



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

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FIELD TRIP MASTER'S VOICE



The painter Julian Schnabel is not an early riser, and last Monday morning he was more than usually fatigued, having returned the day before from Paris, where for the past six months he has been making a film of Jean-Dominique Bauby's memoir "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly." Not long after arriving at his Brooklyn studio, at around eleven, he settled into a commodious velvet armchair, with chipped gilt paint on its arms, and fell asleep.

He was dressed in jeans and a checked work shirt that was tight around the middle, and wore a long necklace of bright beads and charms, which was made by his daughter Lola when she was seven. The dimly lit space was bustling with people—assistants, several Schnabel children, and assorted visitors, including Agnes Gund, the former president of the Museum of Modern Art—but nothing appeared to disturb the artist in his Buddha-like repose.

At eleven-thirty, Schnabel got to his feet to greet six art students, who were in town as guests of the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts, a program created by Ted Arison, the founder of Carnival Cruise Lines (who died in 1999), and his wife, Lin. The students had been mustered out of the Hilton at nine-fifteen, marched through MOMA, and then taken to Brooklyn in a van for a master class with Schnabel. One of them, eighteen-year-old Cheryl Smith, had the word "Rauschenberg" written on her hand, because she had seen something of his she liked in the museum.

"Hello, I'm Julian," Schnabel said. "I work here."

He began by telling the class his areas of expertise: "I know bullfighting, surfing, painting, and art." Schnabel, whose smashed-plate paintings made him a star in the eighties and became a symbol of that decade's bombast,

has acquired with the years (he's fifty-five) a tinge of self-mockery that makes his egocentrism more palatable. He showed the students two of his early paintings. They were huge and dirty-looking. "I don't want art to look expensive," he said. "I like it when it looks like junk." He told them a story, now a well-established part of his legend, about how he had bought the tarpaulins the paintings were executed upon from a truck driver in Mexico, where he was surfing. The students didn't appear to be enthralled by this tale, which caused Schnabel to redouble his efforts to charm them.

"Normally, I paint outside in Montauk," he said. "If you paint something inside, it might not look good outside, but if you paint something outside, it will always look good inside."

"What do you do in the winter?" Jason Lee, a seventeen-year-old from Chicago, asked. He was dressed in an oversized white V-neck undershirt and black skintight jeans. Schnabel glanced over to see if Lee was mocking him and, on deciding that he might be, smiled approvingly. After that, Schnabel insisted on keeping Lee near him. "Where's Jason? Where'd he go?"

Unlike many artists, Schnabel enjoys talking about his work and himself. His voice is seductive; it somehow manages to sound like both Brooklyn, where he was born, and Brownsville, Texas, where he lived as a child. "He sounds like your boyfriend when he's talking to you on the phone," his twenty-four-year-old daughter, Stella, said. "He makes you feel the way you wish a boyfriend would make you feel." Schnabel talked to the students about Walt Whitman and the idea of reality as a horizontal plane in which all things—trees, buildings, people—are equal. He made them stand very close to the paintings, to smell them. He paced from canvas to canvas with a stately, cat-like tread.

For lunch, Schnabel led the group to a pizzeria nearby. On the way, Lee asked, "What's the worst thing you can do as an artist?"

"Try to get people to like you."

At the restaurant, Schnabel directed



Julian Schnabel and Jason Lee

Lee to sit next to him. "You know, you remind me of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Did you see my film about him?" Lee had. "You should see it again."

Lee announced that he wanted to change his name. Schnabel suggested Earl, because "Earl Lee is better than late."

The waiter offered cappuccino.

"Al Pacino? He's not here," the artist called out, and looked at Lee to see if he laughed. Lee didn't seem to be listening.

After lunch, Schnabel stopped in front of a small patch of freshly planted daffodils and tulips. Next to it sat a discarded container and some scraps of wood stuffed inside a cardboard box. Schnabel said, "Now, this looks like it could be art. A little plastic, some flowers, and some cardboard." Everyone stopped and watched while he rearranged the trash on the sidewalk.

"It's beautiful!" Lee exclaimed, lingering to stare at the garbage and the flowers as the master continued down the street.

—John Seabrook