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JULIAN SCHNABEL: TAKING FLIGHT

THE ARTIST/FILMMAKER BRINGS HIS OWN ART HISTORY
TO *THE DIVING BELL AND THE BUTTERFLY*

“IN THIS FILM, THINGS LOOK LIKE YOU HAVEN’T SEEN THEM BEFORE, THOUGH THEY’VE BEEN THERE. YOU JUST HAVEN’T LOOKED THE RIGHT WAY.”

Making a film from a paralyzed person’s point of view may not be such a stretch for a man who, in 1973, applied to the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program by submitting a paper lunch bag full of art slides sandwiched between two slices of bread. Julian Schnabel, the artist and filmmaker known for bold gestures and an equally bold personality, has always worked within this unpredictable vein, free of genre constraints. “The thing about film is that it communicates with a lot of people,” Schnabel says, via telephone from Copenhagen. “Painting communicates with a lot of people too, but over centuries. You don’t get all your audience while you’re alive. It occupies a much slower temporality. The fact that I would be impatient to communicate to more people might be an accurate answer to why I make films.”

Schnabel’s fourth feature, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, takes a painterly approach to the inspirational story of former French *Elle* editor Jean-Dominique Bauby. At 43, Bauby suffered a stroke that resulted in a rare case of “locked-in syndrome”—he was fully lucid but entirely paralyzed and unable to speak. With the help of a speech therapist, Bauby managed to communicate using an alphabet devised of eye blinks; it worked well enough that he was able to write an entire memoir. Waiting patiently while an assistant read the alphabet aloud, Bauby would blink when his desired letter was reached, thus drafting his book, *Le scaphandre et le papillon*, one painstaking word at a time.

Schnabel’s *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* recounts the fourteen months in which “Jean-Do” awoke from his coma at the Berck Maritime Hospital in Pas de Calais, France, wrote his memoir, and then perished due to pneumonia a mere four days after the book’s publication in 1997. Though the film opens in the hospital bed to Jean-Dominique, discovering, then panicking over, his serious disfigurement and inability to communicate, there are scenes throughout that characterize this man’s humor as his main form of resilience. Subtitled in French—Schnabel learned the language in order to make the film—the dialogue often consists of biting internal comments that Jean-Do silently makes to doctors and visitors, giving the viewer access to his sarcasm while those onscreen infantilize him.

Explanations of the film’s central metaphor, in which Jean-Do sinks into the depths of isolation like a diving bell but rises to freedom through his power of thought, feature some of the most abstract and colorful

sequences. Found images from nature—glaciers collapsing, flowers pollinated by insects—are collaged together into experimental, poetic narratives. Colors throughout the film swirl in and out of focus, often pooling together into suites of cool blues that mimic the hospital’s turquoise walls or the sea Jean-Do observes daily from the deck outside his room.

The film is equal parts tragedy and life-affirming love story; Schnabel is, essentially, reminding us to be grateful for our basic sensate abilities to speak, move and address the world.

Schnabel compares his ambitious urge to depict ways of seeing through *The Diving Bell* to different desires present in his non-narrative painting process. “[Making *The Diving Bell*] was more about communicating with a beginning, a middle and an end, and it’s addressing things that people can understand. [Viewers] have experiences that are comparable to what they’re seeing; they think it could happen to them. They get what you mean. [But if] I make a painting, I don’t care if people recognize what’s in the painting or not. I hope they don’t. I don’t want to see a little rabbit in the painting. I’m looking to see something I haven’t seen before. In this film, things look like you haven’t seen them before, though they’ve been there. You just haven’t looked the right way.”

“In this particular case,” Schnabel continues, “until there was a tragedy, there was no consciousness, and there was no attempt at redemption. In his book, Bauby said, ‘Had I been blind and deaf, or did it take the harsh light of disaster for me to find my true nature?’ To me, this was key. Somebody is able to admit that his life had been a string of near misses. He’s saying, ‘Do something about your life now, be in the present. Because later, when you have 20/20 retrospective vision, you won’t have a body anymore! It’s about grabbing onto life and being alive. What is life, and how do you live? My starting point was to mine and navigate this interior life.’”

This practiced observational style, as both a work ethic and an approach to daily life, appears to have nurtured Julian Schnabel’s rise to success. Born in 1951, Schnabel grew up in Texas and graduated with a BFA from the University of Houston. He relocated to New York City, where he sharpened what is known as his Neo-Expressionist painting style. Reacting to the austere, intellectualized minimalist art that dominated

New York galleries in the early 70s, Schnabel presented a pivotal 1979 solo exhibit at Mary Boone. A string of other shows followed, and the artist was able to revive interest in painting itself, even after critics had proclaimed the death of the medium.

From the beginning, Schnabel has made dramatic, expressive visual statements, employing abstract as well as figurative marks. Using disparate media like oil paint, wax, emulsion, plaster and applied *objets trouvés* on surfaces that vary from canvas, wood, pottery shards, velvet and army tarps to surfboards, his trademark approach has been to work on a gigantic scale, lending his massive paintings a sculptural quality. Add to this a fiery, flamboyant public persona cultivated over the years by drastic actions and fashions (think pajamas in public, dandyish fur coats), and one can fathom how he's attained the status of an enigmatic art star whose fame has been compared to Salvador Dalí, Picasso and even Warhol, a friend of Schnabel's.

In fact, now more than ever, Schnabel has increased admiration for Warhol's diverse, infamous endeavors. "Now, [painting and filmmaking] seem more seamless, but before I was a bit frazzled by the schizophrenic nature of the whole thing. The art world, they don't like you to do something outside of that. People were angry with Andy for that, and now they've realized his value. Now his prices have gone up, but they gave him a hard time when he was alive. He didn't get a show at the Museum of Modern Art, and he was always trying to keep that magazine [*Interview*] going. But he was one of the greatest artists. He was just curious about the ways things functioned that weren't prescribed by the conventions of the art world."

In the 1990s, Schnabel created his largest paintings thus far, some measuring 22x22 feet, for an installation in a former Roman temple, the Maison Carrée, in Nîmes. His need to work on an increasingly monumental scale was already asserting itself. "The scale and size of the painting," Schnabel told *Flash Art* in 1986, "has a physical reality that affects its meaning. When the paintings are large, the interior of the painting seems to deconstruct itself. I like that, and I like what happens to me when I feel like I'm watching the painting deconstruct itself." It's not a far cry from the experience of watching a moving image onscreen.

Six years after the exhibit in Nîmes, his first film project, *Basquiat*, premiered in 1996. He made the film to commemorate painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, another close friend, who died of a drug overdose at the age of 27. "When I think back, I wanted Jean-Michel to get the last word," Schnabel says of his impetus to address such personal subject matter for his debut feature. "The artist should have the last word, not the critic. And Jean-Michel has. Unfortunately, it won't make a difference to Jean-Michel, but if he were alive, he'd be pleased to know that it worked out fine. I think he was hoping for that, even though he didn't see it in his lifetime."

Basquiat, as well as *Before Night Falls* and *Berlin* (an upcoming documentary about Lou Reed's seminal noise album) are all compelling moral arguments for celebrating life despite adversities. The prototypical Schnabel film has a deep psychological resonance with the artist's own personal struggles; often, his protagonists are heroic male artists

who, through death, succeed creatively on an eternal level. *Before Night Falls* tells the tale of the gay poet Reinaldo Arenas, who escaped persecution under the Communist government in 1960s Cuba by fleeing to New York, where he died of AIDS in 1990. Actor Javier Bardem, Oscar-nominated for his portrayal of Arenas, sensitively depicted this Cuban literary hero who encouraged so many to escape Castro's regime. Schnabel chalks his preoccupation with noble artistic narratives up to coincidence. "I know about artists because that's what I do," he says. "It's subject matter that is familiar to me. It all has to deal with some kind of interior battle, a situation in conflict with the surroundings. Ultimately, it's about freedom."

This fixation with freedom through death reaches its pinnacle in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, which in many ways is the director's most autobiographical work. Schnabel publicly admits that the film's emotional weight is based not only on Bauby's story but also on his own frustration witnessing his dying father. "These are movies about people who believe that no matter how difficult their lives are, there's an optimistic choice to make things better, a denial of death. I was reading Tarkovsky, and he was saying that life contains death, but art doesn't contain death. Art excludes death, so it's life-affirming. There can never be optimistic and pessimistic art, only mediocrity and talent. The basic gist is that it's a denial of death. In all of these cases, because people are involved in making something immortal, something that can transgress death, they don't have the same limitations as other people." Schnabel finds that film, as a medium, suits his thematic investigation of mortality—shooting people on film commemorates them for posterity, at least "as long as the film doesn't disintegrate into nitroglycerin."

Though he won the prestigious Director's Award at Cannes for *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, there is no sign that Schnabel is neglecting his painting career. Schnabel has major retrospectives arriving at the Schloss Derneburg in Germany, the Tabacalera Institute of Contemporary Culture and the Guggenheim Bilbao, both in Spain, the Palazzo Venezia in Italy, and the China Millennium Monument in Beijing, to name but a few. His travel schedule alone would be inspirational, and a bit daunting, to the average person, but Schnabel just sees it as part of his job—which is, simply stated, to make the planet a more humane place. "I'm trying to fix something," he says. "I think there's a need for that, whether I'm making a painting to make the world more honest, if that doesn't sound too pretentious or impossible. I don't make a movie because I want to. I mean, I don't *really* want to. I resist it until it happens. It's like, you need to put a stop sign on that corner or someone's going to drive their car through, and a Mack truck's going to hit them. It's hot as shit out there, but someone's gotta nail that sign out there. So I go out with my shovel and pick and cement." ■

