

# Julian Schnabel retrospective in Toronto: Art, celebrity, and the market

Lee Parsons

20 December 2010

*Julian Schnabel: Art and Film*, Art Gallery of Ontario: September 1, 2010-January 2, 2011

This autumn's exhibition of Julian Schnabel's work at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto—whose opening coincided with the screening of his latest film, *Miral*, at the 2010 Toronto film festival—attempts to look at the relationship between the controversial artist's paintings and his films. Offering a substantial sampling of his work in each medium, the show thereby illustrates a certain breadth in his interests and abilities, but also some surprising limitations.

Schnabel is an artist who makes a virtue out of being indefinable and eclectic, shifting his style and medium as a matter of course. Despite a prolific output over three decades, during the course of which he has produced some exceptional images, such as "Painting for MJ and BB," which have a lasting impact, one feels in general a marked lack of seriousness in his work.

Various worthwhile subjects are taken up or touched upon, but rarely developed or worked through. This is presented as a strength by AGO curator of contemporary art David Moos, who observes in the exhibition catalogue, "An overview of his work defies simplistic notions of style ... With his creative credo 'not to copy yourself', Schnabel has set for himself an ambitious agenda of innovation".

This sort of empty praise is typical of the cultural elite's adaptation to success in the art market, which for various reasons determined decades ago that Schnabel was a horse worth backing. As governments of all stripes gut funding to arts programs and cultural institutions, the public is increasingly at the mercy of such interests, who often regard art and artists as investment vehicles for a handful of wealthy collectors.

In Schnabel's case, frankly, the artist has been complicit in the process, using a gift for self-promotion to gather the connections and attention that have returned him a fortune out of proportion to his talents as an artist.

Since he came to prominence over 30 years ago as a painter, Julian Schnabel has inspired competing and impassioned judgments regarding the merit of his work, but on balance it must be said that his stature as an artist rests largely on something other than his art. Even the controversy generated by Schnabel's ostentation and brashness has only inflated his fame and investment value. His paintings commonly command six-figure prices.

His notoriety in the art world has been enhanced and perhaps eclipsed in recent years by his acclaim as a film director, an achievement which is itself a complex matter. On the whole, it must be said, his filmmaking seems more serious and substantive than his painting. Schnabel has produced some moments of remarkable depth and pathos, and acted courageously, for example, in directing *Miral* against pro-Zionist objections, but his films are inconsistent to say the least.

Certainly the 60-plus works in this exhibition demonstrate versatility, but it is difficult to see any unifying ideas within Schnabel's painting, let alone how the latter relates to his work in cinema. To see what part his films play within his oeuvre, it is useful to first consider his development and trajectory as a painter.

## A product of his time

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Schnabel moved to Brownsville, Texas when he was a boy and that is where he spent much of his youth. In his interview with Moos for this exhibition, Schnabel relates that he had little exposure to art or film as a child, but decided early on that he was going to be an artist. He studied fine art at the University of Houston before moving back to New York to continue his studies at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

He cites a disparate range of influences throughout this period including the French theatrical visionary Antonin Artaud, important Italian directors such as Pasolini, De Sica and Visconti, and also personalities from American popular culture such as Andy Warhol and Francis Ford Coppola. This no doubt encouraged the diversity of his interests and subject matter, but also the troubling and powerful interest in celebrity and fame in the tradition of Warhol.

Schnabel first attracted the attention of the New York art world for his 'plate' paintings—actually broken plates glued to canvas and painted over, some of which are shown in this exhibit—and was quickly elevated to art stardom after his initial one-man show at the Mary Boone Gallery in 1979.

These early efforts were generally unremarkable compositions, but done on a grand scale—indeed the scale of his work is often its most notable feature, with many of the works in the exhibit occupying entire walls of the gallery. Given his reputation, the crudity and general lack of skill exhibited in this artist's paintings are remarkable. Apparently, many of his plate paintings are actually falling apart due to poor technique in adhering the crockery to the canvas.

Works in a figurative vein, such as his renowned "Girl with no eyes", are drawn at a fairly crude level as well and with no convincingly redeeming qualities. The disdain for method and craftsmanship characteristic of this work is consistent with the general decline of traditional skill in the recent decades when novelty and ingenuity have been valued at a premium.

His other work ranges from a series of treated or painted photographs of

movie celebrities, such as Marlon Brando and Mickey Rourke, to clever collages and juxtapositions of found objects. All in all, the effect is sometimes interesting, and often impressive, but as one critic put it: “One generally gets the feeling that it is all about the artist rather than the art”.

### From big canvas to big screen

As mentioned above, Schnabel found himself drawn to depicting a number of movie stars in his work, but doesn't seem to have had an idea of making films until he was invited to direct *Basquiat*, based on the life of the Haitian-American artist, Jean-Michel Basquiat. Basquiat began his career as a graffiti artist in New York and later produced Neo-expressionist paintings.

Schnabel relates in interviews how film has always been an escape for him and very central to his development, and while this may well be true, it is not apparently a matter to which he ever gave serious thought or study. This is after all a man who once boasted in an interview that he didn't read books.

*Basquiat* (1996), *Before Night Falls* (2000), *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007), *Lou Reed: Berlin* (2007)—all of the films Schnabel directed before this year enjoyed sold-out screenings at the AGO as part of the current retrospective. Although the organizers have attempted to draw some connection between his painting and his cinematic work in their catalogue, these films are not only disparate from each other in both style and content, but have little discernable relationship to his work as a painter.

Basquiat, the latest of Andy Warhol's discoveries, died of a drug overdose at the age of 27 in 1988. Eight years later the film *Basquiat* was released and was hailed as the first feature about an American painter written and directed by an American painter; it was Schnabel's film debut.

Schnabel was a friend of Basquiat and, despite his inexperience, seemed a fitting choice to direct a screenplay about the latter's life (one of the characters is a thinly disguised version of Schnabel). With Jeffrey Wright giving a remarkable performance in the title role, the film features a number of notables, including David Bowie (as Warhol), Dennis Hopper, Christopher Walken and Courtney Love. There are some inspired choices, including major portions of the sound track, and some memorable images, but on the whole *Basquiat* is a fairly thin and self-indulgent work.

For a cogent review of his next film, *Before Night Falls*, based on the autobiography of the same name by Cuban poet and novelist Reinaldo Arenas, see “The sad life and death of a Cuban poet”. The point is made here, and it would seem to hold true for much of Schnabel's work, that the director's insights are relatively slight and the treatment of his material rather superficial. Still, it is not a film one can just dismiss, nor is it a piece of anti-communist propaganda.

*Diving Bell*, his most successful film to date, won the Palme D'Or at the 2007 Cannes film festival and Schnabel won the best directing award at the same event. The work is based on the remarkable memoir of Jean-Dominique Bauby, journalist and editor of *Elle* magazine, who suffered a massive stroke at the age of 42 and was completely paralyzed except for his left eye.

With the movement of this one eye, Bauby learned to communicate through an arduous process. He eventually managed to dictate the book from which the film is adapted. His effort at communication becomes an enchanting ritual in Schnabel's film, represented with great compassion.

Despite some self-indulgent digressions, that compassion is characteristic of the film overall.

Lou Reed's 2006 first live concert performance of his 1973 concept album “Berlin”, which at the time it was recorded was a commercial failure, is the basis for Schnabel's next film. Filmed over five nights in Brooklyn, Schnabel's *Berlin* is a fairly straightforward documentary of the event that rests largely on the stage show and the music. It faithfully conjures up the period and culture of its subject and as such is a worthwhile document.

His most recent film, *Miral*, which debuted at Cannes as well but is not part of the exhibition in Toronto, is notable from several standpoints. Because it portrayed sympathetically the plight of a Palestinian woman—along with her entire people—and was the work of a Jewish-American director, *Miral* provoked a storm of protest from pro-Israeli forces when it was screened at the Toronto International Film Festival in September.

Some of the choices in casting and otherwise are not inspired, but it is to Schnabel's considerable credit that he challenged the official silence of the global establishment regarding the treatment of Palestinians in Israel, and placed this ongoing and criminal injustice compellingly before a world audience.

In short: while it is more or less generally accepted that Schnabel is overrated as a painter, people are not without contradictions, and insofar as the artist reflects honestly on his time and society, he seems considerably more interesting in his film work.

### Why Schnabel?

How such a figure as Schnabel manages to remain in the upper strata of the art world is a complicated matter. Though certainly the distortions wrought by the art market and its agents are at play, in essential ways the case of Schnabel is symptomatic of a more troubling impasse in art generally.

A critical debate was waged over the value of Schnabel as a painter when his star first rose, even as he was being promoted as a leading figure in what has been called the ‘Neo-expressionist’ movement. Though perhaps overly harsh, the views of art critic Robert Hughes seemed fairly close to the mark: “Schnabel is to painting what Stallone is to acting—a lurching display of oily pectorals—except that Schnabel makes bigger public claims for himself”.

To be fair, the problem goes beyond Schnabel—parallels can be drawn with a number of his contemporaries who were likewise products of a stagnant period in contemporary art. The scourge of post-modernism had become a dominant influence in art circles and schools and the entire Modernist period in art was being impugned as the product of self-serving ‘grand narratives’. All notions of social progress were similarly discounted, and the traditional skills of painting, drawing and construction in general were being chucked out of art school curricula in favor of subjective and conceptual approaches to art.

Schnabel was among those who reacted against the cold detachment of this trend, reintroducing recognizable imagery in his work, infused with emotion and whimsy. His impulse to reject such a barren atmosphere may have been a healthy one, but without an understanding of the historic and societal origins of the impasse, it has proven insufficient.

“By emphasizing the primacy of human emotion as the *raison d'être* of his art, Schnabel maintains a somewhat distinct position in the art world”. Apparently AGO contemporary art curator David Moos genuinely values Schnabel's painting—but his lofty appraisal is not convincing, any more

than most of this artist's work.

Intuition, emotion, innovation, industry—these are Schnabel's strengths, but even when combined, they don't compensate for a lack of genuine insight into the world and its doings. And while there is a good deal more to the success of Schnabel than his marketability, it is not incidental that his name continues to generate revenue for the institutions that continue to celebrate him.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**