

ARTNEWS

'Julian Paints Before He Even Starts to Paint': Max Hollein and Julian Schnabel Open Monumental Show in San Francisco

by Cynthia Durcanin
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Max Hollein and Julian Schnabel with a painting by Schnabel at the Legion of Honor.. Courtesy Legion of Honor

Julian Schnabel's first major West Coast show in 30 years, which opened on Thursday at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, begins outside the building, with a site-specific installation of six new monumentally sized abstract paintings. Each measuring 24 feet square, they are on display in the museum's open-air courtyard alongside three of Schnabel's sculptures from 1982 and a permanent museum resident, Rodin's *Thinker*. The overall effect transforms the quintessential Neo-Classical structure into a work of contemporary art itself.

"The whole exhibition started with an invitation to come here, to help me with an idea—how to artistically interact not so much with a white cube gallery space, but with a

building, with something that's already charged with a certain history," said Max Hollein, the director and CEO of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, who curated the show, and who was just hired to be director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Titled *Symbols of Actual Life*, the exhibition continues in the museum's Rodin galleries, with three rarely seen series of paintings that span the past 30 years. The works, according to the museum, represent Schnabel's response to the physical space and (this is an artist who never thinks small) the themes of desire, love, suffering, death, and redemption that pervade the Legion of Honor's collection.

JULIAN SCHNABEL

“They seem to have a surprise to them,” Schnabel said, while ambling about, examining some of his pieces, which include all sorts of unusual materials. “There’s something in them that you can’t get any other way. The surface is already a receiver, they’re just waiting for paintings to be made on them.” He was wearing jaunty nautical attire and his trademark tinted glasses, and he seemed pleased.

While traveling in the Lagunillas area of southern Mexico, he said, he was drawn to a type of sack linen used to cover market stalls that had been altered by hours of exposure to the sun. Standing in an empty gallery minutes before the opening, he pointed to the three paintings that grew out of his find. “This beautiful lavender color with this curve was made before I even touched it,” he said. “Ellsworth Kelly would have to do that and it wouldn’t look like that either because he’d do it in a very clean way.” He added, wryly, “My mother once said to Andy Warhol, ‘Your paintings are so neat, I wish Julian’s paintings could be neat like yours.’ And Andy said, ‘Oh, I’m trying to get mine more messy.’ ”

Describing the interplay between his paintings and the Rodin galleries, Schnabel motioned toward a large amorphous shape he applied with gesso onto found canvas and said, “That’s a very idiosyncratic piece of material and shape with a bunch of torn scars on it and drawing that’s kind of hermetic. It looks really nice in this pristine room with these beautiful Rodin sculptures. You start looking at that painting and you see all these white shapes and it takes you to some other place. There’s a marriage going on here, and that’s cool.”

Later that evening at the museum, Schnabel chatted onstage with Hollein about the inspiration for *The Sky of Illimitableness*, a series of three large-format inkjet and oil pieces on polyester that prominently feature images of a goat. He began them in 2012 as a tribute to the late artist Mike Kelley, who used stuffed animals in many of his best-known works.

“The starting point was a piece of Dufour wallpaper from the 1850s that depicted George Washington and his soldiers,” he said. “I took him out and put the stuffed goat in.” He later added a stuffed rabbit to represent misshapen horns, and then superimposed the image on the wallpaper. The larger-than-life goat, he said, is a rather surreal nod to Velázquez’s *A White Horse* (1635).

“I like to engage in the dissonance or dyslexia between those two things,” Schnabel said, of the dynamic between the wallpaper and the goat.



Installation views of *Julian Schnabel: Symbols of Actual Life* at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. Courtesy Legion of Honor

For paintings from his *Jane Birkin* series (1990), he used sailcloth that he acquired from sailors in Egypt and shaped into felucca sails. Their boat’s name happened to be Jane, which brought to mind for him the famed singer and actress, and he was moved to paint her name onto the sail along with abstract marks.

JULIAN SCHNABEL

Interviewed before the opening, Hollein spoke of how such found materials play a critical role in Schnabel's artistic process. "Julian paints before he even starts to paint," he said.

The two have known each other for a long time, having met in the late 1990s, when Hollein was an assistant curator at the Guggenheim Museum in New York and Schnabel was preparing an exhibition for the Guggenheim Bilbao. The curator was struck by the artist's openness. "He talked to me. He wanted to share his thoughts," he said. "At the time I was a young guy and I was impressed to be taken seriously by him."

Hollein's star continued to rise, and in 2001 he was named director of the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, where he curated a Schnabel retrospective in 2004.

For Hollein, the current show is one of the final chapters in his brief but impressive two-year tenure in San Francisco. He will preside over one more opening in June, *Truth and Beauty: The Pre-Raphaelites and the Old Masters*, before taking up his new job in New York.

"I think he's really prepared," Schnabel said. "I have this special relationship with him, but I don't think I'm the only one that does. I think a lot of artists do. I think he has a deep relationship with antiquity and with living, working artists. And he's not just an administrator—he has a love for art and artists and you feel it."