

BILANZ

I Hate Instagram

by Brigitte Ulmer
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Julian Schnabel, the New York painter and award winning film director, talks about the magic of pictures, the Engadin valley, repentant curators, and his star-gallerist son, Vito, and the craziness of the art market.

One of your colleagues, Chinese Artist Xu Zhen, said recently that today's artists spend most of their time as sales people. Do you agree with him?

If he sees it that way, then that's his experience. My primary concern is the experience of painting. That's it. I like the relationship I have with the objects and the canvas, as well as the interaction between different materials. It opens a door for me, which I can disappear through. Within my painting I can change in any way I like, and I take something from that for myself.

But surely you can't be completely indifferent to what ultimately happens to your paintings after they are finished.

Clearly, when a work is finished, it's sold to the world. You (as the artist) try to give a context to the work so that people can understand the work. However, I must admit: the older I get, the less I expect people to understand my paintings.

The verdicts of critics and curators are not important to you?

Over the years I have had many negative reviews from critics, but consider this: many people change their minds. The curator, Rudi Fuchs did not vote for me in 1992 for the Documenta. But over 20 years later, he wrote in an essay that his decision to not vote for JS was a mistake. The critics at the New York Times awarded my exhibit with Larry Gagosian in New York two years ago. She couldn't have written something better had I paid her for it. It did however take 30 years until she passed positive judgment. Sometimes the cavalry arrives late, sometimes never.

What do you take away from that?

In art, one cannot have a short-sighted horizon. Art and life do not always match, but artists must keep doing what they do (create art). Young artists who suddenly acquire fame and have success in the market run the risk of becoming distracted and losing themselves.

You were catapulted to art-stardom at a very young age, until the art market-bubble popped in the '90s. These years, things have been calmer. How was that for you?

I earn more money today from my paintings than I did in the '80s.

How difficult is it to keep an art career go through thick and thin?

When one is an artist, it is critical to make art regardless of what reactions the artist receives. There was a time when people were no longer interested in Andy Warhol, but he simply continued to produce art. Today, every one of his works is priceless. Vermeer was finally discovered 300 years after his death. One must simply continue forward.

In the mid-'90s you began to make films (ex. Basquiat). You received better reviews as a film director than as a painter. Does that bother you?

Films are more open and easier to understand than paintings. But ultimately, I didn't like being designated as primarily a film director. My true power lies in my paintings.

Let us talk about your paintings, then. Your trademark is to include found objects such as broken plates on huge canvases. How do you pick out the materials of your paintings?

There are people who see money wherever they look. Like Christopher Walken in the film *At Close Range*. In it, he plays a thief who steals tractors and at one point says, "There are people who see these and see tractors. I see only money." When I look around I see pictures / paintings everywhere. Whether I'm here in S-chanf (Alpine town in Switzerland) looking at the mountains, or at wherever glancing on neglected things on the floor or a sign on the wall, I see pictures / paintings where others might see nothing.



GERN IM ENGADIN
Julian Schnabel zu Gast in
der Villa Flor in S-chanf; im
Hintergrund ein Prototyp
einer neuen Werkserie.

Then it seems that everything you do is from your gut feelings. But you must have criteria for selection.

I don't think it's possible to separate your gut feelings from your intellect. Recently I painted on an old wallpaper

from 1850, which I liked very much. It shows George Washington at the end of the American Revolutionary war in the moment that he accepts the surrender of the British. My daughter found more of it at an auction for me. Then I took a stuffed goat, photographed it and set it in the middle of the countryside and made a picture from it.

George Washington and a Goat?

My pictures / paintings function as temporal maps. The photos that sit next to each other appear in different forms but are on one level. Everything exists simultaneously.

Is this attitude also incorporated in your movies?

Painting is similar to film as both work around a rectangular, a frame, and what's outside of the frame. A picture is a piece of a large whole. It is the shadow of the outside world. The picture / painting contains something (real) but also contains something that is not visible in the picture / painting, that you as a viewer takes with you. As a painter, you present the viewer a stimulus that influences him (the viewer).

Recently you've been critical of the entire art business. You've said that the art world has become a world of Megalomaniacs and a zillion art dealers, and is a bluff. What did you mean by that?

I don't think I used the word "bluff," but today there are certainly many people who are part of the whole scene because art is cool, but know nothing about it. On the other hand there are some wonderful art dealers and I've been lucky to have the support of one of them.

You mean the Swiss, Bruno Bischofberger, your gallerist?

Exactly. We have not always seen eye to eye on all things, but he has changed my life. He is a genie in uncovering things (and people) and has a curiosity, an engagement, and a depth that is not so easy to find. When he came to my studio for the first time in the '70s and paid me \$10,000 for a painting, it was as if he gifted me a Cadillac.

In your film "Basquiat" you portray Bischofberger as a seemingly ambivalent person.

It's true, I showed him as a machiavellian character, but I've also depicted others in this way. I was not always a nice guy. The film is fiction, an amalgamation, it's my version of the things.

Today many artists market themselves via Instagram and sell directly from their studios.

I hate Instagram and everything that's on it, including myself. I'm a caveman (old timer). I like contact, a personal touch. You can sell a picture / painting on Instagram, but on Instagram you can't really see a picture / painting.

You are therefore still for the old system of galleries.

Yes, gallerists are important for the artist. Good and big gallerists are such that they are really dedicated to the art. That's what Bruno Bischofberger does. Exactly how René Block did in the '70s when he was dedicated to Beuys. My son, Vito, who just opened a gallery in St. Moritz, has this temperament, a way of speaking with people about art; he doesn't talk about money with them, he doesn't come out of the business-field. He grew up with artists. It's not simply about numbers, about reputation or the like, or to make a pick of who's currently "hot", it's about a human relationship.

Do you find St. Moritz to be a good town for art?

St. Moritz is not a small town in the middle of nowhere. St. Moritz is a global thing. We no longer live in the age of the covered wagon. People fly to St. Moritz from all over the world. The place for discourse about art is at the Engadin Art Summit, E.A.T, in Zuoz. In St. Moritz you find the people who many artists around the world want to sell their art to. I got to know St. Moritz through Bruno Bischofberger and worked in his studio here. In the Engadin one finds timelessness where one can be entirely surrounded by nature. I like it very much.

There seems to currently be a massive appetite for art. What do you attribute this to?

Art is a substitute for religion as well as a good investment. People have realized that art is a commodity. The price of Picasso continues to rise. So do the prices of my works.

What is your record price up to this point?

remains quiet

No false modesty.

My paintings are still too cheap. The Museum of Modern Art bought a painting from 1979 from me for \$1.25 million and it really isn't much for that painting. When I sold it for the first time in 1979, it cost \$1500. A couple years later I paid \$90,000 to have it back and had it for 30 years. I could've held on to it longer, but I thought, the Museum

of Modern Art is not a bad place for one of my paintings.

Especially since the Museum of Modern Art practically ignored it.

The art world likes to categorize artists into decades. Then you become the artist of the '80s or '90s and then are hacked away. But artists cannot be pigeonholed into particular decades. Warhol is significant for the outgoing 20th as well as the 21st century. When one masters something, then there is something timeless. It is something internal. We are speaking of external things, but for me it's an internal matter.

Do you feel something different in film than you do when painting?

With a film, I look to tell a story. The images in my paintings have influenced my films.

What did your painting bring to film?

I've always been a film buff. My first film, *Basquiat*, was a kind of bailout situation. When my friend Jean-Michel Basquiat, the painter, died, someone who wanted to make a film about him came to me. I gave him money for the research, but after some time I realized it wouldn't be any good. So I decided to take the project in my own hands. Until then, I had never held a (film) camera in my hand. But I knew the subject matter. Dennis Hopper, who plays Bruno Bischofberger in the film, said to me, that it appeared to him that I'd been making films for the past forty years.

It's expensive to produce a film. As a film-novice, how did you find the money?

The budget for *Basquiat* was \$3.6M. A third of it was my own money, and the rest I guaranteed with my paintings. People had advised me to not invest any of my own money, but had I not done it, the film would never have been created.

A financial risk.

That is my style to live. In New York City, I built a building that has place for 20 apartments, but it holds only five. I didn't build it with a business interest. Tom Waits once sang: "Money's just something to throw off the back of a train."

You were born into a relatively modest family and now live as a wealthy man in a seven story Venetian palace

in downtown New York and in Montauk. What attitude brought you this far in life?

I don't know. It's a wonder. But look, I don't consider my success from the economic perspective. Success to me means that I can preserve my integrity and autonomy. That I don't make art in order to sell it. My success is that I didn't have to sell my soul.

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Julian Schnabel (64) came to fame in the late '70s, supported by Swiss Gallerist Bruno Bischofberger as the main representative of neo-expressionism. His trademarks were large-format canvases, and the broken plates, sides of truck trailers, and sails that he painted on. From the mid-'90s he explored film, directing *Basquiat* (1996), *Before Night Falls* (2000), and *Miral* (2010). He won the Golden Globe for Best Director for *Schmetterling und Taucherglocke* [Butterfly and the Diving Bell] (2007).