

The art of the comeback

By Éric Troncy

Painting, architecture, film...
Julian Schnabel has tried his hand at every discipline with the same brio and the same spirit of extravagance. After an absence of ten years, he's making his big comeback, at the **Almine Rech Gallery**.

For over 20 years, from the early 80s onwards, his name inspired successive waves of curiosity, admiration, respect, indignation, indifference or contempt... Now, at nearly 65, having disappeared from the museum and gallery scene for over ten years, Julian Schnabel is back. His new works, like the old ones, are being shown once more, and are once again the subject of fierce discussion. It was in the context of a powerful shift in the art scene, when painting came back into favour, that Schnabel's work first hit home in the late 70s. In an era when the visual arts concerned just a handful of experts, minimal, conceptual and performance art were at the apogée of their ascendancy – arts that, in one way or another, freed themselves from the horribly bourgeois concept of the painting. For this very reason, Pop art wasn't well regarded, and Warhol, for example, not taken very seriously. So one can only imagine the shock caused by the sudden wave of painting exhibitions that crashed onto the art scene at that time. American "Bad Painting," German Neo-expressionism, French Figuration Libre, Italian Transavantgardism: whether related to Postmodernism or not, in just one decade these national movements conquered all the museums and galleries.

Among the roster of artists suddenly thrust into the limelight, Schnabel was already emerging as a singular figure. Because of his personality for a start. This Brooklyn native, who was born in 1951 and grew up in Texas (he studied art at the University of Houston), was unanimously criticized for his overinflated ego and a penchant for extravagance that contrasted with the seriousness of art at the time. In those days, Schnabel was often depicted as someone who strode the streets of New York in silk pyjamas. But what was also surprising was the extravagance of his painting, which seemed to want to bring together every style and assemble all sorts of references that were, to say the least, contradictory. "How can you criticize what a painter does when the obvious intention is to do everything?", art critic Stuart Morgan wrote of him in 1986. His painting was seen as inherently bulimic and omnivorous. As the press release for a 1987 Centre Pompidou show put it,

"It is clear that his rapid rise to fame has earned him the vehemence of the critics." For in addition to his status as a "personality" who chose to ignore convention, Schnabel also stood for meteoric success. In 1979, his first solo show in New York – at the Mary Boone Gallery no less – sold out before it even opened: just four paintings, offered at \$2,500 each, which was a fortune at the time for contemporary art. In fact Schnabel had two exhibitions with Mary Boone that year: the first showing his *Wax Paintings*, and the second his *Plate Paintings*, including one that was wittily titled *The Death of Fashion*. And his work did indeed celebrate a certain rebirth of painting: "I thought that if painting is dead, then it's a nice time to start painting. People have been talking about the death of painting for so many years that most of those people are dead now," Schnabel would declare a few years later.

The *Plate Paintings* were an uppercut aimed directly at the avant-garde's chin.

The prototype for the series was the 1978 work *The Patient and the Doctor*: before starting to paint, Schnabel covered his canvases with broken china plates, forming a fractured surface and thereby mixing painting and objects in an audacious synthesis of contradictory influences. It was an aesthetic shock, for sure, but Schnabel didn't stick to just one style, as is apparent if one compares these jagged works with the clean perfection of *Painting for Ian Curtis* (1980), a black-velvet picture reproducing in white paint the image from the cover of Joy Division's legendary album *Closer* (a musical reference that, once again, wasn't so common for the times). What's sure is that he was severely reproached for his success and his growing legend, as well as his propensity for mixing disciplines – something which today would qualify him as part of the slash generation (a term that comes from the blogosphere), and thus as someone eminently inventive and respectable.

The problem is that Schnabel dabbled in more or less everything. Painting, of course, but also music – he recorded an album in 1995 entitled *Every Silver Lining Has A Cloud* for Island Records (producers of the

B52s back then and Stromae today) – furniture (mainly beds), and several architectural projects, beginning with his own house. And what a house! In it, all Schnabel's tendencies towards the extravagant and the excessive found an outlet. A former horse stable in Manhattan, of which he initially rented a part before acquiring the whole building, it became the infamous Palazzo Chupi after a series of substantial alterations, including a multi-storey extension on the roof. It's in this staggering pink confection of Venetian inspiration, boasting some 180 windows, that Schnabel lived in perfect harmony with his world vision, surrounded by assistants and oscillating between the almost Olympic-sized pool in the basement and his private apartments, napping beneath the benevolent gaze of a Picasso *Femme au Chapeau* (which he acquired in 1989, and which Christie's sold in 2009 for some \$8 million). As though blowing a raspberry at the art world which openly snubbed him, in the mid 1990s Schnabel added film-making to his list of accomplishments with his biopic *Basquiat*. Co-produced by billionaire Peter Brant (incidentally one of the most ambitious of contemporary-art collectors), it was a rather good portrayal of the late New York painter and memorably featured an inspired David Bowie in the role of Andy Warhol. "I know what it's like to be attacked as an artist. I know what it's like to be judged as an artist. I know what it's like to arrive as an artist and have fame and notoriety. I know what it's like to be accused of things that you never said or did. I know what it's like to be described as a piece of hype. I know what it's like to be appreciated as well as degraded," Schnabel explained with respect to *Basquiat*. He ended up directing five films in all, including the much-lauded *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007), which was nominated for four Oscars and took the Best Director award at Cannes.

Today, 40 years after "the return of painting" that sealed Schnabel's initial triumph, it's once again a question of "the return of painting," but in a market that's totally free of hang-ups about the possible bourgeois nature of works on canvas. It's also a market that's free from any censure towards artists' antics, even if, sadly, they've all



Untitled work by Julian Schnabel (2013). Ink-jet print, oil and ink on polyester, 223.5 x 243.8 cm.

become horribly professionalized, always on and eager to play the game (especially that of the market). Now that they could, if they so wished, wander about the streets of New York in pyjamas without anyone reproaching them for it, few of them seem to have any desire to do so. Today, in an art world that's ever more global, connected and conformist, Schnabel's extravagance only seems all the more admirable.

And so Schnabel is back, with paintings once again, paintings for which he'll surely be reproached – indeed the litany of negative criticism has already begun to rain down on him, the one constant in his multivalent career. Those who take offence pretend not to see what all these young (and not so

young) artists who are currently hot property on the market owe to what Schnabel did in the 80s – Schnabel who invented the multi-faceted, multi-style artist, Schnabel who, like Damien Hirst a decade later, constructed the very idea of the "contemporary artist" as we know it today. Whether one likes it or not, the extravagant Schnabel and his legendary ego now occupy a prime spot in the history of art, a spot that many artists may set their sights on, but with no guarantee of their getting there.

Jack Climbed up the Beanstalk to the Sky of Illimitableness Where Everything Went Backwards, at the Almine Rech Gallery, Paris, until 14 November. www.alminerech.com.