

## A fine Sense of Zebellion

Glenn Brown

I love the paintings of Julian Schnabel and Albert Oehlen, and I mean real love, the kind that goes deep and lasts forever. Though I may be overly romantic, and especially about painting, I know artists that trigger this much love don't appear too often. However, being a rational romantic, I would like to use the occasion of this exhibition and essay to discuss what it is that triggers this love. When the particular works seen here are hung side by side, what comes to mind, and what is most interesting, is the humour, wit and intelligence that bind these two artists together. We are left with the strange and very wonderful sensation that the individual works become one. The exhibition as a whole says something greater than the sum of its parts, as it becomes a real visual conversation between two very individual artists.

There is a fine and noble sense of rebellion in the paintings of both Albert and Julian, which comes, I presume, from them having a fierce streak of individuality. Neither, I imagine, would relish the prospect of being considered a part of a group or movement, or even being compared to any other living artist. Both have set their sails for uncharted waters, leaving the safety of the dry land of academia in favour of the rough seas of artistic freedom. The expressive physicality of their paintings gives us an indication that each has a very personal vocabulary of gestural marks. Their works are very clearly, undeniably and profoundly 'theirs'. Their personalities are writ large. That, at least, is how we might first see these two self-styled rebels.

I am fully aware that we live in a post-modern age of relational aesthetics, of healthy living and pragmatism. Our cultural diet is organic and varied and we are more aware of where our cultures come from than ever before. So, in order to do justice to the rich aroma and complex palettes of our two artists we have to talk of the cultural past, and the circumstances that created them, as two of the most important artists alive today.

Modernist and avant-garde art history is full of colourful examples of rebels: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg etc. Examples of every conceivable rebellion are available to any hapless soul who would avail themselves of buckets of paint and sheets of canvas. The concept of evolution and revolution, standing on the shoulders of heroes and heroines, masters old and new, to reach for the 'new', is a sensible way of learning about art history, but doesn't quite deal with the vacuous sensation one gets when standing in front of a blank tory, but doesn't quite deal with the vacuous sensation one gets when standing in front of a blank

canvas, brush in hand, ready to express the here and now.

The concept of the avant-garde, rule-breaking artist was born early in the twentieth century in the teething days of modernism. The story of Western twentieth-century art has been constructed from the disruptive shock waves sent out from forward-looking artists filling the vacuum left after

the safe structures of academic painting had been removed. The avant-garde soldier headed off into the artistic battleground of the future, an isolated tortured artist, full of existential angst. The artist of the First World War, who was desperate to come to terms with the modern mechanisation of warfare, lived on through the Second World War and then the Cold War. To be an important artist in the twentieth century you had to always look ahead and break the rules of the past.

Contemporary art galleries, universities and museums are full of artists and curators who keep this idea of the avant-garde alive, or at least keep feeding its corpse just enough for it to cough back up a few last morsels. Though we are told the avant-garde really lost its ruddy cheeks in the late 1970s, we can't seem to let it die. The promise of continually new art and revolution has us all hooked, like a spike in our blood sugar levels making us always crave another hit. We know all too well what damage this continual high is doing. Change has to involve destruction as well as creation. The old must be got rid of to make way for the new. Destruction can be good if it wipes away the tyrannical structures of the past, but did the avant-garde care what it got rid of as long as we made way for it?

The avant-garde became an international language, and what developed was broadly understood, if not all over the world, at least in a large part of it. Yes, some cultures got ignored and generally downgraded, while whole aspects of societies that had developed for thousands of years and blended into a rich culture were simply too complex for international modernism to understand. The role of women was always going to be problematic to such a phallocentric philosophy. Like a thousand-year-old village being bulldozed in order to build a contemporary art museum, modernism was a forced imperial culture. It did, however, produce some jaw-dropping and wonderful works of art that enriched our lives beyond measure: *Guernica*, *The Dance*, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue, Woman I*, to name but a few of the most famous paintings.

It is clear to see that our two artists have ambition. They both wanted and deserve an international audience. They wanted big museums with big white walls in big cities, all across the globe. They have both produced art on a prodigiously large scale, in size and quantity. They have not created studios modelled after Rubens, David or Koons that involve factory production lines of meticulously trained assistants, involving the employment of persons that are willing and able to fully automate themselves. Our two painters, I think, would find it problematic to take less successful artists and buy their souls to turn them into production line workers and capital. Warhol was of course being ironic when he named his studio The Factory. He was too much of a humanist to really turn his assistants into machines, even if he pretended to turn himself into one. The Factory was a meeting place for amateur artists of all persuasions to make a living and perhaps find a bit of fame. In this cruel capitalist world, artists have to sell their souls, all artists. Julian and Albert have sold theirs, I have sold mine, and I will assume the dear reader was willing to sell theirs. Buying the souls of one's fellow artists is for most a step too far. Albert's great friend Martin Kippenberger played the role of the devil very well. He bought the talented souls of young

painters and displayed their work as his, but if Warhol's Faustian pact turned him into a soulless machine, Kippenberger became one of Jean Tinguely's inventions, a machine whose sole aim was to self-destruct.

Both Kippenberger and Warhol constructed irony machines to drive home the point that they at least desired to be outside of capitalism. Both also needed to hide the fact that they had the ability and skill to draw and paint extremely well. The model we have to look for here, if we want to understand the prodigious production of our two heroes, is more along the lines of van Gogh or Picasso. A manic and obsessive production that needs just one soul. The multiple studios of our two artists may be impressive, but at the centre of production is still the isolated slightly self-conscious self. But isn't the existential tortured lonely artist just a myth? Well, yes and no. As I have tried to suggest, shared myths make language and artists need language in order to communicate with their audience. Sometimes you can be acting out a role, a myth, a stereotype, whilst all the time it's really being sort of true. An actor's stage tears are at once both real and pretend. They need to construct the essence of some sort of real anguish in order to create the tears that convey artificial anguish to us. Whether Julian and Albert's tears are real or the crocodile tears of two great actors is unimportant for now. The work of both of them, and especially combined, has the ability to confound, confuse, disturb and resonate.

I think it is time to talk about punk. I am not interested if either Albert or Julian wore the clothes or listened to the music but punk happened precisely at the point that these two started to think about making international art. Few of us seek to be true outsiders. We can flirt with the idea, we can twist the rules a bit and perhaps act out a little. It is so very difficult to step outside of capitalism, for an artist just as much as a banker. Capitalism is intrinsic to the international rules of the production and distribution of art. It's not so much that selling a work of art makes it part of capitalism. The paintings of Albert, Julian and indeed myself all form part of our cultural capital irrelevant of their monetary value. Museums don't sell art but they are just as much a part of capitalism as Mr Hetzler and his galleries. I don't know who first introduced the idea of a 'culturitalism as Mr Hetzler and a value outside of its actual physical worth. Museums, opera houses, theat capital', that art had a value outside of its actual physical worth. Museums, opera houses, theatres are all cultural capital, they help create cultural value. They make life better, they make life richer. Most of the time we want rich lives, full of culture and communication. We want the time richer. We must purchase our freedom and pay for the privilege of participation, in short, buy our time. We must purchase our freedom and pay for the privilege of participation, in short,

Punk was just what international capitalism needed. Religion's ability to control the masses into compliance had long gone. Modern art's role had been the new 'opium of the masses', and the museums and galleries the new churches, but this had started to go stale as the avant-garde produced conceptual art in its last attempts to appear new and relevant. Punk then stole the keys to the pharmacy and took whatever it could get its hands on to achieve some sort of artificial

nirvana. Punk was there to soften the pain of being a participant in consumer capitalism. If modernist art had made us feel better, punk made us feel even better still. It was a new high. We could be anarchists, or at least look and feel and say things that felt sort of anarchic, whilst all along knowing we were fairly well trapped inside the capitalist box.

It may sound like I am being critical of punk, and perhaps being critical of Albert and Julian for participating in punk's pranks. But don't forget that you cannot step away from language. We are cultural animals that are formed from our relationships and cultural bonds. Just as stepping outside of a spaceship without wearing a protective suit means instant suffocation death, life outside culture has a very limited appeal. The avant-garde died when conceptual art thought it had wiped out the last vestiges of capital production from the work of art, only to find that in abandoning its cultural past it was still stuck inside the culture machine, but now without any relevant tools with which to communicate. Punk's importance was that it let us play the 'what if' game. What if we lived outside of capitalism/language/society. It made life bearable, it made change seem plausible, and who can deny the importance of that? The valve on the pressure cooker needed to be lightened so that we might 'never mind the bollocks' of the modern world that we had to live in. In some form we have come full circle, for Christ's teachings were the very essence of punk, an anarchist far greater than Che Guevara. Both Jesus and Che had to finally be destroyed and humiliated by capital if their roles were to be fully acted out. Which artist is to play the role of Che and which Jesus is irrelevant. They both offer if not salvation then at least a bandage for our bleeding souls.

If, dear viewer, you might find a certain 'poverty chic' present in the works of our two artists, a liking for the half-mended hole, the detritus of the studio floor and the damp glamour of tarpaulins in man-made fibres, it is present as a very glorious prayer to the spectacle of ordinary things. If we are to carry on our humble existences in this murky capital-fuelled world, then we have to learn how to heap praise on the humble, glorify the downtrodden and find beauty in the darn right ugly. Like born-again Samuel Becketts, these painters teach us that we can simultaneously be in the gutter looking at the stars whilst also being high on the ceiling looking at the beautiful patterns that the pools of paint and bird shit make on the studio. To look at their works one must first take a radical step outside of the body and visit a state of pure consciousness.

Both Albert and Julian offer a very handmade salvation. This is not the mass-produced automated tone of Billy Graham but very much the garage band version of artistic production. As artists, we are all actors. We claim authenticity, we mean every word we say and every brush mark is real and fraught with tension. If the skill is a little lacking in parts, the face a little lopsided, the colour a little off and the perspective not quite perfect then all the more convincing and honest our role. We, as artists, have learned to keep it real. Lo-fi sounds for Grandma Moses' iPod. Bad art is good art. We hate professionals, or at least we hate to see the professional artist at work. The amateur's daubs may lack skill but at least they are far more real, far more convincing and most importantly more authentic. We crave authenticity. Real food, real lives, real meaning.

Picasso turned amateur at a very early age, convinced that the Renaissance had in part been a shift in the wrong direction and that professionalism had tipped the balance of skill too far in the direction of craft. The nineteenth century was awash with skilled artists. Painting had taken on photography and nearly won. The detail and precision with which painters captured images of both beautiful leisure and ugly toil had a greater sense of the real than ever before. You could smell the sweat of the horse just as you could just about get a whiff of Ophelia's perfume. The nineteenth century saw realism, and the rendition of three dimensions into two hit full volume. But the public began to think that the academy's version of real was not as honest and real as it pretended to be. The greater the realism with which the happy and contented peasant was painted, the greater and more apparent became the lie. The academy and the academic had grown too close to capitalism. For a collector or even just a spectator, the act of purchasing an artist's skill, labour and time came to represent bad taste, in an age where the downside of the industrial revolution was starting to become more apparent. Industrialisation was starting to turn us, the working majority, into zombie slaves. Even Karl Marx could not resist quoting Bram Stoker as he described the bourgeois as vampires feeding off the blood of the working class. For an artist to be seen as skilled in their craft was to be judged as an antique corpse. The academically educated were seen as mere offerings to the gods of capitalism. Picasso, full of pride and self-worth, was not going to be anyone's sacrificial lamb. Out went professionalism and in came the amateur. Skill had to be well-hidden lest anyone suspect that what they were buying was in any way inauthentic.

The model of the isolated amateur artist has made its way through the twentieth century with relatively few challenges. The vampires atop the capitalist pyramid have become ever more engorged and we, the people, ever more complacent with our role in the food chain. Van Gogh's madness, displayed so well in his effervescent brush strokes, and Picasso's inability to ever properly finish a painting are salvation to us all, besides being convincing enough renditions of the amateur at work. Even Marcel Duchamp succumbed to the mania and assembled his crucifix and garlic defence, lest he be accused of being one of the undead. After producing, with the generous help of his siblings, the masterpiece that is Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2 in 1912, Marcel was embarrassed. Only the professional eye-wateringly clever team of Raymond, Jacques, Suzanne and Marcel were going to manage to turn Picasso and Braque's amateur stabs at cubism into something really worth looking at. Nude Descending a Staircase, amongst others of the Duchamp family productions, is the apotheosis of synthetic cubism. But something went wrong. Only a few, and the wrong sort of people, liked its cleverness, skill and dizzy humour, and Marcel paid penance in 1917 by producing Fountain, a work so lacking in skill and craft that it absolved him for all eternity, and the readymade was born. This 'don't try too hard' model makes us all feel better. Art for all! We are all artists! Just one step away from genius! The readymade and bad art gave us all hope, allowed us to connect, made us important. A few pencil lines on a canvas or a daub of paint is creativity enough to convince us that the bourgeoisie would never have liked this. Boucher and Fragonard's candied confections are representations of consumption out of control, a pompous display of wealth. The more skilled the rendition, the further the plate is pushed away by the contemporary audience, by you, my dear reader.

This is all true, I hear you say, and I hope you are willing to accept that the avant-garde amateur or punk misfit wind is what has filled the sails of our two intrepid artists as they sailed their way to international stardom aboard the good ship Modernism. The ship had needed to stop at some point for a refit as we had started to notice more and more leaks, but all this was manageable. The refit was a success and the prefix 'Post-' added to its name so it could sail on for many years to come. If our sturdy ship had to suffer the indignity of piracy, all was not lost. A few of the crew who refused to accept the new moniker and a captain too crazed to really take control were thrown overboard and lost to the waves. The punk crew, more slovenly, lazy and ill-tempered than their avant-garde predecessors, still managed to just about keep things afloat, though in a more bedraggled fashion. If, dear reader, you think you detect a whiff of irony in my windy text, don't be too sure. There was no option for our two heroes: they had to hide their technical brilliance in the dark arts of dynamic composition. They were both aware of the cautionary tale of Salvador Dalí, possibly the most skilled painter of the twentieth century. He tried to hide his genius behind perversion and comedy, but his craft was too great and he was chased out of the village by the baying crowd, who were eager to protect their children from the perversions of his virtuosity.

We all enjoy a good story, but painting was left with a problem: how could it tell a good story when telling tales involved narrative, emotion, drama and figuration? These were all banned by the rules of international modernism. Though figuration has been allowed to creep its way back into the room it had to amend its literal ways. If it could look wrong and amateur enough it was allowed to stay, or if it was part of the polished world of pop or appropriation it would be considered stupid and inexpressive enough to keep its place at the table. The sort of intelligence and wit that true storytelling needed had to hide elsewhere. This is what really separates our two heroes from the rest of the bedraggled crew. This is what makes Julian Schnabel and Albert Oehlen kings among men. This is what creates a love for these two artists that makes me want to carry on in spite of the vampires that track our every shadow. They guide the way by giving volume to the shadows that fall on the wall of Plato's cave. Their tales of long-forgotten battles and the fantastic worlds that lie beyond this realm have had to hide in pure abstraction, and a reinvention of the baroque. This new abstract baroque must do battle with classical modernist abstraction. Nature and its curves must learn once again to overthrow the tyranny of the rectilinear modernist hegemony. It is a battle we see beautifully illustrated in the computer paintings of Albert and the dominance of the tree and the rhizome structures that grow and devour so many of Julian's canvases.

We are hunter-gatherers and we have the brains of hunter-gatherers that have evolved over a hundred thousand years. The parts of our brains that process the visual information needed to hunt

and gather, fornicate and reproduce successfully are central to our being. This is where the intelligence of the modern artist has had to hide. Somehow out of sight and at the centre of it at the same time. Our two punks are too clever to be attacked by the anti-intellectual bully boys of the avant-garde. It is the narrative created as our eyes move over the surface of a painting that excites our brains and fundamentally communicates. Flowing along brush strokes, climbing lines, stopping at points and falling into the shadowy darkness of grey washes. This is where our two heroic painters have thrived. This is their night of long shadows. Resistance fighters behind enemy lines, waiting, pretending to be good foot soldiers, whilst all along craving for a different outcome.

But I am not sure the story is finished. The world that is the far side of the picture plane may have more to reveal. The authenticity that you rightly crave and is the calling card of our two artists is perhaps not quite what it seems. The drips, dribbles and daubs of paint show, like a tear on the Virgin's cheek, that we are confronted by 'real' painting, 'real' emotion and 'real' expression. But do the Virgin's tears need closer inspection? Are they to be trusted? If an artist, in full fury, happens to spill a drop from an overly loaded brush we should, of course, forgive the happy accident and laugh at the impertinent enthusiasm of their hasty gesture. What could indeed prove beyond doubt that these two artists exist on the highest plain of existentiality and that carefree they emote with vigour and agility.

A lady who accidentally drops her glove and consequently has it handed back by a charming young man is of course beyond reproach. If that young man should catch the lady's eye then that is to be expected, and if the young lady should find favour in the young man's eye and should return that favour by keeping her eye fixed a little too long then all is still innocent and after all these are the ways of love. Accident and the chance encounter are always beyond reproach. If, however, we were to find out that the young lady had deliberately placed the glove in such a place that the innocent gentleman was to find it, would we now think of her as changed into a cunning vixen? If the act of repetition and the suspicion that some things are just too good to be true would lead me to conclude that all those accidental splashes, slashes and dribbles of paint were there only to make the viewers believe they were looking at true genius and true expression, real sentiment and real vigour, what then? What if all those 'signs' of the authentic but slightly ham-fisted artist, loveable vigour, what then? What if all those 'signs' of the authentic but slightly ham-fisted artist, loveable vigour, what then? What if all those 'signs' of the authentic but slightly ham-fisted artist, loveable vigour, what then? What if all those 'signs' of the authentic but slightly ham-fisted artist, loveable vigour, what then? What if all those 'signs' of the authentic but slightly ham-fisted artist, loveable vigour, what then? What if all those 'signs'? Who is better then: the cunding vixen or the scheming painter? Who are we to trust?

Surrealism mines the subconscious to reveal hidden truths. The abstract forms found in the paintings of both Albert and Julian perhaps owe a debt to Yves Tanguy and Max Ernst's brand of surrealism. Abstract 'thought forms' outside of space and time, and devoid of any grounding sense of scale. We are left speechless, in awe and wonder of the beautiful anti-gravity space within their paintings. If I were to say to my psychoanalyst that I had started to have troubling memories of my childhood and that I believed that the faint memories I had hidden from myself were starting to surface, if I believed that these memories were so traumatic that they had created deep fissures in

my psyche and that the very act of hiding them had all but ruined my adult life, I hope my psychoanalyst would plump up the pillow that gently held my head and listen on with interest. Every good art therapist knows that if a person paints a green ground, or chooses a green sheet of paper or canvas and repeatedly, obsessively, even manically paints red figures on that green ground, then trauma is being described. Deep, troubling, unconscious and nasty traumas are lurking in that mind. If that ground is a rosy, slightly dusty hue of aged pink, and the green is a dark fungal sap colour, what then is our intrepid art therapist to conclude? Rich veins of trauma running like gold through the mine of the subconscious, and no doubt the promise of a further month's pay, because we are all human after all. If the patient had also insisted in spite of all the trouble that these paintings had to be made on irregular canvases on such an enormous scale that they consumed the viewer's field of vision, what would our therapist be thinking then? Would they start dreaming of research papers published in important academic journals, and glittering careers, or would they start to smell a rat? We are not all professional art therapists, thankfully. We don't all understand how to read the outpourings of an untrained patient. Most of us are, however, in possession of a good deal of empathy and the ability to sense trouble when it lays hidden ahead. Humans have lived in tribes or villages for thousands of years and evolution has made sure that those able to spot that their neighbour is showing troubling signs of instability are most likely to survive. Evolution has given us the ingenuity to learn that it is perhaps better not to stick around when our neighbour manically starts painting strange abstract shapes in green and pink dribbling swathes of paint all over their house.

What are we to make of Mr Schnabel's subconscious cry for help, or Mr Oehlen's manic attempts to signify that all is not well at home? Perhaps each of these ladies doth both protest too much, methinks. Hamlet may be right in thinking that when too much emotion is acted out before him a hidden truth is being revealed. Dear reader, I ask you to consider the facts: are our two heroes of the high seas in fact villains, guilty of, or complicit in, the murder of the King of Denmark? Have their vaudeville pratfalls gone too far? Are these authentic cries for help, or are they just clowning around? Either way the grease paint is slapped on with such verve that we can't hope to understand what is going on underneath. So here we have two actors: Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon, or Laurel and Hardy, either way I detect a couple of 'hams'. But painting just as comedy is all about timing, each fall of paint and slapstick gesture has to be delivered with precision. And our two great comedians, both at the height of their powers, fully understand that if one gets the details wrong then everything falls flat. Van Gogh and Artaud in his madness have given us a taste for blood, and a fascination with the mentally ill. If we are to be the fodder of the bourgeois then so we will feed on ourselves, acting out to the point that the blood starts flowing. The job of the artist is to act out the ritual of self-destruction. We, as artists, must at once be the convincing actors in the Theatre of Cruelty ready to show real pain and make the audience weep real tears, whilst simultaneously giving a knowing wink and acknowledging our deceit. Very few actors can

make song and dance so sad, and here we have two. The paintings and drawings of Albert Oehlen and Julian Schnabel represent at once the most dumb and stupid of roles and the most noble and glorious act imaginable. A brilliant contradiction that words cannot quite do justice to.

I sometimes have this dream, it usually occurs when I have a fever and am wafting in and out of reality. In the dream I see things as they really are, I see through things, and nothing has any scale. Everything is completely abstract, or nearly so, because moments of real life bounce in every now and then, but just like the abstract forms they have no sense of scale. A toenail could be the size of a planet whilst simultaneously being the size of a cell or atom. Everything is in the process of becoming something else. All is both figurative and formless. Because I am seeing things as they really are there is also no sense of time. Like size, time is merely a construct that stops us seeing things as they really are. I know that describing my dreams is self-indulgent, but I am making a guess that you, dear reader, may under similar circumstance or even under the influence of various substances have had a similar hallucination. It always seems so real and so vital and so fundamental that I get the feeling it has some greater value. The important fact that both our artists have for many years produced paintings that describe this dream so well brings this story of my love for the paintings of Albert Oehlen and Julian Schnabel to a close.