

Vito Schnabel on His Days as a 16-Year-Old Curator and His New Exhibition “White Collar Crimes”

by Lauren Christensen

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He may be only 26 years old, but Vito Schnabel—the eldest son of artist and film director Julian Schnabel (*Before Night Falls*, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*)—has already established himself as a force in the Manhattan art scene. Since launching his career in high school (Schnabel curated his first group exhibition in a Hudson Street warehouse at just 16), he has organized more than 30 shows in some of the world’s most distinguished galleries, forging long-term relationships with the Bruce High Quality Foundation and celebrated breakout artists like Laurie Anderson and Terence Koh. In an exclusive interview inside his West Village home, the Palazzo Chupi, the young art dealer took a break from touring the international art scene and curating the upcoming group exhibition “White Collar Crimes,” which opened yesterday at the Acquavella Galleries, to give us a glimpse into la vida Schnabel.

VF Daily: “White Collar Crimes” is about to bring a lot of new—and very downtown—names to Acquavella; this seems like quite the experiment for the typically traditional, Upper East Side institution, no?

Vito Schnabel: It’s basically a painting show of work that’s been produced over the last five

years in New York, by New York–based artists. I’ve always thought of Acquavella as a real painting kind of gallery—whether it was Lucian Freud, Warhol, or de Kooning. They’re having a Pop still-life show right after mine, which is going to be pretty incredible. So in that sense it’s the perfect venue.

Is this a project you just dreamed up and pitched to the gallery directly? What was their response to your idea?

I’ve been talking with Acquavella for years now—I’ve always been a big fan of Bill’s [William Acquavella, gallery owner and son of founder Nicholas], and his son is a good friend of mine, so we all conceived of this together. It was kind of an organic thing that happened. They had a lot of faith in my ideas.

Is the theme of white-collar crime visible in all the paintings or just something you happen to see more abstractly throughout these artists’ work?

It’s something that I see and think. A lot of the paintings in the show have this austere, abstract element—a lot of it takes some profound belief in abstraction to even consider it art. At the same time, when you’re looking at some of these paintings, you really have to look past the surface, whether it’s Tauba [Auerbach]’s fold paintings or Rashid [Johnson]’s wax paintings that have these sculptural elements that make them altar-esque; there’s something very religious about them. But the point is, as with white-collar crimes, you don’t always get what you see, and sometimes there are discoveries made over time and only then can you appreciate it fully.

You said you’ve had these artists on your radar for several years now. What, in your mind, merits putting an artist on your shortlist?

It’s very personal; it’s just what I like and what I’m drawn to and what I get enthusiastic or excited about, and what I feel like working with or putting my time into.

Do artists typically come to you, or do you seek them out?

Both. I meet artists through other artists whom I like and respect. With time, you find more and more things that you like, but unfortunately most of the stuff I see I don’t like very much or I’m not very drawn to. But I love painting; I really do. I’m



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a painting junkie.

When you talk about curating “White Collar Crimes,” your process of aggregating and conceiving of these works as a whole seems quite artistic to me.

Sure. There’s definitely a creative element in organizing a show, curating a show. I did a show two years ago with Terence Koh in Long Island where we mowed out this 25-acre cornfield and installed bronze sculptures there. We created this maze, so that as you passed through it, you stumbled upon these different sculptures, or a 25-foot seesaw carved out of an oak tree that brought you above the cornstalk so you could see the sculptures. The idea of moving into different spaces like this really gets me excited, and that’s all part of the creative process.

Sounds terrifying.

Yeah, it was pretty scary. But fun, and it was a great installation.

Are there any artists you haven’t yet worked with who strike your eye?

I’ve been looking at Mark Flood’s work a lot, which I really like. I’m a huge fan of Mark Grotjahn—he’s become more well known. I think he’s really one of the best working today. And as a person, too; he’s one of my favorite people. I’d love to do something with him at some point in the future. There’s also a young artist named Borna Sammak who I really love; he went to N.Y.U. He makes abstract paintings that he installs in TVs suspended with rope or chains, or leaned up against a wall. He’s very interesting.

You’ve been in this business for a decade now. What was your high-school experience like?

I went to Saint Ann’s School in Brooklyn. I played a lot of sports when I was younger, and I had a couple of friends who I was really close to. I got lucky that I knew what I wanted to do from a very young age.

So how does a 16-year-old curate an exhibition?

Well, I wanted to do a show of work that I had grown up around, that people might not have necessarily known—from a Spanish artist named Jorge Galindo to this guy who makes sculptures but is also a professional surfer, Herbie Fletcher, to my sister, to McDermott & McGough, to Vahakn Arslanian—and I really wanted to see it all together, similarly to how this Acquavella show has happened. I was just thinking about this work for a long time and thought people should know about it.

So I found a space on 250 Hudson Street; I’d actually met the guy who owned the space through playing basketball with him at Chelsea Piers. I said, “Can we go see it?” and he drove me down. It was this 10,000-square-foot space with 30-foot-tall ceilings, and he let me do a show in there for a couple months. And I’d just turned 16.

That’s an impressive amount of initiative. I’m sure it didn’t hurt that you grew up in a household with that much artistic influence.

Growing up, I appreciated everything my father did for us, but his career was something that was really always around me like an incubator; it was more of an incubation process.

My mother is also extremely talented and has a really great eye—she can find beautiful things in the most unlikely places. My sister Lola really influenced me too—she was friends with a lot of artists. One of the artists in the Acquavella show, Stefan Bondell, was somebody I met through her who I looked at art with for a long time.

But until I was about 12 years old, I was focused on sports. I didn’t really see my father; every time I did, we’d be in an art gallery. And then all of a sudden, I had a friend who was a painter. I started looking at a lot of art, and I never really stopped from there.

What’s a day in the life of Vito Schnabel like?

It varies. Last week was really crazy. I was going on studio visits every day with David Rimanelli, a writer at ArtForum. We’re organizing a show that will open this spring called “DSM-V,” which is the diagnostic statistical manual for psychiatrists, and the latest version has removed narcissism as a disorder and added grief. The show is about madness and self-portraiture.

Anyway, that's what it's typically like when I'm in New York—running around to studios and galleries with the several people I'm working with at any given moment.

Are there other industries you'd like to get into down the road?

I'm opening a restaurant with Jeff Zalaznick and Rich Torrisi and Mario Carbone. They're the owners of Torrisi Italian Specialties. I helped them design the restaurant, and we're installing a bunch of art there—that will open around late February or March. It was a lot of fun—I've always dreamt of having a place I could go to that felt like home. And I'd like to make a movie one day.

We'll look forward to that! Your place is pretty astounding, by the way. Is all of the artwork in here your permanent collection, or is it rotating?

It changes a lot. Right now I have paintings of Dan Colen's, a Nate Lowman bullet hole, and works by the Bruce High Quality Foundation, including *The Bachelors de Avignon*, which is obviously based on Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*. I try to combine different artists from different time periods around me.