

The Talks



Mr. Schnabel, when does a work of art become important in your opinion? Do you need external confirmation, or is it something explicitly personal?

I don't think something is important just because an audience likes it. Most people make art and movies as a job and if a lot of people go to see it they make money and that is their sign of success. I am not making judgment here, but their goal is strictly business-oriented. I don't do this as a business.

So commercial success doesn't interest you?

Do I think it's good if people like it? I have to like it. If I think that something is good, it is fine. I mean *Gladiator* came out when my movie *Before Night Falls* came out. *Gladiator* won the Academy Award, Russell Crowe won the Academy Award. Would I rather be Ridley Scott? No. Do I think Javier Bardem's performance was better than Russell Crowe's, although Russell is an excellent actor? Yes. Javier Bardem's performance was better. Did we win the Oscar? No. Does it matter? No. I mean he was the first Spanish actor to ever be nominated for an Academy Award. What does that say about the Academy? There is a level of chauvinism over there; it's a club.

Do you think your indifference to the system has actually made you more successful?

Well I can't just say yes to that, because then I would sound like the guy everybody says I am supposed to be: the arrogant, self-satisfied Schnabel.
(Laughs)

But what you can admit is that you made quite an interesting transition from acclaimed artist to successful filmmaker. How did that come about?

I thought: If I feel like I should do it, I should do it. I shouldn't worry that the art world is going to say, "Oh, Schnabel thinks that we're not good enough for him, he is going to make movies now. The art world is not big enough, he's going to make movies." Then when the people liked the movies they said, "Oh, now he is a better movie director than a painter." But that's not really true. I happened to do it just the same way as some artists write letters. Van Gogh wrote letters and so we have a book of his letters to Theo. It is a great thing to have. The guy is a painter but he happened to write good letters also.

Are you interested in bringing the film and the art world a bit closer together? During the 2010 Toronto Film Festival you premiered with the exhibition *Julian Schnabel: Art and Film* which seemed to aim at that.

Maybe it should have just been called *Paintings That Have Something To Do With Film*. I think the idea was that maybe people from the film world would go and see the museum and it would bring these worlds together. I don't care if those worlds are together or not. My attitude toward it is similar to the way Joseph Beuys left the Kunstakademie open so anyone who wanted to come, anyone who was interested in art, could come. Whatever brings somebody in so they can have an art experience is a healthy thing.

Do you prefer filmmaking or painting more?

I prefer to paint; I don't have to translate anything. I don't have to know if it is good or bad while I am working. I don't want to think when I am working. Even if I am making a movie, I get to a point where I throw the script away. I know what I want people to do and ultimately it is a spontaneous kind of activity. They need to be able to feel comfortable enough to trust me so they can do something and know I won't let them get hurt. They end up feeling that way and that is why the movies are good. But I prefer to paint.

Unlike painting, movie making is extremely collaborative. Do you have to fight to get your way sometimes?

I am my biggest critic. I have final cut on my films and I don't care how much money they ultimately make. If I would have made *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* in English, it would have made more money. But it wouldn't be the movie that I wanted to make and I think the other people in charge had to swallow that when I told them about my intent to make a French movie. The guy is French and I am not going to have French people watching American people making believe they are French in France and then they are reading French subtitles.

We knew you were a talented filmmaker and painter, but we didn't know about your photographic skills until you recently toured the world with a Polaroid exhibition.

First of all, I didn't intend to be a photographer and I didn't intend to be a movie director. I am not a photographer, but I took photographs. And the photographs that I took are very physical; they are like paintings in a way.

Why did you start taking pictures in the first place?

Because I was dissatisfied with how my work looked when it was photographed by other people. I wanted to show the way paintings look inside places where I am working. So I was taking these pictures over the past eight years and I didn't have any intention to show them and this woman came and looked at them and said: do you think we can show those photographs? So to cut it short: was Stanley Kubrick a photographer? No. He was a movie director. But he took photographs that are a gift to see.

Are you in a way proud of all these different careers?

I don't have a career as a photographer and I don't want a career as a movie director, and I don't have a career as a painter.

You don't have a career?

No, I never thought of art as a career. I thought it was more like a monastic practice. It is something that you do – you can't not do it. If I made money doing it, I would do it; if I didn't make any money, I would do it.

Could you live without art?

If I never made another movie, I probably could live okay. I made the movies that I made, I think I did a good job, but if I couldn't paint, I don't know what I would do. If I couldn't paint, I think I would be a problem. I would definitely be a problem to the people who have to put up with me, live with me, deal with me. I wouldn't know what to do with myself. I would go surfing I guess and live in the jungle or something like that. You know, obviously I'm not perfect but the thing I am best at is painting.

SHORT PROFILE

Name: Julian Schnabel

DOB: 26 October 1951

Place of Birth: Brooklyn, New York, USA

Occupation: Artist, Director