



**Julian Schnabel in conversation  
with David Moos**

I first met Julian Schnabel in New York City in 1988 at the opening of his retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He was standing in the centre of the main room, and he made a point of greeting people in a forthright manner, so I introduced myself and shook his hand. Three years later I visited him in his studio in the West Village. Grey cement walls framed an expansive space with few columns. One could look down into the arena in which he operated from a mezzanine above, which led back to his living quarters. In addition to his own paintings, he had works by Cy Twombly, Sigmar Polke and, memorably, Pablo Picasso's large *Femme au Chapeau* (1971), a portrait that displayed Picasso's agility with the paintbrush. For all these works he sought assessments while also offering his own.

Years later a mutual friend, David Leiber, suggested I return to Julian's studio. We met at a different building, also in the West Village, and talked for two hours before we hopped in a car and drove to Greenpoint, a neighbourhood in Brooklyn. In that vast studio Schnabel presented paintings, dozens of them, which he had been working on for several years in series: the *Untitled (Girl with No Eyes)* paintings, the *Japanese Paintings*, *Egyptian Paintings*, the *One-Eyed Jack Paintings*, a pair of enormous dark green tarpaulin works—each series explores a tension between image and gesture, a found emblem and a painterly intervention. This was in 2006, at a time when he was also working on his third film, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. On my regular visits to his Brooklyn studio the focus was always painting, yet the pull of cinema was palpable. Schnabel maintained this studio while he reconceived and expanded his original studio, adding seven floors, creating the architecture of a Venetian Palazzo that he himself designed and appointed inside and out.

Over the past year, as we began to work on Julian Schnabel: *Art and Film*, we met to discuss how painting and filmmaking fit together in his work—surprisingly, a little explored topic. It was of interest to me to understand how he simultaneously operates in these distinct media, fuelling a dual creative enterprise that distinguishes him as a seminal auteur of our time. The following conversations took place throughout 2010, some in his studio, some in his apartment, while others were recorded while walking on the street or talking on the telephone. A standard day for Schnabel involves multiple competing tasks that nevertheless seem to focus his thoughts. Printed here are accurate transcriptions of conversations that reveal how Schnabel punctuates loftier thinking with pedestrian needs, all braided together into the frenetic flow of unfolding days.

**DAVID MOOS:** I want to talk about this project that we're working on—Julian Schnabel: *Art and Film*, which is an exhibition of your paintings. But it's also really about the relationship between painting and cinema. As I looked into this theme it became apparent to me that, at the very beginning of your life as a painter in the '70s, cinema was absolutely present. For instance, the first plate painting has titles, possible titles related to cinema. Just as an example. Maybe you can talk about all the currents that coil through your painting that relate to cinema...your life as a painter...your experience with painting, moving into film.

**JULIAN SCHNABEL:** I grew up in an atmosphere, an environment that had no film or painting. My parents didn't know anything about painting, and they didn't go to the movies that much. And I grew up in Brooklyn, but there was no...you know, in Mexico City in the '60s and '70s, there were film clubs. It was a society that was set up to be exposed to this culture, this art. I had nobody to talk to about film, and kind of came upon it as an accident. I mean, I liked *The Ten Commandments* a lot when I saw the Red Sea swallow up the Egyptians, you know. To think that you could do that with a movie. Or *Moby Dick*. Seeing that big white whale doing all that stuff to those guys in the rowboats, longboats, or whatever boats they were in. Come down and smash down on top of them. And that eye. *Moby Dick's* eye—terrifying. It was an escape for me to go to the movies. And it was certainly an escape for me to paint...

So I created a space for myself that was better for me than life with my friends in Brooklyn, or sports, or things that... It was something that I did by myself. The first time I saw *Repulsion*, which is actually in my film *Miral*, I walked in there by accident and I thought, "What the hell am I watching here? What's going on?"

It was a different kind of a movie. A movie that had to do with your real fears...that really got inside of you, that could haunt you, and you could identify with it.

So the movies were more real to me than my life was at home. There was some kind of a wasteland out there that I grew up in. I mean, warmth of the family and whatever, but no scale... And I mean everything really hampered me, and challenged me and made me feel like I wasn't quite alive when I was a kid. And when I'd paint or do things like that I'd escape from the ordinariness of what life was like in my parents' house... Putting whatever is inside or outside of your consciousness into that thing. Depositing it there. Well, that's the whole sense of the arena. Whether it's the screen in a movie or whether it's the rectangle that is the perimeter of a painting, it's an arena where this battle takes place, between everything that you know and don't know. And I think that I apply the same system to both things. I don't know what it's going to look like when I'm done. I know how to start. I know how to lean towards the divine light. But I figure it out as I'm going along, and the process of doing it is the thing.

**DM:** When you made *Basquiat* you were a painter. So how did you know how to make a movie?

**JS:** I didn't know how. On-the-job training. I mean...other people thought I knew how [chuckles]. And they encouraged me. Dennis Hopper said to me, "Hey, it looks like you've been making movies for forty years..." I don't know what I brought to the film that somebody else couldn't bring to it. I mean I didn't have any pretensions of being a great movie director. I just wanted to tell the story. I thought I experimented enough, and was insulted enough also as a painter over the years, that I didn't need to reinvent the wheel. I just wanted to get the story right about Jean-Michel. And the other thing is I'd been in that basement with him. I'd seen those paintings and watched him work. So I didn't have to make something up. I knew my subject. And I think that's probably the one thing in my films... I find out everything I can about what it is that I'm doing and then I decide if I can do it or not.

There was no path that was marked with signage that would lead me to where I was going. I never thought I was going to be a movie director. But when Jean-Michel died and somebody started to ask me to help make a film about what a painter's life was, I felt that was a good tool to say that young artists need to be given an opportunity to grow. They shouldn't be discouraged from life, the negativity. And I thought that was something that contributed to his early death. And I felt in a way like I owed it to him to portray that in the right way.

Once you start portraying something, you start interpreting something, translating something. It's a filmic activity, rather than a painting activity. Painting is more like playing the saxophone. You hit a note. That's it. You get it all at once. Movie making is...when you're playing, when you hit the next note, it's about what note goes next to it. Maybe in the same way, what mark goes next to the next mark, what colour you like... You have more or less two hours in a conventional film to tell a story, but the story isn't necessarily something that needs to fit inside the rectangle. It's got to go beyond the screen in a way. And maybe when you get finished with the movie, the movie's not over. It lives inside of you the way the experience of looking at a painting lives inside of you. It forms who you are. The decisions that you make. And in both senses for me, they are utilitarian kind of activities rather than decorative ones. So somebody goes to a movie, it's like giving them a drug that they can take. When they come out, they see the world through different eyes.

**DM:** So once you made *Basquiat*, how did the experience of having made that film inform how you thought about painting? Did it? What was the impact of that experience?

**JS:** I was really ready to get back to painting where I didn't have to explain myself to anybody else. I thought, "What a relief. I'm done with this." I mean, there's no rush. You walk into the studio. You don't know if the painting is good or bad. It doesn't matter. You don't know if somebody will understand what you did or not. It doesn't matter. You don't know if it's finished or not. It doesn't matter. You can walk away and come back and

look at it, and it might look much better if you don't do anything to it. You'll see it differently in a few days. And the freedom of that, the freedom of not hearing anybody else talking, not needing to talk to anybody.

**DM:** How do you think about the audience for this exhibition? How do you think a film audience will respond to or react to your paintings?

**JS:** I think that they might learn how to look at paintings, see paintings for the first time. Bill Gaddis wrote years ago, "Most paintings, the instant you see them, they become familiar, and then it's too late." I think when people realize that they're going to see something that they might not understand, that they might not know anything about, and if they start from that point where people think they know something they're willing to be open to having that experience. Now that's very different than, say, the art world. We're talking about different art worlds also, because I think kids, young artists, walk in and they see the work in a way that I find very satisfying. Then there are other people that have things to protect, and they get much more uptight.

But what I hope for from this show is that people will look at the paintings, because you can't see paintings in magazines. You can't see paintings in books, really. You can, but I know as a kid, all I wanted to do is get to Europe so I could see a Velázquez painting in the flesh, so I could see a Caravaggio painting in the flesh, and it made a huge difference.

I think if young people saw those things, they would actually not think art history is boring when they're in school... They'd know it's just an emblem/it's a ??? of that painting that they're seeing. If you're going to see a bullfight, you need to go there, and be in the arena and see what it's like. If you want to see paintings, you need to go there and see them. Paintings are less accessible in the sense that you could have a movie that's playing in China, in Russia and in the United States all at the same time. The paintings, you have to move them around and go see the thing, and somebody's got to stand in front of it. There's a mystery to painting. There's no answer to it, that's what I love about it. There's no system to it. It's undefinable.

Actually the making of things like that, the physical, sexual transference of energy and the interaction of making these objects that actually end up embodying that life force, it's very powerful. It's beyond the gallery system. It's beyond the art markets. It's beyond criticism. It's beyond life. Those things are physical facts that will be here—who the hell knows where we'll be—but they'll be around until the world blows up. You see those things, and people keep reacting to them.

**DM:** I want to pick up on what you said, comparing how you feel about your paintings in relation to your films. How about comparing what it's like receiving the award for best director at the Cannes Film Festival or going to the Academy Awards because you're nominated for best director, and comparing those moments in your life to moments in your life as a painter in the art world?

**JS:** What would the moment be in my life as a painter? When I had my show at Leo Castelli? Maybe that was a big moment.

(aside) Can you grab that, please?

**JS:** The Whitney Museum—that was a big moment. I guess that's a huge deal, right? To have a show at the Whitney Museum. That was, what, 1987? It was the fall. What was I, 36?

**DM:** 35.

**JS:** 35 years old. I had another show at the Centre Pompidou in Paris also at that time, and the Whitechapel in London and the Kunstmuseum in Basel, the Tate and the San Francisco Art Museum and the Houston Museum of Fine Arts all in a year. I guess some other shows, but I never expected to win an award that was The Best Painter

Award. In fact, when they had the Turner Prize and all that, I thought this was sort of a joke. I guess the thing that is comparable to the Oscar is when your obituary comes out, how many lines you get in the New York Times. I mean. When Joseph Beuys died, it was almost as if he was the best artist on the north side of his street, in his neighbourhood, in Düsseldorf. He was a really great artist, but I don't think he was really appreciated in the United States.

A guy like Anselm Kiefer, who was a student of Joseph Beuys, enlarged and, in a way, colloquialized some images that came out of Beuys to make paintings that were more conservative in a way that people could comprehend and put in their houses. Much more successful, in a certain way, than Joseph Beuys.

The prize is the work. Doing the work is the prize. The opinion that you have to really enjoy is your own. You'll know it if you did it well, if you surprised yourself, because you feel surprised, when you watched what you did. You go, "It's better than I thought it was" or "It's not as good as I thought it was, and I failed." But when you win the Academy Award, it's a bit like a popularity contest. The funny thing is that I won best director at the Golden Globes, and Best Foreign Language Film at the Golden Globes. But the year that I won, the Golden Globes were cancelled, because there was a writer's strike. I was in the baggage claim, at Kennedy Airport, and I saw my name come up on the monitor. That was my award ceremony. So I didn't mind, but maybe more people would have seen The Diving Bell if I could have made a speech. On the other hand, you have to see the comic irony of it. I thought it was funny.

When I won the best director in Cannes, I was very happy. It's not a group of people that might be voting for their friends there. What are they, 10 people on the jury? They're your peers. They're actors and directors. They're people that work. They're just watching the movies, and I felt very honoured by that. But what are we talking about? We're talking about other people's responses to your work. Then we're talking about your own response to your work.

**DM:** Also, let's say, an extraordinary moment created by your work in your life and how different they are. How private a painting is. How public film is. Avenues of recognition is one thing, but I'm more interested in what that feels like to you and what that means to you.

**JS:** Hey, I know what you mean. I remember seeing Goodfellas in Paris, and thinking, "Marty Scorsese made a really good movie." There are a lot of people enjoying this. Then I flew to Nîmes the next morning, and I was looking at the three paintings in the Maison Carrée, a Roman temple that Caesar built for his daughter. There was nobody in there except me, and I was looking at these three 22-foot square paintings. I loved the way they sat in that temple. I thought, "This is the route that I've chosen." It's like Hyman Roth's line, "This is the work that I've chosen." This was my ecstasy, standing in that spot. I made those paintings for that architecture, for that place in the world. It might not be televised. It might not go from Timbuktu to...Iowa, but I saw it, and I got to make those things.

I had the same feeling when Paul Simon gave a concert, up the road in Montauk, and there were 10,000 people in this farm that was 500 metres from my house. If a helicopter could have been there, there were these three big paintings that I was working on in an open-air studio. There was a guy alone on a 60 x 30 foot squash court with no ??? working on these paintings, and 500 meters from there, there's 10,000 people listening to music. What is being communicated? There are different ways of communicating.

But I love to paint, and it's also given me the freedom to make the films that I want to make. I think ultimately, it's about freedom—the whole thing. Freedom. You put something down. You don't have the answer. Just put it out there and have the freedom to do that. Nobody's stopping you from doing that. That's a huge privilege.

(aside) Hi baby. Come in. Hi.

People arrive & chat. David and Julian pull out a painting for the visitors. They all look and chat.

**JS:** (discussing painting, a portrait of Rula Jebreal) Paintings don't lie. You are what you are. I love this. I love

this person and I... Don't be shy about being intense, because it's just...you look at somebody in this thing...and you look out at them and you look like, "You'd better tell me the truth." That's what I see. The Picasso painting was in here and I wanted to put a nice strong painting in the frame.

**RULA JEBREAL:** It's strong, I love it.

**JS:** Yeah, but she's scared of that. She said, "Isn't she aggressive?" I said, well, I didn't find her that way. Well, I think that she, on television, has to be aggressive with certain people that need to be aggressed.

**RJ:** Also, what's wrong with aggression? It's a life force.

**JS:** But I don't see this as being aggressive. I think you look beautiful. And I think you look...you know what? I don't know what I think...I painted what I saw.

**FEMALE VISITOR:** You know what, I love it.

**RJ:** You don't have to explain it, you painted it.

**JS:** Thank you!! And the other one, I saw also—that's you too.

**RJ:** Multifaceted, right.

**FEMALE VISITOR:** You know why I love the other one. I loved the process, wearing that dress.

**RJ:** It's pretty. Yeah, we want to look good.

**JS:** You know, when my daughter Lola was little, she made these drawings. And I put them in a book. They wanted me to do a Schnabel book. I said, Why don't you do a Lola Schnabel book. So a seven-year-old girl had a book that's been published. And when we got it back, she opened the book and there were drawings of hers that had tape on them. And the tape was stuck to another piece of paper. So when she opened the finished book, she put her hand on the paper to see if the tape was there. She couldn't believe the photographic image of the tape on the paper. It was printed. So she touched every page. And when you were in that dress, you were touching that dress, you couldn't believe... I kept saying, "Stand still." And you kept looking...

**FEMALE VISITOR:** That was the last hour. After 5 or 6 hours, I mean, I was like okay...

**JS:** Wait a minute, you never stood still for 5 or 6 hours.

**FEMALE VISITOR:** No, but I mean, two hours and a half and it was very cold...

**JS:** One day. Another day. And one hour.

**RJ:** Posing is an art in itself.

**JS:** You did a great job, but it wasn't five hours all at once.

**FEMALE VISITOR:** Well, that's impossible to do.

Rula Jebreal and Female Visitor leave.

**JS:** There is a moment, I think, when you're doing this when you think, "What did I get myself into?" Can I do this? Are they moving around too much?

I remember being at the beach at Coney Island years ago, and I wanted a knish. And there were these three girls on the beach. A knish was 75 cents. So I said, "I'll make a portrait of the three of you for 25 cents apiece. And I did, and two of the girls liked their portrait and gave me 25 cents, but the third girl wouldn't give me the 25 cents. When I told my father about it, he was really pissed off that I gave my work away so cheaply.

**DM:** No knish?

**JS:** I must have gotten that 25 cents somewhere else. I'm sure I got that knish.

**DM:** So what about that feeling. You're engaged. They're moving around a bit. It's like improvising, editing, on the spot.

**JS:** It's performance. It's a performance. You're performing. Not for them, but for yourself... You know, there are some actors, a guy like Chris Walken. He thinks about something else while he's saying the words. So he remembered the lines, but he's thinking about something totally different, so when he speaks it gives this chilling quality to what he's saying, because the words that he's saying are coloured by something totally illogical, and totally unrelated to what you think... So it feels like there's no acting going on.

I was making a painting of Placido Domingo, and he came here and he was dressed in armour and had a... That might be an interesting painting for the show also. He was dressed in armour and had a cape on. But he was being the character that he was dressed up to be, instead of being himself. And he was acting, which is not what I wanted him to do. I wanted him to be himself, so I could paint him, even if he was in the armour. So he kept acting like he was Placido Domingo. But that's not who he was.

**DM:** Does that affect you? The way you think? The way you are?

**JS:** Definitely. So I was painting him. I kept painting him. I didn't feel connected. At a certain moment I walked out of the room. And I thought, "Why did I commit to doing this? It's not going to look like him." They're going to take this painting, the Met commissioned the painting from me, they're going to lower this painting down onto the stage of the Metropolitan Opera. It's not going to look like him. They're going to think this guy Schnabel can't paint his way out of a paper bag.

And why did I do it? Why did I commit? Because I said I could do it in a few hours. He had a very busy schedule. He showed up from Washington, and he was going back that afternoon at six o' clock. I said I'd do it in three hours. So what happens is, I'm painting and painting, and I have him at first right away. But you know sometimes you work too much on something and there was a moment when he was standing there and I walked out, and I say to Bianca (Julian's assistant), "Why did I say I would do this?" Then I walked in and I scraped his face off the painting. I told him that he could go home. I don't think he knew that there was any problem in my mind or whatever. It was part of the process of being a painter. Because he kept moving. He kept posing, thinking he was posing, and his face kept changing. But I remembered what he looked like, so when he left I could paint the painting. I just thought about what he looked like. I remembered where his eyes were, where his nose was, what expression he had at one time. I just painted that. Now the painting is at the Metropolitan Opera.

I don't like to paint from photographs. I don't. I don't make paintings of people from photographs. There



is something about them being in front of you and being alive that informs the painting. I think that's what the viewer gets when they walk up to the painting, the painting's alive in some way. And that's the thing.

**DM:** What about the very gusty, gestural, very engaged painting in the background?

**JS:** Well basically, the way I do this is I paint the kids on the brown surface, this is all oil paint. Then I took the oil paint and I put it on there with my hands; it's finger-painting. And I just went like that (waving hands in circular pattern) and covered the rest of the painting, painting that sky, or whatever it...yeah, I guess it's a sky. And that's a very nice unimportant table. And it reminded me of something that Man Ray would have in his studio or something like that. I bought it at a garage sale. I like that it's a crazy shape. It reminds me of some of Man Ray's paintings, like Macbeth or some of those objects that he'd just have floating in a rectangle. So it's fingerpainting. I put gloves on and smeared the paint around. And then I pour the resin on top.

**DM:** So I'm interested in that kind of painting, which is a kind of painting that you're known for. It's the kind of painting that you're aligned with when I think about abstract expressionism and someone like Pollock or de Kooning. And then the painting of a sitter's face. I'm using the same word painting, but they strike me as very different.

**JS:** Uh-huh. I think you'd have to think also of Soutine and Picasso also because I think it has to do with economy of lines. Well I think you have to go all the way back to Velázquez and Goya. You look at those pictures and see, wow, it looks very abstract when you get up close to it. There's just a couple of marks here, and that makes a face. That makes a shoulder.

Usually, if you look at paintings by Vuillard, or a lot of the impressionist painters, they were using photography. They were taking pictures of people and then they were painting. And I always wondered how they got their perspective so good. And then people used grids and things like that. Or different systems, ????

scientific system for getting everything in perspective.

I like the human flow. Of not having any kind of...not using a ruler, not using a straight edge, not using a grid. Just spontaneously reacting to what's in front of you. I think that sometimes you play a piano concerto, sometimes you play a requiem, sometimes... It depends on what instrument you want to use and what tempo you want to have. So I think that the paintings, even though they are made with the same materials, can have a radically different appearance from painting to painting.

**DM:** And when you're making a movie? The feeling that now this is engaged. Operating according to a script, but it's finding its own flow. Is that analogous?

**JS:** I definitely throw the script away, lots of times. And something will invariably happen. You'll be standing in landscape...well, for example, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. I noticed that the tide went out 500 metres every day. And there was a stanchion on the beach, it was totally exposed. It looked like a lifeguard stand in the daytime. At another point in the day, in early morning, it would be totally covered. I took Jean-Dominique Bauby and put him in his wheelchair on top of this stanchion. It looked like the wheelchair was floating in the water. But the stand was underneath there. Well, that wasn't scripted. It was an obvious thing to do, if you're talking about a castaway on the shores of loneliness. And that stuff happens all the time. The landscape dictates what happens.

The following was a phone conversation between Julian Schnabel and David Moos that took place in May 2010.

**DM:** Let's go back to the mid-'70s. I'm thinking about the first paintings that are in our exhibition, like *Pool Painting for Norma Desmond*. And you're also making paintings with titles like *Shoeshine for Vittoria de Sica* that explicitly have to do with the cinema.

**JS:** I've been a painter ever since I was a child. And I never thought I was going to be anything else. And maybe naming those paintings, those things in my way was sort of speaking to myself and those things had a...for example, the notion of William Holden lying on his face, floating in that pool and you hear somebody speaking to you beyond death saying, "Here I am lying in the pool." There's something subliminal and also transcendental about that moment. And achieving something that can only be achieved in art, where somebody can talk to you after death, without moving their lips while they're face down in a pool.

And I think that what happens there is that scene conjures up a voyage for any viewer that gets engaged in that thing and you walk away from it thinking that life has been altered, that the poetic is stronger than what seems to be the limits of our natural bodies. And when you go to make a painting, I think you're making something that is going to last after you die. And I think building that into the title is sort of saying, "Yes, I'm going to die, and you're going to die, too, but this thing is going to last, just like your voice is lasting, your words are with me here." But I think that if I'm really trying to go back to my state of mind at that time, you know the loneliness also of painting a picture like *Pool Painting for Norma Desmond*, just basically a circle that's with oil paint and a plaster edge.

(aside to men working in the background) That's fine, that's fine, yes.

A plaster lip around it that is the edge, and thinking of the tactility of just my touching the surface of something being that rough plaster edge coating the rectangle of the paint making the concretization of that sense of mortality and immortality. And also, I had been making secretive paintings in a way for a long time, and in that moment in my body of work there was an impulse to make real objects. Real objects that would exist in the world.

(aside to men working in the background) Are we going to put that on the wall? Oh, I'm going to come over there. All right.

Another thing that happened to me is, when I was watching the movie *Shoeshine*, I saw these little heads. First you see an image of the sea, but somehow the sea is something that's very, very important to me. I think it's a moment for some man's death also. You see an image of the sea and as the camera pulls back, you see these little heads, and these kids are in prison and they're watching the sea. They're watching waves. Then you pull back a little more and you see this spiral staircase made out of metal that brings you up to the cells where these kids are in jail.

So, there's a circular shape that is in the *Shoeshine* painting and a hole that's cut out of the yellow part that looks like it's a diamond-shaped hole cut out a brick wall. It was like the inside and the outside of something, but at the same time, the paintings are not naturalistic. They're emblems of something and they're physical facts that denote things.

But obviously, the thing that moved me, it's always, no matter what the story or the way the movies are made, obviously they're made in filmic language. Any language that makes great art transcends their materials and you end up with this, whether it's an epiphany or this altered state or whatever it is that you carry around that becomes a part of your memory. So film and your real memory are interchangeable and they become part of who you are, the way that books you read become a part of who you are, or the paintings you see become a part of who you are.

**DM:** I want to talk about another early painting of yours, the *Portrait of Andy Warhol* from 1982. The appearance of that painting, the look of that painting, actually everything about that painting, has very little materially and formally to do with *Norma Desmond*, *Shoeshine* or *Accattone*. Maybe I want to say that that's kind of a black screen. And then you have this paint, this whiteness, this presence of Warhol applied to the velvet. So what were you thinking when you did a portrait of Warhol? He was alive; someone you knew quite well? Someone you admired?

**JS:** Yeah. All that is true.

**DM:** A filmmaker? A great filmmaker? A pioneering filmmaker?

**JS:** I think we understand that now. Many people don't, many people don't know anything about it and don't even know anything about him except that he's famous.

(aside to man working in the background) I think that wall is done, Joe. It's fine.

I think in a way there's a loose interpretation or a kind of elastic intention of this exhibition. I think that yes, Andy is...in a sense. The reason we put the painting in of Andy Warhol is because Andy Warhol is a great artist. And I like the painting. The fact that Andy Warhol made great films and Andy Warhol was an artist who actually by making the films, I think confused, I think all of his work confused the art world as he invented it.

Looking at Andy's work, I think many people thought, okay, there's not really a painting in here, this is photography that is printed onto something, and this is not a painting. And I think he lived with that reality for a long time and the fact that he actually made the movies made people think oh, he's a moviemaker not a painter. It's funny because when I made that painting of Andy, I said, "Really Andy, you should just keep painting because you are a wonderful painter. Don't let all these other people get your attention and distract you from what you're really great at."

It's funny to me to think about saying that to him now. I just think that there were so many people surrounding him then, in a way, it got in his way, or kept him from doing whatever he wanted to do. But the paintings that he made actually were hard to understand at that time, and in retrospect the notion of printing serial imagery, repeating images using a silkscreen to lay down an image and then putting another one next to it, had to do with the sprocket in a way of film. Even in his films, the notion of time and seeing was always the issue. The fact is...

(aside to workman in the background) Do you have to go somewhere now?

**DM:** Let's not get off course. You were talking about Warhol, you were talking about the sprocket, the seriality of the image and painting. Another question I have when I think about that painting in 1982 is how well did you know Andy Warhol's films at the time that you painted his portrait?

**JS:** I certainly had seen *Sleep and Blow Job* or whatever. I saw different things and I understood it, but I wasn't really thinking about his films...thinking about his, I was really just thinking about him, this guy standing in front of me, with that pink girdle around his stomach. I asked him to take his shirt off and for somebody that didn't really tell you anything about what was on his mind...

**DM:** How long would he have posed for you?

**JS:** I did that painting in about two hours, I'd say.

**DM:** How did he respond?

**JS:** I think he liked it. He liked it enough. He gave me a painting for it. He gave me this triptych that I have, the biggest painting he painted ever, of another person, another artist. It's three panels that are nine by seven feet each, so it's 21 feet across, the painting. They brought over a couple of, he was going to give me these, what do you call it, *Hammer and Sickle* paintings but I'd rather have a portrait by him. And he made this big portrait of me standing out in this field from a photograph that my first wife took.

**DM:** I want to get off chronology in terms of my questions and just have you speak about the process of painting someone like Warhol and directing someone like *Javier Bardem*. And maybe the interactions, interacting with the subject.

**JS:** Well, in both cases you and the person have made a covenant with each other.

**DM:** You said covenant, right?

**JS:** Yes. The actor depends on me not to let him fall through the cracks. Not to let him be open enough to make a mistake and for me not to catch it. Open enough to him to be himself and for me to find his true nature. And the same thing is true of somebody sitting for you, they put themselves in your hand. Or standing in front of you. They put themselves in your hand and they are trusting you. And it's your responsibility in both situations to do a good job, to not disappoint them.

And also, at the same time I forget about myself while I'm doing that in both situations because I am making something out of it. It's not really about me. And what happens is together we make a third thing. Together *Javier* and I made the character of *Reinaldo Arenas*. Together Andy and I made the portrait of him. I saw something in Andy, a beauty in him, I don't even know that he saw that in himself. He kind of looked a bit like *Peter O'Toole* in the painting that I painted. I saw this beautiful face kind of, this tragic beautiful face kind of buried under his skin somehow. Under his bad skin. Under his wig. Under all of his masks.

I think I got the guy there. I think that moment is something that...I know Andy. I know Andy in a way that not that many people know him obviously because they didn't paint him. I mean, *Alice Neel* painted him. I don't know what their relationship was like but I can tell you that the day that I painted him was beautiful. A beautiful partner. A beautiful experience. He was Christlike in a way and vulnerable. And we talked about different things. I think he felt underappreciated. I think he thought that *Jasper Johns* and *Robert Rauschenberg* were seen as serious artists. And I think that he thought that people didn't take him seriously.



**DM:** You said through the process of painting you came to know Andy. I'm just thinking about, let's say, your leap to filmmaking. I mean, that's the way people perceive it. And, I'm thinking how in all of your films there's a certain intensity around the person. The person may be a protagonist. It might be several people, but there's an intimacy, I think, a profound intimacy and a deep understanding of that character in your films. Do you think the painting process and your ability to capture people in painted portraits really sets you up as a director?

**JS:** Well, obviously there's an intimacy that occurs when you are making a painting of somebody. They are putting themselves in your hands. Some people really want to have this happen. Some people are very shy when it's happening. But the way you end up knowing them is very intimate, because you are looking at them and you're kind of peeling down the layers. I paint what I see, and there's no lying in those paintings. So what you get to see, maybe somebody is not always happy with what they see where I paint somebody's vulnerability... There's a character, I mean I see people's character. I'm analyzing what makes them up. I mean, in a way, I'm deconstructing. Deconstructing them and then I'm putting them back together.

I think if there is something that I come to understand about the whole process of being an artist, it's really about something that's very, very intimate. The whole idea of the public really doesn't have anything to do with it. Look at Alfred Molina's performance as Mark Rothko or whatever. He's doing something very personal. He's channelling whatever information through his body, through his acting abilities. He is his own instrument. That's why I say Peter Finch had a heart attack after he made *Network*. Or Martin Sheen had a heart attack when he was doing *Apocalypse Now*. Or when Javier Bardem was doing *Before Night Falls*, there was a moment where, I wasn't going to do another take when he was screaming on the rocks because I didn't want him to have a nervous breakdown. Or when we were doing *Miral*, and there's lots of moments when people break down and start crying when we are doing this. So it's not like people are acting. They are not acting. They are in the middle of a space. They are in the middle of a situation. They are reacting to what's happening. And they are putting themselves and then they are letting it be recorded.

In a sense, when somebody sits in front of you they are letting their presence with you be recorded through the medium of you. When I was talking about Vittoria de Sica before, Billy Wilder, these people, through their art, now they are communicating with you even though they are not around, but their art is alive and their art is a denial of death. And their art includes you. It's this sort of thread of humanity that's transferred from one person to the next in the most intimate way really as if you knew that person. I mean, I love Marlon Brando. I loved him as an actor. I felt so much, such a connection to him. To watch him through his life and then the tragedies in his life, the light that shined out of this guy and the loneliness that engulfed him later. He always had this great sense of humor and the fact of the matter, and you can see it in his work.

**DM:** Talk about the film *Basquiat*. When did the idea of making *Basquiat* take root in your mind?

**JS:** Oh, a guy came to see me after Jean-Michel died and he wanted to interview me and he asked if I'd help to put in seed money to do research. I didn't know anything about that. You know, I said okay. I mean I'd like him to get it right. He seemed like he had an encyclopedic knowledge of film. He asked me if I could help him meet certain people that knew Jean-Michel or whatever. And I gave him \$50,000 actually as seed money to do interviews and go to different places and God knows what. But it ended up that the guy was really a tourist to our world. Jean-Michel died, I think it was August 12, 1988. The day he died I made this painting that's in your show.

**DM:** JMB.

**JS:** Yeah. I painted it on that day. And so this guy must have come to see me about six months later or something. I thought it was a bit of a hurry to make a movie about him right after he died. Oh, there were people, you know, kind of circling around like vultures. But anyway, I thought I'd help this man and I realized after some years of trying to help him get this together that he was being a tourist and he was going to make a movie of a tourist. And I had lent my name to this project.

At first I thought since people like Michael Ovitiz in the movie business, you know, collected my work, I could get a movie made pretty easily. But I was in a...I was in a pipe dream and it was actually, certainly not to make a movie by an unknown Polish director. And after a couple of years, I realized that, smelling a gardenia, I realized that the only way that it was going to come out the right way is if I did it myself.

Michael (Ovitiz) said to me, "Don't put your own money in there. You'll never see it again." But I actually, with some paintings of mine, I guaranteed two-thirds of the budget with two friends of mine and put in the other myself. And so basically I guaranteed the whole budget of the movie and it was \$3.6 million to make. And I made the film. And people that I knew who were actors like Gary Oldman, Christopher Walken, Benicio del Toro, Dennis...

**DM:** Dennis Hopper.

**JS:** People that loved my paintings. I guess, they had faith in me and they showed up to be part of the movie, you know.

**DM:** How about David Bowie?

**JS:** And David. Well, David Bowie, I didn't know. I didn't know David. He wasn't a friend of mine. These other people are friends of mine. David and I became friends after, through the making of the movie. When he was being Andy he was like some old grandmother. He was so sweet...the alpha male in him disappears when he's in the Andy Warhol wig. And he was actually wearing Andy's wig and Andy's jacket. The people from

the foundation gave me these things. We also had the bag of what Andy had with him when he went to the hospital. I got to see what he thought he really needed.

**DM:** So let's talk about the presence of painting in your films.

**JS:** Hold on. Okay, hang on one second...

**JS:** The truth of the matter is that all my paintings are related to cinema in some way, in the same way that Andy (Warhol)... There's two things. You wanted to talk about the black velvet as if it was a screen, and these things were coming out of the dark. I think that's a kind of a literal interpretation of that material. What I did in that painting of Andy, I threw some paint at it. There's bits of modelling paste that are thrown on it. There are lumps on it. If you paint something with modelling on the velvet, the paint will sit on the surface. If you don't put anything under it, there's no primer, paint will look like spray paint. It becomes more porous and seeps into the material. The painter thinks, what do you do? You take it upon yourself to use these, or I did, to use these materials and then react to them and find new ways to paint. That's why I used plates, why I cut holes in the painting, I used Egyptian cotton or I used sails or whatever. I was trying to make a painting that I hadn't seen before.

**DM:** I find it, I don't want to say conspicuous, but I will say relevant to this conversation that the first cinematic scene that you make as a filmmaker is of an imagined child Basquiat, walking with his mother through a corridor, through a series of white chambers, to come upon Picasso's Guernica.

**JS:** Hold on. Okay, hang on one second...

**JULIAN** Schnabel steps away from the phone and returns a few moments later.

**DM:** We left off with Guernica. And I had quite elaborately set up this idea that it is a little conspicuous. The first scene that appears on the screen written and directed by Julian Schnabel is a childhood Basquiat looking at Guernica.

**JS:** So Jean-Michel sees Guernica, and a light goes off in his head. A light emits from his crown. I don't know. My mother took me to the museum, the Brooklyn Museum, when I was a kid. My mother took me to see the Rembrandt painting of...what's his name? The guy who was, Aristotle contemplating the bust of Homer?

**DM:** Isn't that in the Met? Draped in gold. So it's like the crown. They knight him.

**JS:** I don't know where it is now, but I think when I saw it first, it was either at the Met or at the Brooklyn Museum. I think it was not here yet. It came. It was a visitation that I saw. It was there with ropes around it. I think that's the first memory I have, of being in a museum. My mother bringing me there. Okay, so what's the point you're getting at? The first image in my film as a movie director is a child standing in front of a painting.

**DM:** It's about painting.

**JS:** Yes. My first movie is about painting.

**DM:** Yeah, but your first scene. It's not just about painting. It's about a particular painting by a particular artist. And I actually think you told me that you painted that copy. So I see this as a pretty tightly bound cluster that has a lot to do with who you are as an artist. And by artist, I mean painter, filmmaker.

**JS:** Right. I also painted the Jean-Michel paintings.

**DM:** Yeah. I noticed.

**JS:** With Greg Bogen, who was my assistant, who helped me at the time. He was pretty good at it too. I guess Jean-Michel did all the hard work inventing those things, and then I... I'm looking at something really interesting right now. It was much easier just to do a version of something that already existed. But anyway, so what's the question? David?

**DM:** Well, you know, I...

**JS:** Yeah, I think you are showing me the evidence, and you are showing me where the murder weapon was hidden. Now ask me the question.

**DM:** So the question is: How closely does painting relate to filmmaking?

**JS:** Well, I really am one of those people that believes that if you are a painter you ought to paint as much as possible. I mean, every moment that you are not painting, you are not really living or you're not making art really. Or if you are not thinking about painting, you are not painting. And if you are thinking about filmmaking, or making movies, it means that you're not really painting. And maybe that's the big problem.

People think, oh, the guy is not thinking about painting, so he's not a painter. But the truth of the matter is that some people work from nine to five everyday, then go into the studio and then they go home. Then other people, they can't paint all the time. They have a narrative part of their brain where they feel like writing things. Writing things that have a beginning, and a middle, and an end. Writing stories. They're storytellers. And there is one part of the hermetic storytelling that has to do with painting... And leaving dangling articles, kind of topographical...?????? the big paintings on the sixth floor.

(aside) We need two more of those. Actually we need four more of those.

**DM:** Are you there?

**JS:** I'm with you. I'm with you. There's a topographical quality to that. What was I talking about when I got interrupted?

**DM:** You were talking about, I mean, you were on a great groove there...about painting and about either you're painting all the time, and if you're not, some people are nine to five.

**JS:** Oh, right. So, I'm like, I've said this before, like a crop rotator. You plant tomatoes for a bit or you plant potatoes. And then you plant carrots for a while. The land gets refurbished and replenished, and you have better tomatoes, and better potatoes, and better carrots. It was hard for me at the beginning when I used to paint. I'd make one work that looked a certain way, and then I'd make another painting and it looked radically different from the one I just made. Contrary to what people think is style.

It has been an unsettling practice first to change what seems like styles from painting to painting, and then not to paint at all but to still use the same Whitmanesque, non-hierarchical system to give equality to things that seem to be of different kinds—for example words, words in different languages, silence, non-hierarchical judgmental appreciation of images that might fill up a rectangle, whether it be painted, printed or filmed.

The quality of feeling that is transmitted in these different practices is the accumulation and assimilation of the past and an amalgam of experience in whatever form it has been ingested, as music, film, literature,



painting. It is a quality of humanness that echoes out into the world from us and to us, defining our future actions and what materials we will use if we make things.

And then I realized that the difference between all these pictures, and different techniques that I was using, was my approach towards the materials. The different appearance of the different works—that's what made up my way of working. And then imagine that now you're not even painting on different kinds of materials or with different paintings. But you just stop painting all together and you're actually painting with a camera.

**DM:** Right.

**JS:** But, you have to think, I've been looking how to make a brush stroke from it seems like the beginning of time. Whether it was me using a shard of a plate to make a surface, or me covering something with wax. Using a pallet knife, and then cutting a hole in it. Or then whether it was using velvet or different kinds of materials to throwing tablecloths at the canvas so I'd have a printed image. To taking a painting, and then dragging it behind my car so the asphalt would burn an image into it, while the canvas was folded, to make a bigger stroke. To finding these tarps on the floor that are put down to keep people from tracking oil in a guy's house. And then you look down and see the floorboards that look like some subliminal notion of water.

What I always like is the elasticity of things that are a physical description, or physical fact. We understand where they come from, but they lose their identities and they become something else at the same time as we look at them.

**DM:** Mm-hmm.

**JS:** And that notion of simultaneity of time is particular to painting. But the notion of simultaneity of time when you've got parallel lives running alongside of each other, people that can speak to you from the grave—the

same year that I made the Patients and the Doctors, I wrote Paintings That Could Raise the Dead. So whether paintings raise the dead or movies do or speak to you from the grave of the author, in movies there are parallel lives that can run alongside each other like dreams running alongside of each other and out of those dreams you can find a configuration that has meaning.

**DM:** Let's stay with this idea of various-ness that you spoke of in your painting, and that ability to not fall into one way of making a painting, being antithetical to people's expectation of what a style is, like the abstract expressionist notion of a signature style. I was thinking of your films and, you know, the first film is about a great African American artist who's very much an outsider to the art world. The second film is about a gay Cuban dissonant poet. The third film is about a man who is trapped cognitively within an absolutely immobile body, and has no physical sense of his being anymore. And your most recent film is about three generations of oppressed Palestinian women.

If I was to circumscribe all of the content, I'd use the words "alterity" and "otherness." But that seems conspicuous to me when I consider your filmmaking and then think about the various-ness of your painting. What do you think about that idea?

**JS:** In painting you take everything you know and don't know and posit that in the work. It has to be the same in filmmaking. The process has to be elastic, malleable, a work of discovery. People say to me, "How did you do that? How do you know what that's like?" Doctors and neurologists asked me that about the Diving Bell. People who are paralyzed asked me that. But why would I be qualified to engage in any of that, or make this movie about claustrophobia and fear. I think the problem with filmmaking in general is people making movies about stuff they don't know anything about. They don't know...the tools that they are using. They might have techniques, but it is not necessarily going to help them to find the soul of what it is or the feeling. Even an important treatment, if it's told in a boring way, it becomes meaningless.

???In 1981 I made a painting called Oar for the one who comes out to know fear. Overriding factor: transcendence, catharsis "analogue" for life.???

I think in painting also, the same thing is true. People get bogged down in technique, and the work ultimately is generic instead of personal. I made the paintings that I could as I saw it. Being a young person, going to the movies was a part of who I was, who I am. Sitting in the dark before the movie comes on, watching those little particles float around is like a state that of consciousness. You close your eyes when you go to sleep. It is just like that. Then after a while you pass out and you wake up the next day. I never thought I would be a director.

Sometimes I have dreams and in my dream I see a group of paintings but I would think they were somebody else's paintings. Then I would wake up and then I would realize I never saw them before and I could paint the paintings I saw in my dream.

**DM:** I want to talk about, I don't know, the idea of modernism, and the self and this notion. We touched on it in terms of an idea of style, and I raised the term "signature style." You think of Pollock, you think of Rothko. Where do you see yourself in relation to an idea of modernism, or is that even relevant?

**JS:** Well, I would say that...sometimes when you think about Rothko or whatever, you think about that one thing. You think, "Wow, how lucky for that person. They found that one image that they could keep painting and make their work in that. And they were so convinced that was who and what they were." Well, for me, you wonder, "Have I not found the answer, if my paintings look different?" But the truth of the matter is that there's a body of work, and when you look at the paintings, I think that they actively look like they go together. I think I would need a giant space, much bigger than the space in your museum, to really show my work, to where you could have a room full of, say, the Atlas Mountain paintings, a room full of Chuck paintings, a room full of crazy

people paintings, a room full of plate paintings, big ones that are 10 by 20 feet.

Rooms of these bodies of work that I think for anybody else would have been the irreducible image. Say somebody made a plate painting and they keep making plate paintings for the rest of their life. But for me, as portraits they worked. I didn't feel like I needed to make any more big paintings with dishes on them. But I like looking at the ones I made when I see them. And my needs were very different than them/their needs?????. I've looked for different kinds of materials.

I mean, you could probably make a list of things that are variables that a software designer could put in, and come up with an infinite amount of different possibilities of what a Julian Schnabel painting might look like. You could pick a surface. You could pick a word. You could pick the way that oil paint looks on a tarp. You could pick the way gesso looks on a tarp. You could take things that have been printed that have a variety of images on them. You could take works that have been made on polyester with resin poured on them, and the variety of these printed works, from X-rays to surfing images to Japanese or Chinese people.

So there's a technique that's used to get an image onto a surface. Sometimes the surface is more like architecture. Other times the surface or the architecture of a picture is actually a picture. Architecture is something that can be pictorial, and then one can paint on top of it like the big girl paintings. As I was making *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, I came across these X-rays in a house not far from the hospital. These X-rays looked like abstract expressionist paintings to me. But they were the inside of somebody's body.

They were X-rays made in 1911. The ????? of film looked like a canvas. Looked like an arena. Looked like a surface. Sometimes it's a picture of a surface. Then the surface, I will paint with ink on some—gossamer kinds of materials instead of thick paint for some. Other ones, I am looking for the invisible. Something that is just about to come into existence.

I know what you said about de Kooning, I think that might be a very literal description of what he was doing. I think that you can't get away from the physicality of his painting. And the gesture in those pictures. I think that most of his paintings were a bit academic. I think they were radical at the beginning, and then too accepting in of his invention, like image-making. You can't fault him for that. It's a natural progression.

But you can see how he liked Soutine or where he comes from. I'm probably an artist that's more like Picasso. It's just a fact that he had all these different kinds of periods. He painted differently, but he used painting as his medium.

But I am not trying to make a painting to go with the last one I made. I'm trying to make a painting that I have never seen before.

**DM:** Same with your films?

**JS:** You know, I never thought that I was going to reinvent the wheel... So, you know, I made the paintings because I was curious about something, trying to find out something about myself. About the world that I live in and that was my way of mediating the world. I did the same thing with film. I never thought of art as a career. I never made a painting to make money, and I never made a movie to make money... I mean, that's probably different than most people. I think most people make movies so they can make money also while they're doing it. It's like a job. And I make the films because I feel like it's a responsibility.

Van Gogh wrote letters, but I don't really have letters. I had movies. That was my form of writing. Now, hardly any people write letters, because there's text messages, they just text each other. It's interesting, just how communication has to be custom stylized, custom designed for each person. Some people are fine with SMS's, Internet, email and all that, but that doesn't work for me. I couldn't necessarily convey what writing is. Most of the writing I did was about art. It was about thinking about why, trying to explain why I was painting something. What was I thinking about that was making me paint something. When I was painting, it was not necessarily an illustration of what I was thinking, I was trying to list the things that I was reacting to. In the case of many, I was reacting to my experience in a movie theatre. My experience of other people's sensibility, whatever it was,

it was a virtual reality. I mean, the movies that made impressions on me were the ones kind of... They were different when I was really young but as I became more conscious of what it was about, then they were movies that had a physical...

**DM:** Something physical?

**JS:** ...a physical intrusion somehow, into your space, into your consciousness, into your reality. If I saw a movie, like *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, Werner Herzog, he has his camera just on the water for a while, on rapids. The water itself is doing the moving. The camera is not moving, the camera moves a little bit sometimes, but essentially what's happening is that, mixed with a certain kind of music, deposits this feeling in you.

**DM:** Okay, so, go on. Camera on the water, a physical aspect of something cinematic? It doesn't mean he's going to set up something in painting?

**JS:** Yeah, so I go home, or I don't even paint the painting that day, but I walk away from that and I come out basically with the painting Cortes. I mean, I'm looking at these guys marching through the jungle in armour and brocade material. I find just this pink in it, there's red in it, there's mud colour in it. I'm looking at it and then I'm thinking of my own life, just walking through the jungle in Mexico as a teenager, not being able to see outside past the trees. Walking through thorns, looking for some place I where can get some honey that somebody told me about. Then I'm climbing up the side of a mountain because I thought I could paddle across this point, and it turned out to be too treacherous to do... You know, what is painting ultimately? It's a way of taking these things and depositing these things into everything that you're conscious of and unconscious of, and putting it together into whatever way you can to this physical fact.

So I never thought that the paintings—the concept that painting would be a career is totally irrelevant, absurd. The other thing—that paintings, still paintings, would lead you to making motion pictures, is absolutely ridiculous, because there's no need for paintings to start to move... So when they talk about having painting, music, the cinema captures all of these elements, that's not true. It's just the quality of the feeling that you get from whatever thing it is, whether it's a poem or somebody's voice, or whatever. It's the quality of the meaning that will take you on that trip, and that will take you out there and affect your soul and free you somehow.

The nice thing, the thing about movies that I love, is that you don't want to escape from that world, no matter how horrible the things that are happening there. The world that gets created is so seductive that you want to live in that world. The way you want to live in paintings. There's some paintings, you just want to keep looking at them because you don't want to let go of that. And that's what's so great—you can live in that world. I think that's why we're attracted to certain writers. That's why we'll buy paintings because we can support the philosophy of those, the ideology that those paintings embody. Not because they're decorative. They're things that you can be responsible for, things that you fall in love with, you become attached to, that you want to live with, that you don't want to live without.

**DM:** Yeah.

**JS:** I think that by realizing that in the movies that I made, there's something that happens that's unusual or not the typical fare or the typical equation that it's in most films. Something else happens there... It's like they don't end. The movies really don't have an end. If you've seen the story it doesn't mean, oh, I've seen it already, I don't have to watch it again. It's the kind of thing that you can look at over and over again, the way you look at a painting. But by having a narrative people look at, or feeling like they understand or feel close to these film, then they might begin to look at paintings. And if they can come to painting that way, then that's okay. It's just like a way of giving somebody a couple of maybe familiar roads, so that's an access to being able to look at something that's totally hermetic. That is nothing other than what it is made out of. Just materials and paint. The

way that something's put down.

You're not looking for the explanation. You stopped looking for the explanation. You accept what it is. And what it is is mystifying. Not that there is a little rabbit that you are going to find inside of the painting. Or if you see an image, then you go, oh I know what the painting is, it's a rabbit. I don't know if that's any good or not. But I feel like after, or the kind of combination of the two things, it just drags people into this space to look at a painting and let that happen to them. I think that those things are kind of equivalent to sort of these epiphanies that people find in my movies where they go, oh, like I liked when they knocked the building down. Like when I felt I saw the avalanche in here...because the frame is an element. The surface is an element. The way this is painted is an element.

What I am saying is (movies) are connected in my memory. They were part of my life. I was communicating not with people around me as much as I was communicating with people through their art.



**Jon Kilik in conversation  
with David Moos**

Jon Kilik, the producer of Julian Schnabel's films, talks to David Moos about his long-time partnership with the painter and filmmaker. The interview took place in the Schnabel Studio, New York, February 2010.

**JON KILIK:** Julian showed up on my doorstep in 1993 or 1994 after he had asked a few friends in L.A. their advice and if they'd help him become a director. Actually it was a time where a few painters were trying to make that transition, and it was happening, although I don't think anybody else was very successful at it. Julian might have been the one that people were most cynical about and afraid of. Although he has quite a few friends in L.A., nobody was really willing to jump in very early, other than the actor friends, who were a huge help. Plus having Dennis (Hopper), and having Chris (Walken) and having David Bowie, even just for a couple days each, was a way to help legitimize the whole process.

But at that time, and even with the second film, there was a real lack of respect from the Hollywood community, because that's just how Hollywood is. You have to prove it. Show me. We're not really willing to take any kind of chance, so we had to finance all the movies outside the studio system. The main thing with Julian, he got his own money, and the rest of us helped out a little bit, too. People thought I was crazy right off the bat with *Basquiat*. When that one worked out, we got a little bit of help on the next one. And then finally with *The Diving Bell*, everybody jumped in.

**DM:** Let's go back to that moment. Maybe talk about the beginning of your relationship with Julian, why he would have wound up on your doorstep, as you said.

**JK:** I had done a few things at that time. I produced *Do the Right Thing* and *Dead Man Walking*, and I had also worked with directors like Robert Altman and John Huston, and Scorsese and Lumet. There was a reputation that I had, and he was impressed by those credentials. We met, and like I said, friends of mine who had told me about Julian were all very skeptical and cynical about the whole thing. Why do I need to do that to help him become a director? He had just done his record, which came through with mixed reviews.

But we met, and I went to his show at Pace, the Jane Birken paintings I think it was, and I right off the bat felt there was something really special, both with his work and then especially with his passion, and personality and attitude. I respond a lot to that. I work very closely with directors, and it's the passion and what I see in their eyes which tells me what's going to happen when the going gets tough. Also, the vision and the enthusiasm and knowing the subject as he did made up for a lot of what he did not know technically, and I trusted that. I just trusted that he would figure it out and that he would bring a unique perspective to it, which excited me too. I was looking for something original and new, and I saw that in him. I embraced his lack of experience instead of running away from it.

**DM:** How unusual. Your experience is that where someone from another discipline walks, let's say not into Hollywood but into mainstream filmmaking, and can execute a first film at the level of *Basquiat*.

**JK:** It didn't get to that level until the very, very end. It was a constantly evolving, growing process. There wasn't much on the page during the script phase, during the shoot it was a bit patchy, and even during the editing we were still building the story. Just watching Julian paint this movie through that entire process, even in the editing process, when he would add layer upon layer, and music upon stock footage, and just different mixed media until we got there. It's very similar to watching him work with the paintbrush. It's just something that was alive and evolving all throughout the process, constantly getting better until he was done. That is a very refreshing thing for me to see and be part of, and that's why I've been part of this for now 17 years and just am very proud of the work, and it continues.

**DM:** So when I just quickly think about *Basquiat*, it's interesting to hear you describe the process of making. I see that enormous wave crashing over the city, the artist in visions. When I think of *The Diving Bell*, I think of that image of the ice shelf breaking loose and crashing into the sea. Those images, where did those come from? Talk a bit about your process, and talk about the freedom in those films.

**JK:** It starts with an imagination and Julian's imagination, which he'll share with me, and it'll grow into something a little more literal, obviously. But again, it's never really complete until it's built upon, and it'll start with that idea, and maybe it's an idea that is added on top of another idea that exists. Just as he is with the painting, it's something that you could never have predicted how we're going to end up.

I see it happen all the time on the set when we'll walk into a room, and it's a room that the production designer might have set up the way he thinks it should be, and lit the way the cameraman might think it should be, and the actors are prepared in a way that they're expecting the scene will go, and Julian will completely adjust that, because when he sees all those elements together it's going to give him a new perspective on it and a new idea. It's going to take the story further and deeper, and make it stronger.

**DM:** As you mentioned, you worked with some of the great directors, whether it's Robert Altman or Spike Lee. How different is Julian compared to what you were familiar with in terms of his process?

**JK:** Some directors are very well schooled and very rigid with their approach and well prepared, but in a different sense. They may know their subject too, but they also feel that they've got to go into it understanding visually where they're going and have a map for themselves with storyboards and shot lists. Because Julian did not go to film school and did not come up through the other ranks. Julian's fearless. Julian loves to go into it free and without looking at a piece of paper. He wants to look at the room and look into the eyes of the character, again, because he's so well prepared in a different way, because he feels connected to the story, and the script and the actors and just has an instinctual approach to it. He's living in the story. The shots will happen. He's used to looking at that rectangle all the time when he paints, so he's not worrying about figuring out where the camera's going to go. As a matter of fact, he doesn't want to prefigure it. He wants to see how it's going to look when it gets on the set, which really frustrates a lot of the technical crew.

Part of my job is creating an environment for a director, and that means putting him together with a great cameraman, and editor, and the other key crew people and casting people. They're not used to such a different approach, and it's scared a lot of people, especially in the beginning. Now I think Julian's reputation is pretty well known within the industry, not just the work, but how he works. It wasn't very well known or understood in the early days, so this different way of working, not having the shot list and changing things so often on the set, was a little scary for people early on. But they hung in there with him to their credit, and although they had doubts and fears, they did keep going. Turning the room upside down literally was oftentimes something that just made the movie extra special and alive.

**DM:** Do you think that sort of otherness that he brings enables him to do that because he's such an outsider?

**JK:** I think it's partly because he is such an outsider, and frees himself of all of that baggage and wasn't formally schooled in it so he could bring his own style to it. But more than that, he does have an incredible gift of being able to walk into any room and really fix it and really make it better than it was before he got there. I think he can do that as a designer, as a cameraman, and so when the designer sees that happen, when the cameraman sees that happen, they have immediate respect for him because they know that he knows and respects what they do. He prides himself on doing that job well in collaborating with them on how to enrich the film.

**DM:** So your work with him is like a mutual journey, I suppose. You saw this exhibition of his paintings at Pace. Was that a kind of initiation for you into the art world?

**JK:** Yeah, it was. I had always loved art, and my parents, unlike again hearing Julian speak of his, mine brought me to the museums and galleries. I have a little bit of it in my family, and I loved it as a child. It was always something that I really enjoyed. But to see his work was certainly different from anything I'd seen, just the scale of it, and the courage of what he was doing. That Jane Birkin show had these 20-foot sails with writing on them, and I'd just never seen anything like it. His courage and will are qualities that I like to think that I have when I'm out there trying to make movies. We just had that in common.

**DM:** What's next? How do you identify with an engaging project?

**JK:** It just has to hit us... Julian doesn't have to rush. We can be patient, which I would much rather do, and wait until we're inspired and excited about something... You know, at this point now, so many years into his film career, I think we can expand the options. It's great when young filmmakers or first- and second-time filmmakers are working in a world that they really know instinctually. But at this point I think Julian has confidence on the set and can really take on anything that he's interested in, even if it's not something that he knows instinctually. But if it's something that he's passionate about and wants to learn about, as was the case with *Miral*, I think that we can continue to really expand our world beyond just our own experiences, and immerse ourselves in things that we're interested in and want to learn about. That's how I make my choices. Not every subject is something that I know inside and out when I start, but if it's something I want to learn about and think the world needs to learn about too, that intrigues me enough to explore it as a next movie.

**DM:** Speak a little bit about the writing and what that process is, but also how maybe you engage Julian and how it gets crafted.

**JK:** We really take our time with that, and sometimes we've made movies with very little money. Lou Reed had a couple hundred thousand dollars. Basquiat was just barely \$3 million. None of the movies had very large budgets, but we were economical and efficient with what we did have. We'd never rush and never really had a problem with time restricting us, which can happen and usually happens on all films, even films that have tremendous budgets. But we figured out a way to avoid that, and it's been a real benefit because we've been able to take our time with the script, work with writers and experience scout, then come back to writing.

That was part of the process on both *Before Night Falls* and *Miral*. We were able to write a little bit. Julian could write, research, go to Cuba. We could go to Israel. We could come back. We could write a little more. During the shoot you have to be a little more nimble and quick. But during the writing process and during post, we've always taken the time we need to get it right. We had a very long editing process on *Basquiat*, because the script never really was perfect, and it took time to build in the editing room. Luckily, because we financed the movie ourselves, we luckily didn't have someone breathing down our necks saying, "Well, you only have 10 weeks to finish this movie from beginning to end." We could take the time we needed, because we didn't have a lot of people working with us. It didn't cost a lot, and we didn't have the pressure of some big company looking down our backs with a release date that they were holding us to. We never even had a distributor until after the films were finished. We still don't. The writing process would be a very organic process. The goal was to make it as honest as possible, make a good film, but make an honest film. Keep finding the truth. That was always the road we were down

**DM:** Let's say the script's developed, casting happens, rehearsals... You try things out with actors. Maybe it's the right fit, maybe it isn't. How organic is that process? How different is that process, let's say, from like an



Altman film, which I'm using as an example of the kind of textbook, big-budget Hollywood style.

**JK:** I always say to Julian that of all the directors I worked with, Altman is the most similar experience I've had, because he likes to have it be a family sort of experience, and it just feels smaller, and intimate, and very personal throughout. There were dinner parties all the time on an Altman set. It's a very social feeling that includes everybody. Julian's extremely generous and interactive with the crew and the cast, and that's a really unique thing. Again, a lot of people when they get on a movie set, there's so much time pressure and money pressure that there's a lot of fear. We've got to finish by a certain time, let everybody go home and get ready for the next day. It's not supposed to be so much fun, but Julian likes to make it like a big, family-style dinner on the set and even when we're off the set. As far as casting and crewing up, again, it's more about giving those actors the confidence that they're right for it and inviting them to participate in it. He's not big on screen tests or going down lists of casting directors. It's more of an organic process and a gut feeling.

**DM:** A lot of people from the art world, when they hear the name Julian Schnabel, don't think of him in the terms that you described him. I just wonder how you feel about that, if you bother to feel about that. Would you speculate why you think that is?

**JK:** That's because Julian never stoops to political correctness. He is not going to say what he is supposed to say. He's going to say what he feels, and it sometimes comes off as being very smug, very egocentric and with a tremendous amount of attitude. But that's how he is in public. That strong will is maybe something that he has to do when he's outside the intimate setting of his studio or his movie set, because on the movie set and in the studio, I've found him to actually be the opposite of that, to be scared in a good way, showing the actors all of the confidence and all of the work that he's done to get there, but still scared in the sense that he respects the difficulty of what he's taken on, the difficulty of painting a 20-foot painting.

If he thought it was easy, it wouldn't turn out to be very good. If he thought making a movie was something that he could just do in his sleep, they wouldn't turn out to be very good either. But he has great respect for the challenge of making good work, and he's still afraid, especially with the films. I think he has more confidence in the paintings, but that's why we're able to work so far into the process, because he's not sure if it's good yet, so we've got to go at it a little harder, and work a little longer and go a little deeper into it. That really helps me out, because I want to push to make it 100 percent, and when I have a director who's got that kind of attitude and a little bit of fear, but who cannot back down from the challenge, it's usually going to turn out to be something special.

**DM:** I had one last question, which is just... I think about how Julian is operating outside Hollywood top A. This distant French production company. So, what about the temptation to do a big budget Hollywood film? Does that surface ever?

**JK:** Again, I don't think the budget is the achievement. It's whether the film is worthy, whether the story is worthy. We're just trying to make a good film.

**DM:** Maybe you know David Cronenberg. He's an outsider, maybe because he's a Canadian. He has a very deeply developed sense of the kind of film he wants to make. He is very strategic in the way that he positions himself and his resources, quite tactical. In any case, he was recently involved in a project with Tom Cruise. Whether that gets made or not, my point is... Hollywood, using a capital H, can enable certain things... It really has to do with the kind of auteur aspect of Julian's filmmaking, which is related to his studio practice here. But I'm just thinking, do you and he ever wonder what could be done with Hollywood? Or, is that not really a factor, and you don't think about that?

**JK:** The five movies, including Lou Reed, that we wanted to make, we made... The five movies that we made are the five movies we wanted to make. Sometimes, you hear about how Scorsese really wants to make one movie, but studios won't let him. So he has to make these other two. Then maybe they'll let him do that. Throughout film history, you've heard stories like that from Orson Wells to Scorsese. We've wanted to make four movies and a music documentary, and we've made them. Hollywood said no every single time, and we've made them every single time. That's pretty remarkable. Now, the movies haven't been gigantic box office successes. They've been critical successes. We're proud of the films, and they've returned the modest budgets to the investors.

Even after the Cannes win, the Venice win, the Academy Award nomination, the Golden Globe win for Best Picture, the Golden Globe win for Best Director. All the great reviews and top 10 lists, after all that, Hollywood is still going to hold back their dollars and not just jump in to the Julian Schnabel business, because they are going to look at box office return. Not just awards and critical prizes and the quality of the movies, which is the important thing. But that's because they're under a certain kind of pressure. They're owned by gigantic corporations, multi-national huge conglomerates. They've got to answer to a board and a bottom line.

Now if we wanted to make a big story that required a larger amount of money, we'd probably try to still raise it internationally first. We might need Hollywood to come in and finish the financing, possibly, depending on how much you needed. There's that much at risk, even for a foreign financier. You usually need to have some kind of partnership with a U.S. distributor... If it were ever to happen, where we wanted to tell a story that required a big studio budget, I still think we could find a way to pull it off and work with the actors that we wanted that would justify the budget.

Hopefully, the idea of the story and the potential success would be something that would make sense for everybody. But when you get to that level, you do have to be a little bit more calculating and answer those questions. When you're working at a smaller level financially, you do have more freedom. You can take more

risks, because there's enough of a core audience that you can rely on that will experiment with you, that makes a limited budget more achievable, in terms of box office returns.

We've still defied the odds because it's very difficult for anybody to make a film outside the studio system and get distribution. It doesn't matter who they are. Studios have their own movies they need to distribute. So to go out there four times in a row and make a movie and come to Hollywood and say, "Okay. We need distribution now." To break into that is a very hard thing to do. The movies have to be good. So as long as we keep telling good stories and making good films and finding the truth and raising the bar in terms of the style that Julian has been able to bring to these stories, then hopefully we'll have continued success in being able to get distribution for them.

We want to make films for that person out there who we don't know, who is going to hopefully like it and connect with it no matter where they live, who they are, or what they do. We didn't make *Basquiat* just for the art world. We made it for the kid that I met in Bali 15 years ago, who was watching the movie, believe it or not, for the tenth time and was totally connected and inspired by it. The way I was inspired by *The Bicycle Thief* before I ever went to Italy.

There's just a universal, emotional connection that I think that Julian has been able to find that he's been very good at. That's the core of the films—the emotional connection with the characters. That has to be the first thing that happens. Julian's very good at finding that humanity, that quality in the people. The rest of it is a world that, hopefully, we're interested in hearing about. But the important thing is to connect with them emotionally.