



Tom Powel Imaging photos / © Julian Schnabel Studio

Schnabel's big splash

Seemingly offhand works given grand play at Legion of Honor

By Charles Desmarais

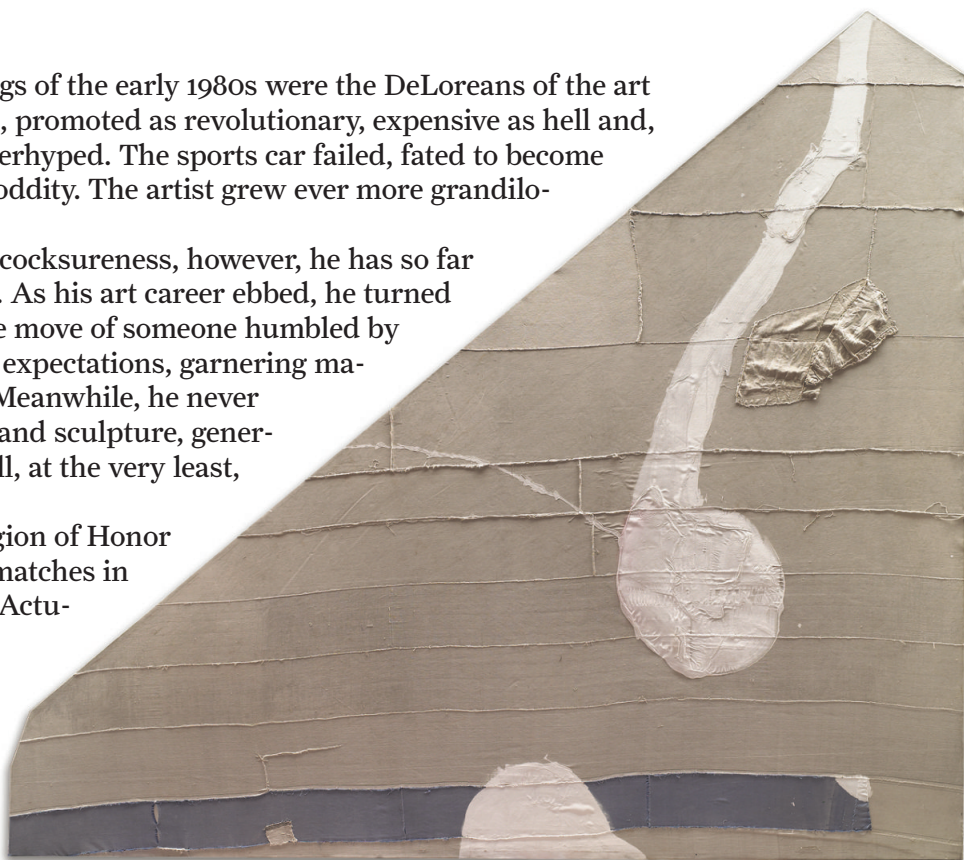
Julian Schnabel's paintings of the early 1980s were the DeLoreans of the art world: audacious in design, promoted as revolutionary, expensive as hell and, ultimately, dismissed as overhyped. The sports car failed, fated to become no more than a collectible oddity. The artist grew ever more grandiloquent.

If Schnabel suffers from cocksureness, however, he has so far survived his affliction well. As his art career ebbed, he turned to directing films — not the move of someone humbled by criticism. He surpassed all expectations, garnering major awards along the way. Meanwhile, he never stopped making paintings and sculpture, generally at a scale one might call, at the very least, ambitious.

Now, San Francisco's Legion of Honor has provided a space that matches in size the artist's aspiration. Actually, several spaces. "Julian

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Julian Schnabel's "Untitled" (2017), top, and "Jane Birkin (Egypt)" (1990), right.



ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Mason Trinca / Special to The Chronicle

“Julian Schnabel: Symbols of Actual Life” paintings are on display near Rodin’s “The Thinker “ in the courtyard at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco.

Schnabel makes big splash at Legion

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Schnabel: Symbols of Actual Life” dominates most of the museum’s entry courtyard, as well as the walls of three huge galleries. The show opened this week and continues through Aug. 5.

The exhibition was organized by Max Hollein, director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, of which the Legion is a part. It turns out to be one of Hollein’s parting public acts — he is leaving to take over New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art — and it is a telling one. During his short tenure, Hollein brought a refreshing new atmosphere to an institution that had become more than a bit stale.

One of the ways he did that was to expand the presence of contemporary art in the museums. Importantly, he hired a strong curator of contemporary art in Claudia Schmuckli. It will be of great interest to see whether she can win institutional support in the absence of so devoted a champion.

A signature program has been a series of “interventions” by living artists in the galleries where the Legion’s famed collection of works by Auguste Rodin reside. The Schnabel show, as pompous as it is, turns out to be the most deferential of these.

At 25 feet square, Schnabel’s paintings for the courtyard could occupy the entire footprint of a decent studio apartment. There are six of them, evenly spaced along two sides of the colonnade, with three towering plaster-and-steel sculptures commanding strategic positions on the quad.



Tom Powel Imaging / © Julian Schnabel Studio

Julian Schnabel’s “Untitled” (2016) is among the large abstracts on found fabrics in the show.

The installation is stunning. Not in the literal sense, but in an air-kiss, don’t-you-look-fabulous way. That’s catty, but the works’ seemingly offhand yet calculated stylishness invites such a response.

Simple abstract forms, some plantlike, others seemingly enlarged from selected accidental splodges, are painted in white gesso on found fabrics — tarpaulins that once saw industrial use, presumably. Faded over time in the sunlight to dusty pinks, grays and purples, the canvases themselves provide the only color, their stitched seams and repairs the

few carefully drawn lines.

The untitled paintings were made expressly for this presentation, their dimensions and their foggy tones nicely fitted to the space. The sculpture, from the 1980s, has a vaguely neoclassical vibe with strong hints of Rodin, about whose “Thinker” everything else in the outdoor room revolves. Amphora forms in weathered white bear titles the French master might have chosen: “Helen of Troy,” “Grady” and, closest of all, “Balzac.”

Inside the museum is where the visual correspondence

between the two artists really gets started. Gallery 8, as it is called, is filled with white marble and plaster Rodin works from the Legion collection. On three walls, spliced sheets of canvas that once shaded market stalls in Mexico become desert skies or landscapes with the judicious addition of lonely, cloud-like painted forms of white. They are the surface gestures of a decorator, you might say, but there is no denying their elegance or their knowing nod to Rodin’s fabled poetic efficiency.

In another room, a pair of worn, sail-shaped canvases

“Julian Schnabel: Symbols of Actual Life”: 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m., Tuesdays-Sundays. Through Aug. 5. \$12-15. Under 18, free. Legion of Honor, Lincoln Park, 100 34th Ave., S.F. (415) 750-3600. <http://legionofhonor.famsf.org>

sourced from Egyptian sailors are, though made in 1990, precisely, uncannily right for the space in color and form. The sailcloth had come with the word “Jane,” the name of a boat, already inscribed. Just because he could, the artist added a painted last name and titled the works “Jane Birkin (Egypt)” and “Jane Birkin #2.”

Starved for content by the final gallery, some viewers will be thrilled to encounter three untitled works, each imprinted with the photographic image of a toy rabbit astride a stuffed goat. The exhibition introduction tells us the works are a tribute to the late artist Mike Kelley. Kelley did use toy animals in some of his best known early works, and virtually all his art demonstrated a ribald sense of humor.

I was most interested in the French wallpaper that patterns the background, however. I couldn’t help but think it was Schnabel’s inside joke on the relationship between mural-size abstract painting and wall decor.

For all the guff he has taken — and he is far from the only artist guilty of inflating modest ideas to enormous size — he gets to have an opinion.

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