



*Julian Schnabel, Painting for Malik Joyeux and Bernardo Bertolucci (V), 2006, Gesso and ink on polyester, 20' x 15'. Courtesy of the artist
© 2006 Julian Schnabel*



Julian Schnabel, Untitled (Self-Portrait), 2005, oil, wax, resin on canvas, 108 x 102"
 © 2005 Julian Schnabel. Collection of Johnny Depp

What Goes Around Comes Around Julian Schnabel at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto

by Edward Rubin

It is somewhat ironic that Julian Schnabel's current exhibition, *Julian Schnabel: Art and Film* at the Art Gallery of Ontario is following in the footsteps of the museum's *King Tut* exhibition. Both men are known for doing things in a very big way – King Tut with his tomb and Schnabel, highly in evidence here, with his titanic canvases that all but dwarf the common man. For the 59-year-old Schnabel, who was all the rage with his smashed plate paintings during the late 70s and early 80s, before he eventually fell off his art world pedestal, this exhibition – the largest since his 1987 Whitney Museum

Retrospective – is tantamount to a Second Coming. The “ball has come back into his court” as he gratefully acknowledged during his press preview. Not that he ever stopped playing, or for that matter stopped painting, but people and life went on to different things. Julian himself turned to film directing, a move which further eclipsed his reputation as a painter.

Art and Film, deftly curated by David Moos, is an ingenious way of refurbishing Schnabel's all but forgotten art world reputation and a reintroduction of the artist to the general public who is more familiar with his films than

his art. The exhibition, using some 60 of Schnabel's works, traces the artist's interest in cinema through his paintings, sculptures, and photographs. Many of the works refer directly to specific actors, filmmakers and their films, such as Pasolini's *Accattone* and Vittorio de Sica's *Shoeshine*. One of the earliest paintings in the exhibition, his 1975 painting *Norma* (*Pool Painting for Norma Desmond*) is a tribute to the film *Sunset Boulevard*. It is an interest which according to Schnabel, goes back to his childhood days of growing up in Brooklyn during the 50s. “Just like painting, going to the movies was an escape for me from the ordinariness of everyday life at home,” Schnabel told me during a pre-opening interview. “Movies were more real to me than my life at home. As a child I found *The Ten Commandments*, when Moses parted the Red Sea, totally awesome, and *Moby Dick*, when you get to see the great white whale's eye is terrifying. When I first saw *Repulsion*, I realized a movie can really get inside of you. It could haunt you, and you could identify with it.”

Despite the immense size of some of the canvases, and the fact that the artist's work takes up the entire fifth floor of the museum, the exhibition is an intimate experience – in large part due to the intensely personal and arcane nature of many of the works. Crowds aside, the viewer is continually reminded, by the size, power, and experimental brashness of the artist's executions, that there are only three people here to take into consideration – you, the looming artworks themselves, and the branded hand of Schnabel, whose resonant signature announces itself at every turn. The first painting that meets you head on as you walk into the exhibition is the *Last Diary Entry (for Roman Polanski)* 2010. Although I do not presume to know what it is about, nor what it represents, the lush and crazily colored figure in the painting – a mix between a tampered down Frances Bacon, an *Alice in Wonderland* character, and some dizzy

dame – is highly exciting and very much alive. It is one of the few works in the exhibition that jumps out at you: it actively grabs your attention rather than engulfing or overwhelming you, as many of his larger works attempt to do.

Several of Schnabel's historical smashed plate paintings are on view, most prominently his groundbreaking 1978 *Patients and the Doctors*. Having settled back into the dust bin of history, they bear none of the initial excitement that they engendered when they first turned the art world on its head. At least for now, until they are gathered en masse for maximum effect – and hopefully this will be soon – they remain an anachronistic oddity. Equally unengaging, though it does shed light on the artist's respect for Brando (who he considers "the greatest actor that we've seen") is the Brando Room. Six large, relatively mundane poster-like photographs, which Schnabel bought from the actor's estate sale, depict Brando in a long-haired wig, kidding around during the filming of the 1968 comedy *Candy*. By adding spray paint, resin, and ink to the surface of these photographs, Schnabel, making this work his own, transformed the photographs into paintings. These same photographs first appeared during a fantasy scene in Schnabel's 2007 film, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*.

Another small gallery is filled with Schnabel's portraits, including one of himself from the collection of Johnny Depp. Even with their tacky framing, which reads young and very early 80s, the slickly painted, slightly garish portraits, compelling in a nervous sort of way, are not half bad. Gary Oldman, who as Albert Milo played Schnabel in the film *Basquiat* is presented wearing a traje de luces (suit of lights) belonging to Curro Romero the famous Spanish bullfighter. Rula Jabreal, Schnabel's current love interest, and the author of the book on which Schnabel's soon to be released movie *Miral* is based on – it opens worldwide this December – is seen wearing the same dress that actress Emma de Caunes wore in *The*



Julian Schnabel, *The Patients and the Doctors*, 1978 oil, plates, bondo on wood, 8 'x 9' x 1'
© 2010 Julian Schnabel

Diving Bell and the Butterfly during one of Jean-Dominique Bauby's reveries. The most compelling portrait on view is the 1982 *The Portrait of Andy Warhol* painted on black velvet, in two sittings and five hours. Here a shirtless, ghostly Warhol, looking more vulnerable than usual, more an apparition than a live human being, appears to be dematerializing before our very eyes.

In the three largest paintings – each one 22 feet by 22 feet, one inch short of the gallery's 23 foot ceilings – (although you would not know it unless you read the label or are wearing a head-set), Schnabel returns to the theme of bullfighting. Painted in 1990 these works were specifically made to be exhibited in the city of Nîmes at the "Maison Carée", an ancient Roman temple. Here, the three canvases, removed from their original site, read like epic movies that end up on a small television screen, their sense of wonder severely muted. All we are left with are

three very big, mildly interesting abstract paintings that mean a lot more to the artist than the viewing public. What is interesting about these works is the unique and totally unexpected way – a well known signature of the artist – that these paintings materialized. "I took a table cloth and dipped it in oil paint that had a lot of turpentine in it and I threw the table cloth at the paintings so all of this drawing that looks like printing, that looks like gravure, is made by taking a big linen sheet and dipping it in the paint and then throwing it at the canvas. Sometimes I even took the sheet and rolling it up used it like a bat."

One near-mesmerizing, disarmingly simple painting that still sticks in my mind – one of 14 that Schnabel's painted for his *Big Girl Paintings* series in 2001 – is *Large Girl With No Eyes*. Going large again – roughly 14 by 12 feet – we see a young blonde girl, from the shoulders up,

wearing a blue dress. She is looking – that is, if she was allowed to see – straight out at us. However, the artist, stripping her of sight, bars us from entering into the picture by painting a long black bar that masks her eyes. Schnabel's stated intent, for this painting as well as the entire exhibition – here perfectly, if not hypnotically achieved – “is to force the viewer to look at the painting and not the eyes.”

The most cinematically stunning works on view are *Painting for Malik Joyeux* and *Bernardo Bertolucci V and VI*, two enormous black and white photographs from Schnabel's 2006 *Surfing* series. Again, by adding gesso and ink to the polyester canvas, the artist turns a simple photograph of a surfer negotiating a giant rolling wave (somewhat akin to turning a script into a movie) into breathtakingly dizzying ride, which all but magically pulls us into a canvas that is more alive than dead. Not a bad ending for a Schnabel comeback.

What follows is a transcript of a portion of an interview by Edward Rubin with Julian Schnabel and videotaped on Thursday, August 26, 2010 at The Art Gallery of Ontario. The interview may be viewed at: www.dartmagazine.com

Ed Rubin: Critics place you with a group of artists known as the neo-expressionists and then they claim that you railed against both minimalism and minimalist's attitudes of the 70s. Is this label even fitting? Is it a fair assessment or were you consciously or unconsciously just doing your thing?

Julian Schnabel: Yes, that's a good question. No! That label is irrelevant in fact. It means nothing. And I wasn't railing against minimalism. In fact I like it.

ER: I do too.

JS: And so it depends on what artist is making it. I like certain works. I think Don Judd is an excellent artist and Dan Flavin and a lot of people that work in that kind of practice. But for me my version of art didn't include it, or those issues were taken care of by them. I

had other issues to address.

ER: You moved to Brownsville, Texas and you learned to surf off the reefs off the Gulf of Mexico.

JS: Well, there's no reefs out there. They're sandbars. But I started surfing in Texas when I was a teenager and then I went down to Mexico and surfed down there. I surfaced in Hawaii. Different places.

ER: Water means a lot to you. I noticed in your paintings, in your sculpture, in your films you are always referring to water. I mean one sculpture is titled after Ahab. You have a 1981 painting titled *The Sea*. *Lou Reed's Berlin*, your concert film, opens and closes with rushing water. Some of your monumental paintings which require ladders, hoists and gallons of paint, you liken to the process to whaling, casting out in the ocean to see what you can get.

JS: Yes, I said that it's like whaling in the sense that you go out and bring back whatever to make the lamps with. It's actually Malcolm Morley that said that, but I thought that it was a good thing.

ER: Then you carried it over to Jean-Dominique Bauby, who feels trapped inside a diving bell and his artistic liberation is accompanied by images of melting icebergs. You even place Bauby in a wheelchair on top of an oil rig which is surrounded by water.

JS: It's not an oil rig. It is a stanchion, in fact. Actually, it is on the beach near the hospital in Bergues and as I was going to the set, the tide had come in and the stanchion was totally under water and on other moment it went out 500 meters and it was on the beach. What a perfect solution for a guy that's on the shores of loneliness, so I put that in the movie and put him



Julian Schnabel, Portrait of Andy Warhol, 1982, oil on velvet, courtesy of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. © 2010 Julian Schnabel. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund and Regents Collections Acquisition Program with matching funds from the Jerome L. Green, Sydney and Frances Lewis and Leonard C. Yaseen Purchase Fund, 1994

in a wheelchair on the stanchion, but it is not an oil rig.

ER: Also in the film *Basquiat* he is given to fantasies of surfing on the ocean.

JS: Yes, the ocean is important to me. The sea is important to me. In fact, there is a picture in this exhibition called *Shoeshine* and I made it in 1975 and the first image that you see in the film *Shoeshine* by Vittorio De Sica is an image of the sea. It's a black and white image of the sea, and as the camera pulls back you realize that there is a little head on the bottom watching a film of the sea, and as the camera keeps going back you realize that they are little heads that are in prison looking at the sea... so they're children in jail looking at the image of freedom.

ER: Well, you also live in Montauk by the water. Am I right?

JS: Yes I do.

ER: In 1987, just a little history, you are quoted as having said that "eventually you will look boring to the art crowd."

JS: Boring to the art crowd?

ER: In one of your interviews.

JS: I don't think that I said that. I don't think that I said that.

ER: Anyway I read it.

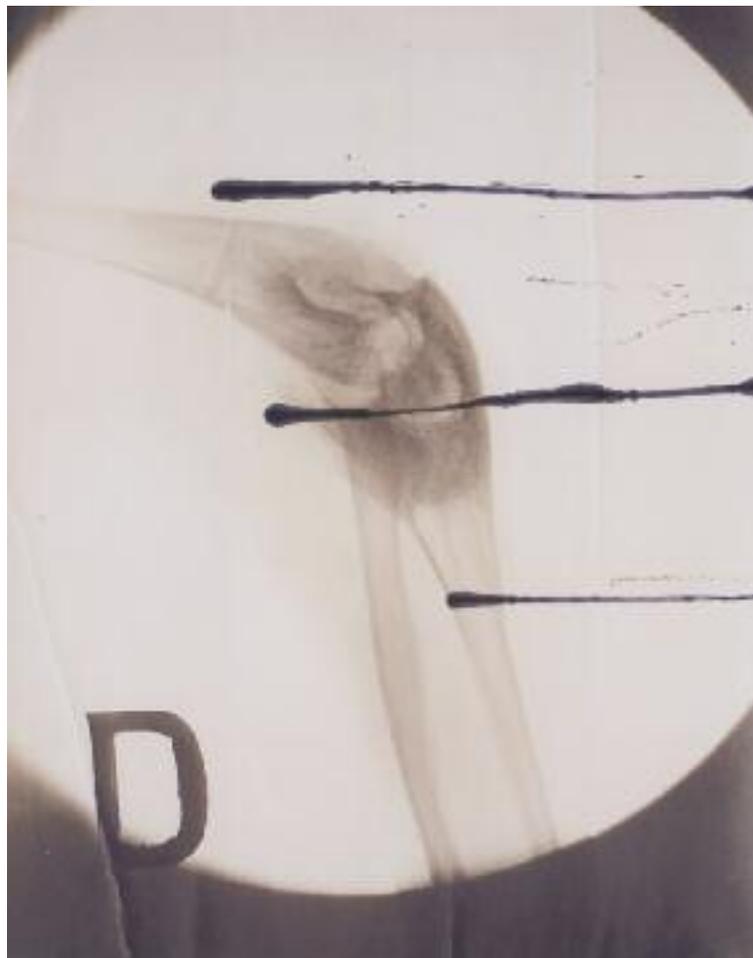
JS: That's OK.

ER: And then at one point you were all the rage, and people said "Well the 80s, you brought in the 80s." In other words you came in with the decade of greed. You had your painting in the film *Wall Street*, etc. They are trying to place you. Then came all these vicious attacks. People would attack you, like Hilton Kramer.

JS: Actually no. Hilton Kramer wrote a great article about my work in 1982. He wrote about Malcolm Morley and me called... I don't remember what it was called, but actually that was very positive.

ER: Well, he did... Didn't he write a catalog essay for you for one of your shows?

JS: No! But what Hilton Kramer did was he wrote some of Charles Saatchi's *Art of Our Time*, that was a catalog of his collection, and Hilton Kramer was one of the writers, but he became more



Julian Schnabel, Unintitled (x-ray), 2008, ink on polyester 148 x 116" Courtesy of Sperone Westwater and Marco Voena. © 2008 Julian Schnabel

conservative as time went on. But actually what he wrote about me was extremely positive.

ER: Well I read a lot... they said a lot of ugly things and I think that they attacked you as a person and not your work. In other words, it was two different things. I was wondering what effect that had on you.

JS: Well how did you feel when you came to the show and you saw the paintings? What was your experience of the show?

ER: Since I wasn't that familiar with your work, although I thought in the last few weeks I've seen a lot of it, I found it awesome. I also wondered why all of

the critics, many of them, everyone, even your TV appearances recently, they would talk to you about your monumental ego, and yet from what I feel you don't have a... I mean you're doing your job, I don't see that. And I am wondering what they're seeing. And I said to myself he's a wonderful son. I know that you had a close relationship with your father which was very beautiful. You took naps with him. You take naps with your son. And you said, "I want to be a good son." One of the things that I found strange is that in everything I read you very rarely talked about your mother. It's a lot about your father. Is there a reason?

JS: Well, I think that in the last part of her life my mother receded quite a bit. When I was a child she was my best friend. And what's interesting that you say that is that I really did make *The Diving Bell and The Butterfly* for my father, who was trapped inside of his body. He was dying of prostate cancer. But my mother, in fact, was president of Hadassah in Brooklyn in 1948, something I didn't know, until my sister, who is eleven and a half years older... I knew that she was the president of Hadassah but I didn't know she was the first president of Hadassah.

ER: The first!

JS: Yes! 1948 was the birth of the state of Israel. So this film that I just made *Miral* is definitely for my mother, so my mother is getting her moment in the sun.

ER: Oh really! You said in one place that your parents were married for 60 years and who wouldn't want to buy into that. I was surprised that you're an intellectual...I didn't know anything about you and that you are so smart and well read. In fact, I think I remember hearing you quote Naguib Mahfouz. Were you reading from his book at the Dennis Hopper show that you curated at MOCA in Los Angeles?

JS: No! No! I was reading from Amin Maalouf's book *Leon El Africano*, but that's a great writer.

ER: By the way, the poem that your father wrote. Beautiful.

JS: It's a great poem.

ER: It's a great poem. Every bit as good as *Howl*. So anyhow, you were attacked viciously by people who compared you to Picasso and would bring up Walt Whitman, I believe America's greatest poet. Do you feel that you share things with these to people? I mean other people seem to think so.

JS: Well I love when Walt Whitman says, "It's OK if I contradict myself. I contain multitudes." So I think if you look at the show, there are a lot of different versions of what a painting can be, and obviously at a certain moment there is a part of my brain that's a storyteller, so I started making

films also. But one thing is when somebody comes to your studio and you have one painting and then a group of pictures and you say "OK I'm going to pull this one out and show you something and it looks radically different" and they go "Wait a minute. Let me try and wrap my head around that." And then they come over another time and you're not making a painting but your showing them a film and then they say "What happened to the paintings? I mean, why are you jumping ahead so quickly? Let me catch up to you." In a way, everybody's got their own trajectory and their own life to live and they do not have time to figure necessarily all the intricacies and interests in everybody, and if you don't couture your work to please or placate the audience, that could be a problem in the short term. In the long term, it doesn't matter because I think an artist works at making their work, and ultimately what is satisfying is doing the work, not having people agree with you. Now, maybe on occasion when I was younger, the unwillingness to be more social in some kind of way could be seen as arrogance. Or saying no to certain things, or not wanting to be co-opted in certain ways, and obviously when you're young... I remember Jean-Michel being interviewed once and somebody was asking him and he said, "You know this was the product of a young mind," and you know, when he was saying this he was only 25, but it came out like he was 20. But he was so smart, that one time I was looking at a painting of his and he said, "What do you think?" and I said, "If I did it..." He said, "This is my version." And I thought "Now that's smart." I thought about that a lot. But until you do... you know sometimes obviously we are insensitive when we are younger. For example, there was a guy named Rockets Redglare. Did you ever know Rockets? 'Cause he used to do this comedy show in the East Village.

ER: No! The name sounds familiar.

JS: He was a big fat guy. He's actually in the movie *Basquiat* as the drug dealer.

And Rockets was walking near Grammercy Park and I saw him one day, and I said, "Where are you going?" And he said "I am going to Jean-Michel and he's going to make a painting of me." So I said, "I'll make a painting of you. Just come over to my studio." Just like that. Now I didn't mean anything by it. It was unconscious. I didn't mean to insult Jean. The guy came over. I made the painting, but his feelings were hurt. Michel's feelings were hurt by that. You know, you're young and unconscious. I was older than him, but I was still young enough to be stupid. When I made the movie, I had a scene where Gary Oldman comes in and sees Rene Ricard, and he says to him "What are you doing?" He says "Oh, ya know, do you want to come over and I'll make a portrait of you?" And he leaves Jean-Michel's studio, and then you see Jeffrey Wright [the actor] write – 'cause he was making a painting for Rene – and it said, "Rene, something, 711" or whatever it was, and he basically crosses it out and you understand what constitutes the history of marks in painting sometimes. It's something that was helpful in making a movie about a guy that writes words on his paintings or writes things that people can recognize, 'cause if somebody crosses that out, you can go, "Ah, he crossed out his name because the guy left his studio." So you can see that Jean-Michel's feelings were hurt, and maybe that was a way of answering Jean, even post death, just saying to him "I'm sorry."

Julian Schnabel with Jeffrey Wright and Benicio Del Toro on the set of Basquiat. Courtesy of the artist. © 2010 Julian Schnabel

