ARTNEWS

by Bill Powers
Winter 2017

Q&A *Julian Schnabel*

BY BILL POWERS
PORTRAIT BY LOUISE KUGELBERG

Bill Powers: We're looking at new plate paintings in your outdoor studio. One narrative appears to be a woman on the beach wrestling a giant lobster.
Julian Schnabel: It's from an image I found at the Fish Farm in Napeague taped up on their refrigerator.

BP: Two other paintings are cropped landscapes with flowers. Does working outside have a direct impact on the imagery?
JS: Well, I can turn around, and I'm confronted by nature. You see all the holes between the branches and the way the light hits the leaves. You realize it's not just one green. It's a million different versions of green and the organized chaos of nature.

BP: To me, your new flower paintings hover between the feeling of a Japanese garden and Monet's water lilies.
JS: These flowers are in the graveyard where van Gogh is buried. The black and white marks are from the wall behind it, the little stones. You don't see the sky, which is interesting, just the roses inside this enclosed space.

BP: And then Tim Roth played him in *Vincent & Theo* (1990).
JS: Which starts with an auction scene where his painting goes for $36 million, as if that justifies his life somehow.

BP: Have you ever heard the theory that Gauguin actually cut off van Gogh's ear and that's why he split town so soon after?
JS: If you were living with a guy who just cut his ear off, you might leave town, too.

BP: I'm reminded now that one of the opening lines in your Basquiat movie is "everybody wants to get on the van Gogh boat."
JS: "There's no trip so horrible that someone won't take it. The idea of the unrecognized genius slaving away in his garret is a deliciously foolish one. We must credit the life of Vincent van Gogh for really sending this myth into orbit." That was written by Rene Ricard.

BP: As you get older, do your ideas about spirituality change?
JS: When Héctor Babenco died last month, I wrote an obituary about him in the *New York Times*.

> "If you don't feel good, just slip on Marlon Brando's boxing gloves for a little while."

BP: Does that convey a sense of entrapment?
JS: I wouldn't call it claustrophobia, but they are relentless in a way where there's no escape.

BP: When you visit van Gogh's grave, do you get a spirit hit from that proximity?
JS: I've been thinking about making a movie about van Gogh. I've got about sixty pages. I'm working with Jean-Claude Carrière. I think it's interesting to see what van Gogh was thinking about. He would go into a museum and act as if no one else was there. He'd walk right up to a painting and block other people's view. He didn't care.

BP: Paintings by which artists?
JS: It's obvious he was looking at Goya and Velázquez and Rubens and Franz Hals. When you look at light hitting someone's face, it's just one mark. He understood that paintings have to be done quickly as opposed to Gauguin, who believed in planning everything out. If you look at the straw hat in Saint Sulpice, it looks like a van Gogh hat, but it was painted by Delacroix. I'm sure he saw that hat.

BP: There have been a couple of van Gogh biopics already.
JS: I love Kirk Douglas, but that movie (*Lust for Life*, 1956) was terrible. It's just one cliché after another. He's crying all the time.

BP: That distillation of remembrances can be a curious process.
JS: There's a new documentary Pappi Corsicato made about me that hasn't come out yet. He did a great job, but there are other people talking about me and you realize that history is not true. Everyone has their own version of it.

BP: Does that make you question your own sanity?
JS: It's just funny how people remember things that never happened. My daughter Lola is in the documentary talking about these sculptures of mine in St. Moritz and how they were dropped out of a helicopter. Or my sister telling a story about my Uncle Charlie, who was already dead at the time it allegedly happened. People imagine things.

BP: I'm fascinated by all the moments lost to history. For instance, I remember being at Pace Gallery for your opening in 2004, and seeing Philip Seymour Hoffman there. I asked him how he was handling the news of Richard Avedon's passing, only to realize he hadn't heard about it yet . . . so, in a moment of shock, he rushed outside.
JS: It was amazing to know Phil. I made four paintings for him in Mexico after he died. We always wanted to work together. He was going to play a role in [my 2010 film] *Miral*, but the timing didn't work out. The first time he got a little money, Phil bought two paintings of mine, which was a real compliment.

OPPOSITE Julian Schnabel photographed in Paris, France on October 20, 2016.

BP: I also heard a story that when John Currin was a grad student at Yale, you went as a visiting artist and, during the studio critiques, you told him that his work (he was making abstract paintings at the time) had something hard to find in painting: they had poverty.
JS: I remember going to Yale, and all the artists had submitted one painting each, to which I said, "How the hell can I tell anything about a person's work from one painting? If I'm going to help, I need to see where you're going." They all went back to their studios and brought two more pieces. So now all of a sudden I'm looking at three hundred paintings and out of all of them, the one I chose to single out for discussion was John Currin's.

BP: Do you believe that spaces and objects house memory?
JS: Well, I live in a Stanford White house in Montauk. The details of what goes on, the choices he made about ceilings or walls are just so human. It's not erased by Sheetrock or people trying to do something modern or practical afterward. I'm pretty allergic to most modern architecture. When I built my house in the city, I wanted it to look like Venice.

BP: Your indoor pool in the city reminds me of the pool at San Simeon. In fact, you share another passion with William Randolph Hearst in that he loved tapestries, because he thought of them as the headlines of yesteryear.
JS: All these things transport you to other places. The way paintings bring you into their present, even if they were made three hundred years ago. It's very easy to get bogged down in the ordinariness of the everyday. So much activity in life can be like static on the radio. You want some visual feed to make you feel alive or engaged. The Ahab sculpture I have on my front lawn does that when I'm sitting on my porch. It jars the rational.

BP: You mentioned Stanford White, whom I always thought would be a fantastic subject for a movie, the way he was shot at Madison Square Garden for sleeping with another man's wife.
JS: Well, that's in the movie *Ragtime* (1981), where Norman Mailer played Stanford White. It's a good movie.

ABOVE *Divan*, 1979, is on view at Aspen Art Museum show "Julian Schnabel Plate Paintings 1978–86" until February 19, 2017.

BP: Is it true that you own a pair of boxing gloves that belonged to Marlon Brando?
JS: Yes. I just wanted to put my hands in them. If you don't feel good, just slip on Marlon Brando's boxing gloves for a little while. They're very talismanic. I don't wear them often enough probably. Have you ever seen the documentary *Listen to Me Marlon* (2015), where he speaks from the grave? It's amazing . . . and heartbreaking. Or have you ever seen *Missouri Breaks* (1976)?

BP: I haven't.
JS: It's a very interesting idiosyncratic movie. Jack Nicholson and Marlon Brando in a cowboy movie. Arthur Penn directed it. I'll lend it to you.

BP: I only recently watched the Wim Wenders movie, *The American Friend* (1977), where Dennis Hopper plays a cowboy-type art dealer abroad.
JS: Dennis is great in it. Bruno Ganz is terrific, too.

BP: I find that artists often fall into two different camps. Someone like Richard Prince will skip his own opening, especially if it's out of town, because he feels like, "hey, I made the work. Isn't that enough?" But then, conversely, Jeff Koons feels a responsibility to contextualize the work with his presence.
JS: I figure while I'm alive, I go. Also, I like to hang my paintings. I like hanging other people's work, too. In fact, I'm hanging all the Clyfford Still paintings in Denver for a show next January.

BP: At his museum there?
JS: Yes, they're letting me hang the whole museum. I selected thirty big paintings and thirty small paintings.

BP: Do you think about how he would want the work to be shown?
JS: Well, I knew Clyfford. He came to my studio once and I always felt a kinship with him.

BP: Did you learn something new about him?
JS: They're just so odd and unique, these Grand Canyons he painted, the ravines. It's like Thelonious Monk or Albert Ayler, he's really out there.

BP: You were saying that Still's use of brown is way more interesting than if he'd chosen black.
JS: Because you're looking for the darkest value in a painting, the heaviest element. A guy once said to me, "Try to make a black painting with bright colors." And I thought, what? Or when Ornette Coleman said to me, "Can you sing 'Apartment #9,' only without the melody?" It took me a minute to wrap my mind around that. What Still did with brown, I'm not sure people understand it even now. It's like picking the ugliest shirt in your wardrobe to put on and then making a big deal about it. Brown is less obvious than black and it ups the ante into seeing his sensibility.

BP: Do you try to find the representational aspects in his work? For instance, the Still painting we look at now is like an impossibly configured castle with a tiny door.
JS: Or the Le Corbusier church? But, no, I don't want to think about that at all. And as soon as he sees it becoming too much of a boat or another shape, he changes direction. He made such excellent decisions about light and dark. In some of his work I see Marsden Hartley or even El Greco, or Philip Guston's "Ku Klux Klan" paintings. Or I'll see another Still painting from 1945 and think of Sigmar Polke's *Moderne Kunst*. Modern art! And then you factor in Still's pronouncements about not wanting to make bourgeois paintings pandering to rich people.

BP: Is that why you don't really see his paintings in collectors' homes?
JS: I think at some point he opted out of the game and stepped into eternity.

BP: Are we too precious about chronology in a way where it colors the artist's work? For example, in the Jackson Pollock show at MoMA you saw him abandon the drip paintings toward the end of his life and almost revert back to what he was searching for as a young painter.
JS: I go to shows and walk in backward all the time. The Matisse show, for instance, it was much more interesting to see the last paper cutouts at the beginning and then see the early work at the end. You're not waiting to find out what will be, instead you're tracing things back to the seed.

BP: In your own work, you have been on a big violet kick lately, is that fair to say?
JS: Yeah, for what . . . the last 20 years? One year I bought all the purple in New York City. Actually it was mineral violet. It seems to be a very succinct color. Purple covers a lot of ground.

BP: Often in your paintings I'll notice a big white gesture that reminds me of an abstracted Artschwager blip or a dried riverbed. Do you have language in the studio for these recurring symbols?
JS: I think of it as an intervention upon the temporality of what's already there. It's a way of pinpointing something. For instance, the old map of Montauk you gave me this morning. The previous owner drew red marks around different areas of the coastline that stand out. You realize that someone else touched that map at another moment well after it was made. And I think when you look at my paintings with the white marks you see that, a complicity in what already existed.

BP: You often work on the road, be it Spain or Mexico or Australia. Is there a foreign quality that you hope to capture in your painting?
JS: Yes, traveling has been a big part of my work. I remember when someone complained about my defacing Japanese kabuki backdrops. And I thought, "If you go somewhere and don't bring anything back with you, what's the point of going?" Whether it's something you bring back in your head or something physical. For all the materiality of things, ultimately it's about something invisible . . . it's about a feeling. It's about traveling, either geographically or in time.

"Julian Schnabel: Plate Paintings 1978–86" is on view at Aspen Art Museum until February 19, 2017.