

Artsy Online: 'Julian Schnabel on Why Making Art Is Freedom', by Emilie Nathan, October 30th 2015

Julian Schnabel on Why Making Art Is Freedom

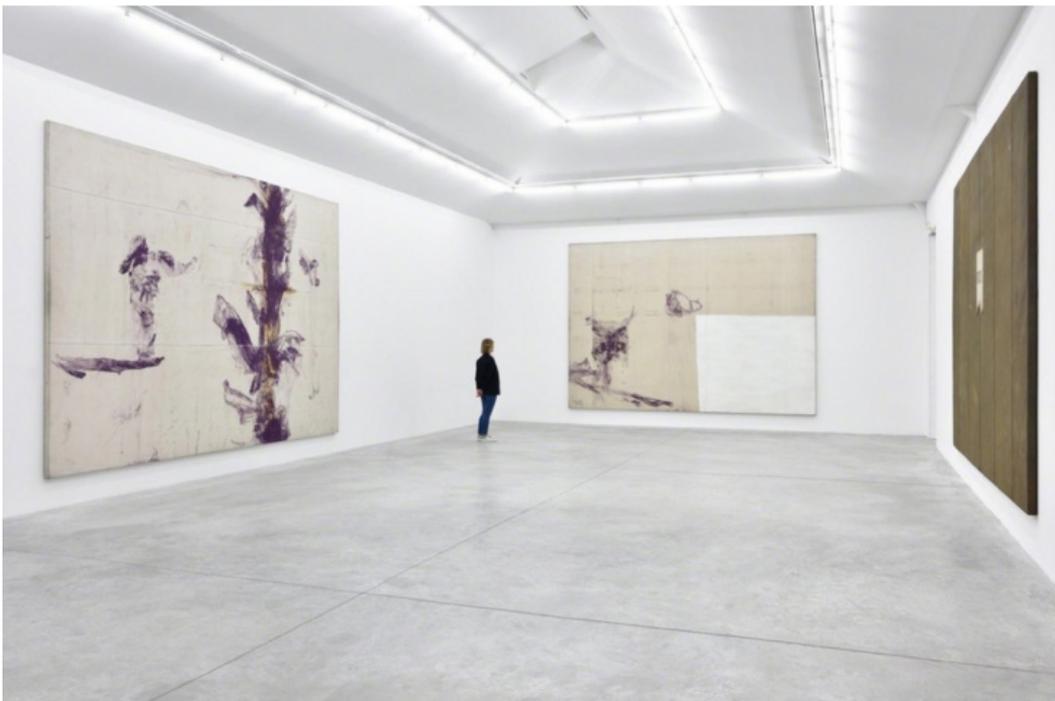
Arguably the “baddest” of Neo-Expressionism’s “bad boys”—that group of young male artists who rescued painting from Minimalism’s chokehold in the ’80s and invested it again with form and figuration—Julian Schnabel has never stopped confounding collectors and polarizing the press. He is often cited for his “plate paintings,” whose thickly impastoed, fractured surfaces groan under the heft of shattered ceramics and surge illusionistically between two and three dimensions. Everything he does is big and loud, and his material arsenal is vast; his paintings have included boxing mats, burlap, awnings, wallpaper—anything that strikes his experimental fancy.

Then there are his occasionally award-winning movies: *Basquiat*, *Before Night Falls*, and *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, the latter of which is marked by his distinctly painterly perspective, seething with color and light. And his public persona: silk-pajama-and-sandal-clad in his signature tinted shades, in and out of the pink Palazzo Chupi mansion—alternately described as eye-sore and revelation—in Manhattan’s West Village.

Schnabel is regularly villainized by critics for his braggadocio and swagger, and he has had many lives, disappearing from headlines for years only to suddenly reemerge as the subject of much scrutiny. But the truth is that he has never stopped working, not for one minute, producing countless works over the decades that have not been shown in public. It’s just that we sometimes stop looking.



Portrait of Julian Schnabel. - Photo by Steve Clute for Tom Powel Imaging.



Installation view of Julian Schnabel's "Jack Climbed Up The Beanstalk To The Sky Of Illimitableness Where Everything Went Backwards." Image courtesy of Almine Rech.

Now, Paris's Almine Rech has given him his first show of paintings in France since 1995 (a 2011 show at Galerie Magda Danyz displayed his polaroids), and so he rises again. On the eve of the opening, he joined me for a coffee in the gallery and explained what he's learned, how he learned it, and why our ongoing search for meaning in his work is really beside the point.

Emily Nathan: Your work has involved the use of numerous varied materials, from tablecloths to dinner plates. How would you characterize your working process?

Julian Schnabel: You know, when I was younger I was worried if the last painting that I made didn't look anything like the one that came before it. And after a while, I realized that that was a blessing—even though some people who liked work of mine were dismayed when my work didn't repeat itself. But it was never my intention to do that, to be a chameleon. There were just things that I wanted to see, or different properties that things had that led me to other things. It was always an experiment. So I ended up making paintings where I used plaster and joint compound, or I'd cut holes in the paintings, or I made them from projective drawing tests. I made all kinds of paintings.



Julian Schnabel, Untitled, 2013
Almine Rech



Julian Schnabel
Tour of Hell I, 2008-2015
Almine Rech

EN: That kind of material experimentation is rather à la mode these days.

JS: Yeah, I think it's much more appreciated now. But when I was doing it, it was like, "Why are you using that? What are you doing?" I thought that signaturizing was the death of an artist. I didn't want to do that. I made a lot of stuff out of found materials, and a lot were not made from found materials. Sometimes there was yellow that I liked that was printed on something that somebody gave me—people would see things, and bring me things. But my genealogy happened according to whatever interested me at the moment. And I think, after a while, people realized that I wasn't trying to be freakish or outlandish, that there was something there that I was trying to explore—but that's mostly looking back at this stuff in retrospect, 30 years later, with 20/20 vision. While I was doing it, I didn't know what I was doing. I was doing it because I wanted to see it, I wanted to feel it.

EN: The show features a number of your so-called "goat paintings;" critics have suggested that the goat is meant to exist as an allegory for you—representing yourself as a sort of "scapegoat."

JS: No, that's not it at all. When Mike Kelley died, I wanted to make a painting for him. And I've always had this taxidermied goat in my studio with this rabbit on top of its head. And I thought, "Well, you know, he liked stuffed animals, and I'd like to make something for him." We hardly even knew each other; I just thought it was a nice thing to do. And my daughter Stella had given me some wallpaper, because I had painted on wallpaper before. (I'm kind of a Whitman-esque sort of guy in the sense that it could be burlap, it could be something that's pictorial—anything can be an image that you can paint on, anything can provide the architecture of a painting.) Stella bought some wallpaper at auction and gave it to me. I photographed that, put the images together, and later made the goat paintings. There are four that are that size, that have purple and pink dots of paint on them, and some other ones that have orange on them. Of course, I didn't know I was going to put pink on them when I started.



Installation view of Julian Schnabel's "Jack Climbed Up The Beanstalk To The Sky Of Illimitableness Where Everything Went Backwards." Image courtesy of Almine Rech.

EN: How did you select the works for this show?

JS: Oh I don't know. There are some paintings I could have shown but didn't that are pretty interesting; they look like wood. For those, I had a couch that I left outside and the veneer came off it, and then I was looking at the piece of veneer. So I photographed the veneer, blew it up, made shapes with it, and then painted on top of it. But again, that veneer was something that was disregarded, and a lot of the time I'll see things that go under the radar or that are just sort of tossed out. But they look something like the treasure of the Sierra Madre to me.

EN: What is it about these sort of discarded objects that appeals to you? Is it the story behind them, or is it the material itself?

JS: I mean, I think that there's a continuum in these objects. I think plywood is just an interesting material, and wood grain. If you look at early Picassos, Cubist things where they're painting wood grain, you see that people were always thinking about natural phenomena—how things exist because of nature, and then how things are artificial or get manipulated in some way. And things that are manmade that get reverted back to nature, like pieces of foam that have been used in a boat that's been shipwrecked, and then it comes back to the land, so you've got this piece of archeology that has formed.

There are a couple different hands at work, whether it's the human hand or the hand of nature. And weather is also a big contributor to things. I've been painting outside since 1979. I can see better out there. And also, I probably correlate living with painting, with being alive. It's amazing when you can just walk out in the backyard and do something, and feel like you've earned your day, justified it. That makes you feel better because you can be engaged. It's a wonderful thing to feel engaged in something. Everything else is just so complicated. I don't know how everybody gets things done. I'm impressed when people can go to a store and go shopping, I swear to God.



Julian Schnabel -Untitled, 1990 -Almine Rech

EN: But you've been productive. You've made a lot of paintings. You've made some movies.

JS: Well yes, I can paint. That's one thing I can do.

EN: Looking back on your work, what do you feel about it? You've said many times that you didn't think of art as a career.

JS: Well, you don't understand what the real job is when you start, being a young artist. You don't know how long it's going to go on, you don't know what you're going to do, you don't really know what it means. And then the variables change radically over the years. But I never painted to have a show; I just painted because that's what I felt like doing. And one of the things about being a painter is you're a bit different from being an actor, or working in film, because you're not waiting for other people to give you a job. So when artists say, "My studio's not big enough," or whatever, I just say, "Go outside. Find a spot somewhere." Because the thing is that you can always paint if you really need to. So that's been a great luxury and kind of a freedom, to be able to do that. And actually, to be able to survive doing that is a miracle.



Installation view of Julian Schnabel's "Jack Climbed Up The Beanstalk To The Sky Of Illimitableness Where Everything Went Backwards." Image courtesy of Almine Rech.

EN: You seem to use a lot of purple in your work. Does it have some special significance to you?

JS: Yeah, a lot of purple. Why? I can't give you an answer to that, but I can say that it's not a regular color. It seems to transverse and transmute into some other kind of thing, it seems to be sort of a symbol and a color at the same time. So it has a multi-purpose. I have a series of purple paintings that are 11-feet tall, and they look like aerial maps. But they're photographs I took of the floor of my studio after pouring all that purple ink and white gesso on it. And then I thought they looked like you're landing God knows where, somewhere up at 20,000 feet. Then I put ink on the floor and walked on the back of them, and the result looked like you're flying through clouds over mountains.

EN: So when critics try to read significance into your work, parsing it for symbolism and allegory, that's really beside the point?

JS: My work is about seeing. Ultimately, it's about a way of looking at the world. I'm just painting what I'm seeing; I'm just trying to connect the dots of my own vision. Every time I stumble across something that's worth a look, it stops me in my tracks. You know, I was driving down the highway in the Atlas Mountains [in Morocco], and I saw some awnings of these butcher shops. I stopped. I was with my wife and kids at the time, and they had to wait for me to get the guys to take the awnings off because the part that was burnt by the sun was ochre, and the part that was rolled up was red. And they looked like landscapes of New York to me. I put some white on them after—and you can ask me, what does the white mean? But I don't know. You sort it out. We could start this conversation now and finish in 10 years.

—Emily Nathan`

“Jack Climbed Up The Beanstalk To The Sky Of Illimitableness Where Everything Went Backwards” is on view at Almine Rech, Paris, Oct. 19–Nov. 14, 2015