can see it goes all the way back to Giotto. I was looking at the way that Giotto would use the conical shape that was basically all drapery, *instead* of painting a figure, and then he'd just stick a head on top. [*Laughter.*] Quite abstract really! And also the surface, the fact that they were porous, permeable wall frescos—I thought it was actually quite genius when Francesco (Clemente) made frescos, something I would have liked to do, but I was happy that he did it, and so well that I didn't need to.

Anyway, it was natural, after having worked with very physical materials like modeling paste and fiberglass mixed, and oil on canvas in the mid '70s, to work with wax on panel in the next couple of years. You can see all the covering that went on the surfaces. There were drawings that I made—little texts or notes or whatever—that seemed to be a catalogue of a new language that I was trying to generate.

Rail: Like the painting *Formal Painting and His Dog* (1974), in which you painted flat a headless man in frontal view wearing a white suit with red grid; and he's shot on the left of his lower torso while his dog is painted in full volume, and in profile.



Julian Schnabel, *Formal Painting and His Dog*, 1978. Oil on canvas. 96 × 72 in. © Julian Schnabel Studio

Schnabel: It's interesting even with these paintings that I'm working on now, the drawing is what essentially makes the forms that hover quite unpredictably in space. My girlfriend Louise Kugelberg, who is Swedish, recently cut and tied branches and flowers around my sculpture *Idiota* (1988) in the backyard; we turned the sculpture into a maypole for Midsummer's Eve, which is considered the most magical night in regards to the power of nature and romance. When the wind blew, all the leaves were shimmering. So I started to paint those green marks on the new calendar paintings on the floor with a long brush, just kind of pressing them, and you'd also get the imprint of the studio floor. After all of these years, I still am trying to find a way of making a mark that has a physical characteristic that alludes to something else, I still am thinking about what I'm painting on, and what paint is, or how both the material and the image are going to react on a porous or more opaque surface, and allowing myself to go through a lot of permutations of what paintings could look like, and so on.

The same with these 24-foot square paintings I'm working on, which will be installed at "The Legion of Honor" at the Fine Arts Museum in San Francisco in 2018. Originally I found the skin of these sorts of paintings—a tarp-like material—hanging over a fruit market I came across in the jungle of Mexico years ago. I didn't need to put wax on it any more, I didn't need to make it mine in the same way I had previously. It was already. They were manufactured partly by the weather that made them look old. I felt (and feel) a need to work and build on this new fiction. The change could have happened when I started making paintings on velvet, on burlap, on broken plates and then I wanted to make black paintings, or dark paintings. I was driving down the road in Mexico, and I saw this large piece of tarp material that looked like an elephant skin that covered a man's tractor-trailer, which had broken down, and I said, "Well, I'd like to buy that piece of material from you, with 70 dollars in my pocket." He said, "Yes." And that was it. It turned out to be very weathered tarpaulin made to cover army trucks. I tied it to some rebar and painted there, outside, and after that I made two other ones, which I bought from two truck drivers at a gas station. There were three paintings in total, made in 1985, called *War*, *Atrophy*, and *Consumption*. Each measures 17 by 23 feet.

Rail: Yes, they're of serious scale. At any rate, do you see any continuity from the older work to what you're working on now, especially those featured in this exhibit?



Julian Schnabel, *Idiota*, 1988. Bronze with Patina, 212 × 200 × 16 in. © Julian Schnabel Studio

Schnabel: Yes, although the fiction or intervention is slightly different. I've been interested for quite some time in the subject of printing—whether it's printing by walking on something, printing when the sun slowly burns an object on the surface, or printing something that might be a reprinting of an X-ray—different versions of how marks get impregnated through surface, especially since I've been making films.

Rail: Which is another subject to be continued in a separate conversation.

Schnabel: Sure. I guess that all comes out of the initial impulse of how do you make a painting? How do you make a painting yours, also? Which is to say it's not a personal language, it's rather a personal selection of language. I'm always surprised, actually, how accepting most people are of the way paintings are made, because it's hard to make paintings look interesting or interesting enough to look at. Earlier you mentioned some radical, idiosyncratic way of dealing with form...

Rail: “Extreme form”—something I think you and Ron [*Gorchov*] have a mutual love for: not necessarily tormented forms, although I do see them in your early works, but forms that suggest expansiveness.

Schnabel: Yeah, I was looking for something that would offer a sense of observing observation: a thing that when you saw it, it would shift your perception.

Rail: Ron once remarked that when he thinks of your treatment of form, he thinks of Rodin's “Balzac.” He cited that according to some sources, when Rodin felt the nearly completed plaster version didn't look right he hit it with a sledgehammer, which gave it a new twist and energy.

Schnabel: Well, these large paintings I'm making now, which will be installed at the Legion of Honor as I mentioned before, are where the first cast of the *Thinker* greets you in the courtyard, and many of Rodin's other works, including models of sculptures on display inside that building. When I went there, Max Hollein, the new director since last year...

Rail: Who previously had been the director of Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, where he had organized the large survey of your work (*Malerei / Paintings 1978–2003*) in 2004?

Schnabel: Exactly. Max asked me to come out and see if I wanted to do this project; I remember there was a little plastic white shoe with a wire attached to it. There were fragments of body, little plaster objects in the vitrines. And almost immediately when I looked at this little thing that looked

like a foot I thought, a foot has five toes, so I'll make five paintings. Do you ever look at Andy Hall's Instagram?

Rail: I haven't. What's the attraction?

Schnabel: Andy is a good friend, and he has his own foundation called the Hall Art Foundation, where I have a show of a painting, which is five paintings, called *Untitled (Treatise on Melancholia)* made in 1989. Beuys made a work with the same title. They were painted on the olive green type tarpaulin that I did in Mexico in 1985, and they're shown along with seven sculptures of mine. Anyway, the drawings of the larger paintings, ultimately—which I had no idea what they were going to look like—ended up being pretty much what I sublimated from seeing those similar little fragments that I saw in the vitrines at Legion of Honor. So I guess if you look at or think about Rodin, or these little models, or if you think about, say, Joseph Beuys's work, things are fragments of things. And fragments of things have lost their meaning, discarded things, strung to the tear, news no longer news; these observations were written by Bill (William) Gaddis and pretty much is the closest writing to describing what I do.

Rail: I agree. Meanwhile, there's a healing element in your work, which perhaps is revealed through your admiration of Joseph Beuys. As we know, when Beuys arrived to New York in 1974, the trip was part of bringing together his theories of sculpture and social activism. In fact, the Twin Towers, which were just built, were the first objects he performed upon as a therapeutic operation. You remember he was wrapped up and taken by the ambulance from JFK airport, then dropped off to meet the coyote, the symbol of the detainee, at Rene Block's gallery. My friend David Levi Strauss, in his excellent essay "In Case Something Different Happens in the Future: Joseph Beuys and 9/11," saw Beuys as a healer addressing the Twin Towers, an obvious symbol of capitalism. Levi also felt that Beuys saw them as severed limbs, and according to his theory of sculpture, as classic crystalline forms: rigid, dry, and cold. So what he did was—you may remember seeing the multiple postcards of them—he wrote the names of the twin brothers Cosmas and Damian (the Arab saints of Healing, who were brought up as Christians by their mother) on both buildings, then coated or tinted them with a yellow resin, making them look like two sticks of butter, a substance—like his use of fat—very responsive to heat. Would you say that either case—a removal of meaning, or a capturing of lost meaning—might relate to a healing effect that you're conscious of?

Schnabel: What is it to be alive? That's the question. And how do you know if you are or you're not. I mean, some people go through life, who knows what they're thinking. It's hard to dip into somebody else's skin, but...As I get older, I look at things differently, as Ezra Pound said it best "Tree you are/ Moss you are/ You are violets with the wind above them. A child—so high—you are/ And all this is folly to the world."



Julian Schnabel, *Walt Whitman (Waterfall)*, 2016,
Ink on pigment print on paper, 51 × 38 in. © Julian Schnabel Studio

Rail: Yes, that's the last half of the poem "A Girl," which makes sense since the poem is written about Daphne, who, in trying to escape from Apollo, turned into a laurel tree. These two familiar motifs, the body and tree branches, have often appeared in your early works, and now have taken different forms.

Schnabel: It's true. And don't you think all poetry is in some ways about the sublimation of the freedom of a child's imagination?

Rail: Yes, I do.

Schnabel: Now, when I think about looking at leaves, the grass, the most fundamental elements, it makes me think about life differently. I remember Lou Reed, when he was dying: he was sitting out by a tree and trying to comprehend what existence was. My next film is about Van Gogh's last days, a fictional account, which will be called *At Eternity's Gate*. He's looking at a landscape, the screen is black, and he says, "All I see is eternity. Am I the only one to see it?" He opens his eyes and says, "There must be a reason for existence." So, in noticing small things, is that a healing process? Or can that ultimately help people, to guide them through life, or the artist?

Rail: Which is in some ways a meditation, one form of healing indeed.

Schnabel: Yes, I think that's the desired effect of the practice for most artists. So if Beuys was to carry out his message as being respectful of the natural cycles, he was able to do it through performance, which allowed a lot of interaction between him and the people, and the melding of the two is part of the process, and also the way the work evolves into whatever appearance it turns out to be. On one hand, I know that there's an audience for my work, but I'm not really interested in being engaged with them, and it's too much work. I mean, why am I putting this white paint with a long stick on this large cloth? To see if it looks okay, that's it. For me this is my ecstasy, or the thing that I've chosen to do with my life. On the other hand, I guess I'm able to separate different activities at different times, which has so far made me feel productive. I have to talk to a lot of different people if I'm going to make a movie. For example, the need to translate things to actors, to people on the production team, who might not understand, or might want to be an obstacle. Translate things to people who are encouraging, or who want to be involved. There's a lot of translating; whereas

painting is more like playing a saxophone. The last movie I made was seven years ago, I mean every seven years I can make a film. But I paint all the time.

Rail: Earlier you said you hoped a painting could be perceiving of perception, and observing observation. I wonder how the viewer, who is once removed, would be able to mediate the whole experience?

Schnabel: Well, it means different things in different mediums. If I'm making a film, for example, instead of making certain scenes more naturalistic I'd just change the color to a more of green palette so you know you're watching a movie. Or there's a cut in it that's more abrupt, which may cause you to have a physical sensation. That may be a part of the narrative that I might desire, though somebody else might think, Oh, that looks like a mistake. And maybe that notion of idiosyncratic work, where something looks like it's atypical in some way, or jarring, is something that I am attracted to. Around 2001 I was at the sculpture museum in Rome, and there were all these extraordinary busts and torsos installed all around the courtyard, but in the middle there was a tree that was nearly fossilized. I couldn't believe there were a couple of leaves on it. It also had a brace on the bottom, cause it was so old, and I thought, Wow, that looks like something! So when I came home, I built *Ahab* (2001), which is very much like what I saw. I remember clearly, I felt like I knew what sculpture was at that moment. I knew what I needed to do.

Rail: *Ahab* has serious volume and weight, yet it leans on a small pole like Ahab walking with his prosthetic leg made out of whalebone. Asymmetry, imperfection, and whatnot, is what catches our attention for sure!

Schnabel: Absolutely. I make my sculpture as they appear in their sizes.

Rail: That's evident! Although in this current body of work one sees a similar function, the use of asymmetry along with, I should add, spatial and cryptic disruption, being treated differently.

Schnabel: I just try to follow to places that the work takes me. Anyway, I don't know where the hell I found these photos of Casa Hemingway, but they turned up at the studio a year ago. I asked Omar (Ramos), to blow them up, and then I spray painted on top of Plexiglas, on top of those images, and on some occasions also onto the frames. So, there is a certain aspect of the body that's actually being depicted through the drawing or spraying gestures, which evokes how a bedspread might have looked on a bed somewhere, and you can kind of conjure a sense of history, a sense of place, and a sense of loss. And they are being shown with other works of different things that have been sort of discarded, and then reconstituted, represented, and re-read. Can I read a few fragments from an essay my friend Brian Kelly has written about the work?

Rail: Please do.

Schnabel: "Put your hands over the piano keys. Press at least 3 or 4 down at once. The images in these editions of prints are of a process Julian Schnabel had developed and expanded on for years. They're records of his actions, made whole by degrees of dissonance and harmony-notes in the chord. / Water falls not down, but according to the play of light, and the light and dark parts within us, where we harbor hopes of immersion and release back into the glinting sun. / Superimposition creates simultaneity: everything happening at once. The water before, the water now, the water after." I'm skipping ahead. "Julian Schnabel's prints are a palimpsest—things that occurred before he arrived; as if he became one of the children who was looking out the school bus window with children he never met: Rorschach trees and clouds, purple explosions of excitement and doubt, and filtered light peering from behind a cloud. We're learning what life is, images become physical facts as we learn to grasp concepts of death and time, who and where we are. We even see places we might have heard of but will never go to. / The images create an unlimited, incomprehensible world, and the wonder and the fear a child feels trying to grasp it: a goat with a teddy bear crown; an army of

uniform men in a purple storm and most terrifying, the distance our goat mother/father appears to be from us, the viewer. Incongruous, unnamable marks, discarded visual aids no longer in use, still in our sleep. We awake from the dream, confused, thrilled, and frightened by the huge world within our heads and the new day.” There’s more where he talks about Hemingway, but I’ll end here.



Julian Schnabel, *Untitled*, 2017, spray paint on plexiglass over printed image 59 × 44 in. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging

Rail: It sounds like he knows you very well.

Schnabel: Yes he does, well, since my first show at Leo Castelli in 1981. Brian also had a band once called Joey’s Oscar.

Rail: What Brian Kelly has written is similar to Wollheim’s proposition that metaphors accumulate to a painting through the making of it, rather than through what the making of it means to the artist.

Schnabel: Yes, the process is the meaning. In the practice of doing it, what is revealed is the intention that you might not have even been conscious of. You’re taking everything that’s inside and outside of you and positing in the process. Otherwise you’re just illustrating what you already know; then you’re not making art. The other thing is that there is so much misunderstanding about art that you can’t really be bothered by it. In the same sense that when, at a certain moment in the script, Van Gogh said I used to care what people thought but now I just care if I’m able to work or not. I think when you’re younger you want people to understand you, but when you’re older you want the freedom of a child. I love that line in Bob Dylan’s song *My Back Pages*, “I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now.” And so I feel that there’s a freedom in not caring and not trying to communicate to other people. To me, to be able to make a physical fact that correlates with your impulse, with your real desire is something that can be unendingly interesting, or unendingly telling of itself. To the degree where you can’t seem to quite get enough of seeing it because it keeps retelling its own story. And maybe you look for that in the authenticity of a mark. Because once you start to give a reason as to why you’re doing something, it’s already a lie. Reason is the opposite of truth. Once you explain it you’re deconstructing it and making it into something else that might be a surrogate for that thing or trying to make it into a surrogate. But it just absolutely cannot be that thing.

Rail: I like your response, when your father asked you why you painted the eyes out in the Big Girl paintings, you said, “it’s so you can look at her chin and elsewhere.” It’s a poetic deflection.

Schnabel: I’m not being defensive; I think that’s a nice thing to say. I think really everything I’ve got to say is in those paintings.

Rail: Do you think having surfed ever since you were a kid, an activity you still actively love, may correspond to the way you mediate space, especially in your large-scale paintings or sculptures?

Schnabel: I grew up in a small and ordinary house in Brooklyn, on East 5th street between O and P, and I always remember feeling claustrophobic until our family moved to Brownsville, Texas. I was fifteen. The vastness and flatness of the land, changed my previous relationship with anything vertical. Around 1985 I went to India to see the Kailasa temple at the Ellora Caves, which was carved out of a single rock. I was taken by the whole thing, which freezes at 22 feet high. It’s a heaven beyond reach and a celestial-like scale that undoubtedly changed how I see large scale, and how it related to both architecture and sculpture.

Rail: Which is evident in the sculptural work that you have made ever since, say *Golem* (1986) or *Leutwyler for BB*(1990) for example.

Schnabel: True. Probably since *Balzac* 1982 . It changed how I see large scale versus large size. As far as the surfing reference, it may have to do with just being in water beholding the power of that. It all has to do with physicality and transference in the same way that film images, by nature are sculptural, juxtaposed to the human observing them, how they get framed and cut there’s a rhythm that carries meaning.