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Don't Hate the Player

New Perspectives on Julian Schnabel



Artist Julian Schnabel. Photo credit: Horst Ossinger/Dpa/Alamy Live News

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A new generation of artists emerged in New York during the late 1970s and early 1980s in tandem with a burgeoning market for contemporary art. In many ways, Julian Schnabel personified the excesses of the period and his art epitomized the aesthetic. More than three decades later, the market remains fixated on his work from the 1980s. But there are signs of a shift as museums and galleries increasingly focus upon Schnabel's other bodies of work.

"It's wrong to define Julian as a 1980s painter," says [Max Hollein](#), the director and chief executive of the [Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco](#), which is planning a major site-specific [Schnabel project](#) next year (21 April-5 August). The new paintings in

the show “might be the culmination of my entire painterly practice since 1977”, Schnabel says. “This is as far as I could go, and as far as I can currently take painting—this week.”



Artist installation proposal of “Julian Schnabel” at the Legion of Honor. Courtesy the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco

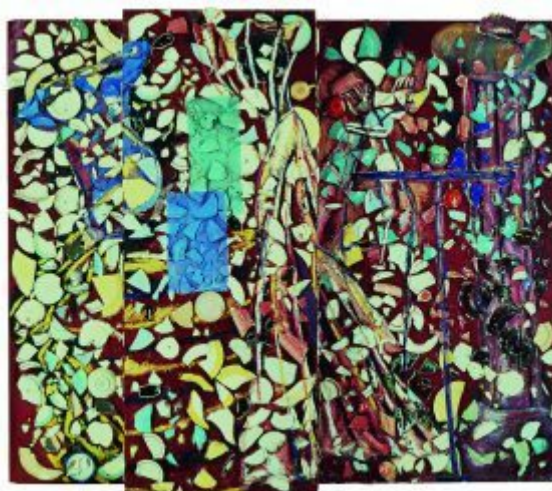
Hollein says that “people tend to have pre-formed opinions” about Schnabel without having had proper exposure to his work. “Perception of Julian’s work is formed in a different way than, say, Gerhard Richter,” he says.

Meteoric success

Schnabel arrived on the scene larger than life. He had his [first solo show](#) in New York with Mary Boone Gallery in 1979 at the age of 27. Two years later he was included in “A New Spirit in Painting”, the [major exhibition](#) at London’s Royal Academy organized by [Norman Rosenthal](#). Schnabel’s work was shown alongside established artists such as Andy Warhol, Francis Bacon, Cy Twombly and Willem de Kooning.

That same year Schnabel had simultaneous exhibitions at Mary Boone’s and Leo Castelli’s galleries—both sold out before they opened. Schnabel was the first artist to join the legendary Castelli gallery in more than ten years. “It represented a sea change,” art advisor Allan Schwartzman says. “The dominant art before that, Minimalism and Post-Minimalism, was restrained, rule-bound and rigorous in form. Julian blasted that wide open. His art was a total explosion of emotion and expression of color, imagery and objects. Painting became a living, breathing and exciting event.”

Meanwhile profound shifts were also taking place in the market. Whereas previously there had been a limited market for the work of young artists, now demand for certain key figures far outweighed supply, causing a rapidly increasing spread between primary and secondary market prices.



Julian Schnabel, *Notre Dame* (1979) © Julian Schnabel Studio

Rocketing prices

Just four years after his first show, in 1983, a work by Schnabel came to auction. This caused a stir not only because the plate-painting, *Notre Dame* (1979) doubled its \$50,000 high estimate, selling for \$93,500; nor because it was significantly more expensive than Schnabel's primary market prices (which were between \$25,000 and \$60,000); nor because this was almost ten times the price of work by Schnabel's peers (which cost around \$10,000 at the time); but also because it was so rare for such recent work to come to auction in the first place.

(Also unusual was the role the artist himself had played in the sale. Schnabel had heard that the Soho dealer Annina Nosei planned to auction his plate-painting *The Patients and the Doctors* (1978), and invoked his right of first refusal, trading it for *Notre Dame*.)

Over the next couple of years, demand for Neo-Expressionism grew, prices went up and the art became even bigger and bolder. There was a sense of excess in the air, borne out of the Reagan-era focus on free markets.

Inevitable slump



Julian Schnabel, *The Patients and the Doctors* (1978) © Julian Schnabel Studio. Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

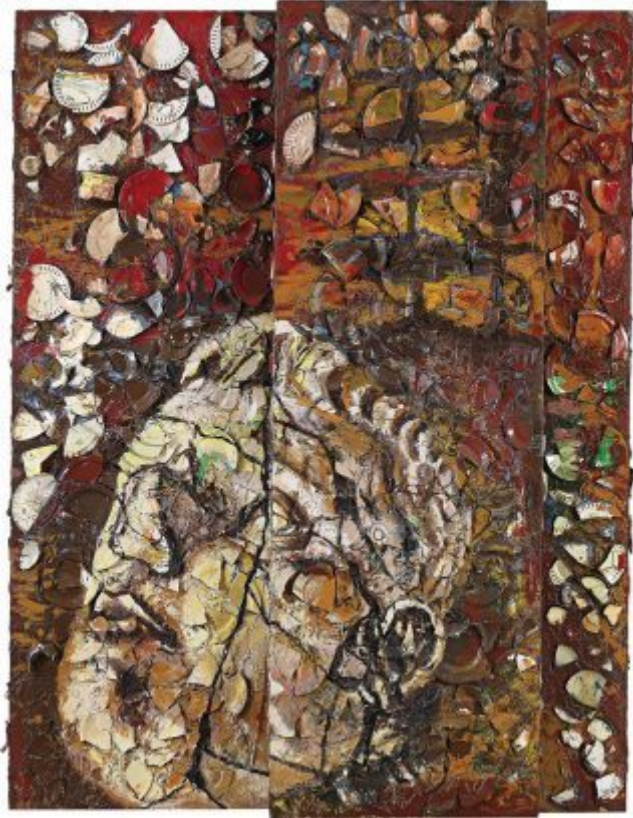
But by the end of the 1980s the social climate changed dramatically. An entire generation of young creative people were dying of AIDS and the art popular in the early 1980s began “to look a little grand and self-indulgent when compared with artists like Robert Gober and Charles Ray, whose intentionally small-scale, intimate and handmade work ended up defining the later part of the 1980s”, Schwartzman says.

Meanwhile, the art market—which had appeared impervious to the effects of the 1987 stock market collapse—had fallen sharply into a deep recession by 1990. The record prices fetched during the 1980s boom were only a memory.

The artists most associated with the 1980s highs, including Schnabel, Anselm Kiefer and Robert Longo, remained out of fashion for much of the subsequent decades. Instead, market demand consolidated around artists that had been ignored at the time, such as Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine and Jeff Koons. Schnabel's auction records through that period show a spotty and uneven market.

Signs of recovery

But over the past few years there have been signs of renewed demand for work by that group of “1980s artists”, including Schnabel, whose top three auction prices have been set since 2013. Interestingly, they were all plate paintings made between 1980 and 1983: *Self Portrait by a Red Window* (1982) which sold for \$905,000 at Sotheby's in 2013; *800 Blows (in 3 parts)* (1983)—the first Schnabel painting to sell for more than a million dollars when it totaled \$1.2m at Sotheby's in 2014; and *What Once Denoted Chaos is Now a Matter of Record* (1981) which sold last year at Christie's for \$965,000.



Julian Schnabel, *800 Blows* (1983) © Julian Schnabel Studio
 Courtesy Sotheby's Inc.

The question is whether the market will accept the depth and range of Schnabel's practice and his importance beyond the plate paintings. Indeed, while those works represent an interesting development in rupturing the surface of the canvas to create a three-dimensional object, other artists have been most influenced by Schnabel's work from the late 1970s and the 1990s, Hollein says.

According to the curator [Alison Gingeras](#): "Once you enter into a deeper understanding of Julian's universe and the way he makes things, you realize that—like most great painters—he has an incredible depth of knowledge about the history of art that really informs his own work." She counts the linoleum, the velvet and the wax paintings as fantastic bodies of early work and also rates the shaped canvases, the pink paintings he recently made in Mexico as well as paintings that use words. "His figurative paintings are equally surprising and interesting," she adds.

Loyal support

Yet, some haven't yet been able move beyond the Schnabel they know and he remains one of the most polarizing artists to have emerged in the past 50 years. "There are really smart people who hate Julian but can't express why," says Tim Blum, the co-founder of [Blum & Poe](#) gallery, which works with Schnabel. "They can't eliminate the structure, storyline or noise around him."

Blum & Poe is one of several organizations pushing to expand the understanding of Schnabel's work, showing a group of abstract landscape paintings from the mid-1990s that had not been seen publicly before at [Frieze Masters](#) last month. "Certain people came into the booth and were completely in awe—art historians, curators, museum directors and in some cases collectors," Blum says, adding that of the suite of eight paintings, which ranged in price from \$325,000 to \$525,000, two sold at the fair. That, according to Blum's expectations, "was perfect. It's like chipping away at a big block of ice".



Installation view of Julian Schnabel's work at Blum & Poe booth at Frieze Masters (2017) © Julian Schnabel Studio. Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo. Photo credit: Andrea Rossetti

While the market may still need some convincing, Schnabel has consistently enjoyed longstanding institutional support—which is fitting for an artist who has pursued painting, with dedication, throughout his entire adult life. He has regularly exhibited in major galleries and important museums around the world since the late 1970s. Recently he has been showing with even greater frequency. Since 2014 he has been the subject of 20 international exhibitions, many of which focused on lesser-known bodies of work.

The needle is moving, Gingeras says. “Julian has always had support from a loyal group of people, but they were dated to the time in which he emerged. Now that circle is expanding,” she says. “More people are now engaged in a serious re-reading of Julian’s significance.”