

# VANITY FAIR

Exclusive, Cy, Julian Schnabel's son, an art curator in Donosti:  
"My father believes in my ambitions"

by Eduardo Verbo  
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*Cy Schnabel, photographed in San Sebastián this week. Danel Azkarate Vecilla*

*We discovered Cy Schnabel, one of the twins that the New York artist had with the Basque model Olatz López Garmendia. The young man has settled in San Sebastian, where he writes and has just organized an exhibition.*

In recent months, San Sebastián has become an international reference thanks to the filming of *Rifkin's Festival*, Woody Allen's latest film, and the recent landing in the city of Cy Schnabel (New York, 27 years old). The son of the renowned artist Julian Schnabel has settled in Villa Magdalena, a typical 19th century Basque construction located on the road that leads to the Monte Igueldo lighthouse, owned by his mother, the model Olatz López Garmendia, with whom the painter was married for 17 years and had twins Cy and Olmo, the fourth and fifth of his six children.

There, since October 6, Cy has curated the exhibition

*Algunas tendencias en la pintura española ahora* in the studio that his father used when he temporarily settled in Spain. This exhibition brings together works by respected Spanish painters such as Jorge Galindo, Felicidad Moreno, Matías Sánchez and Alejandro Garmendia, his maternal uncle, whom he has proposed to vindicate. We exclusively discover Cy Schnabel, the New York curator who has come to the Basque Country to exhibit and write about art.

## **Why have you decided to hold this exhibition?**

I enjoy curating exhibitions and writing about art. I had my first experience putting together a show called *Horizontes Imaginarios* with my colleague Javier Lara at the Spanish Cultural Center in Mexico City in 2017. A selection of drawings, photographs, etchings, and other kinds of



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works on paper that belonged to the collection of Mexican poet, Miguel Ángel Muñoz Palos. In 2018, I co-curated a retrospective of Alejandro Garmendia at the Sala Kubo-Kutxa Museum in San Sebastian. *Some tendencies in Spanish painting now* is the first exhibition I have carried out independently.

### **How has the selection process for the artists been?**

I had been wanting to do a group show of contemporary Spanish painters for some time now. These were the artists that instinctually occurred to me when I first thought of the idea. Each artist in the show has their own distinct painterly language, I was curious to see how they could all coexist in the same space. The paintings in this exhibition correspond to my taste and are different examples of artworks I like to look at. I was motivated by the unexpected dialogue that could be generated by presenting this group of artists in such a unique space.

### **What has been the reception of the public?**

I think the reaction from the public has been positive. Many people have told me that they appreciate the setting of the exhibition. It is a different kind of experience to see art in such a raw unconventional space. It has its own energy, it is idiosyncratic, more authentic than a white cube gallery aesthetic.

### **Why did you decide to do it at Villa Magdalena, the home your mother, Olatz López Garmendia, has in San Sebastian?**

The space is so authentic and unique that not using it felt like a wasted opportunity. I also thought that the walls and high ceilings made it a perfect space to show art. The fact that it's connected to my home allows me to bring friends, family, and some visitors to my house after, making it a more personal experience. Since it is a private, by appointment only exhibition space, I am in control without my privacy being invaded. This model also seems more appropriate in light of the new reality we face due to covid 19. For many years, the exhibition space was where my father's studio used to be. In this particular studio he worked a lot on portraits, he calls them resin portraits, to which they added white abstract shapes. In these works I liked the contrast between the careful interpretation of each person and the unrecognizable white marks that obscured parts of the painting. I vaguely remember seeing my father painting here a portrait of the German abstract painter Albert Oehlen. Not so blurry in my memory, it's a portrait he did of Gary Oldman dressed as a matador in 2005. I always felt they were inspired by ancient Spanish masters like Goya

and Velázquez.



*Olatz López Garmendia, Olmo Schnabel, Julian Schnabel y nuestro protagonista, Cy Schnabel.*

### **What memories does this place bring you?**

I have a lot of personal history here. I lived in New York throughout most of the year. During the summer, my twin brother Olmo and I would spend time here with my mom's family and connect with our Basque-Spanish heritage. As kids, we really enjoyed it because we had more freedom than in New York.

### **What do you like to do the most now that you live in San Sebastian?**

Yes, I live here now. Even though I always came at least 1 or 2 times a year, the first time I properly lived here was in 2017/2018; while I was helping to prepare my uncle's retrospective at the Sala Kubo Museum. I grew up spending a lot of time in the ocean. Our father got us into surfing, so my brother and I always surfed when we came here — which I still try to do as much as possible. Swimming to La isla Santa Clara and back was always something we would do. My grandmother introduced us to football at an early age by watching the local first division team, Real Sociedad. Enjoying the atmosphere before the game and in the stadium was always great. Just like most people in this city, I appreciate good food. Going to la parte vieja to have pintxos and something to drink with friends and family is definitely part of the routine. Maybe it is an obvious statement because pintxos and food in general is what the city is most well-known for, nevertheless it's interesting to think about what a vital part of everyday life it is. Spending time in mount Urgul and having something to drink at the polvorin is one of my favorite things to do. Walking to Mount Ulia and then across to the port town of pasajes is always great. The area behind the cathedral is really pleasant, close by are bars like Pokhara, Uda berri,



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and El Nido which are institutions in their own right. I have never seen a city where the mountains, ocean, and the city are so well integrated. The coastal road from Zumaia to Getaria is special.

### **You mentioned the artist Alejandro Garmendia. He was your uncle, your mother's brother...**

Alejandro – or, Sander, as we used to call him- was a very talented painter and also a gifted musician. He had an absurd sense of humor, constantly reinventing everyday life by creating fictitious characters and scenarios in his head. A master at imitating accents and distinct personas in French, Spanish, and to a lesser extent in English. Impersonation and disguise were a great source of entertainment for him. He taught me a lot about music, we spoke a lot about art, it was never boring being with him. I was lucky to have him as an uncle, he was definitely unique.

### **Did you learn Spanish from a young age?**

My mother spoke to me in Spanish since I was born. My father would speak to me in English, so I learned both languages at the same time. At home with my mom I always speak in Spanish. I would say I am a fluent speaker. I understand everything, I can also read and write but not nearly as well compared to English.

### **Where and what did you study?**

I studied Political Science at Bard College, a liberal arts school in the Hudson Valley which is in upstate New York.

### **Tell me about your work. What is it exactly? Is Villa Magdalena going to be your own gallery?**

I don't like to call Villa Magdalena a gallery, it is more of a private exhibition space for curatorial projects. I like to curate exhibitions and write about art.

### **I have read that since you were a child you liked to draw... is it true? Are you still doing it? When did you discover that you were good at it?**

I am not sure If I am good at it, I don't consider myself an artist but I have always enjoyed drawing. Drawing always felt very meditative for me, something I gravitated towards naturally since I was a kid.

### **How did your father react when you told him that you would dedicate to art?**

We have always had a very healthy dialogue when we

talk about art. He is a great source of information and he respects my ideas. I think he believes in my ambitions as a curator and a writer.

### **Why did your parents call you Cy?**

I was named Cy after the painter, Cy Twombly. My father knew him and always admired his work.



*Cy, left, with his twin brother, Olmo, in 2018.*

### **How do you remember growing up surrounded by an artist like your father?**

I grew up surrounded by paintings and different kinds of artworks. A lot of his work and others by contemporaries of his like Francesco Clemente, George Condo, Albert Oehlen. The building I grew up in New York was originally a horse stable and then a perfume factory. In almost every room the ceilings were very high. The paintings, architecture, and furniture felt naturally connected, everything was part of his sensibility and taste. He created his own world. We watched movies almost every night, I guess I received a strong visual education through painting and film. I watched him paint my whole life and in many different settings: New York, Montauk, Mexico, San Sebastian, the Alps. He loves painting outdoors.

### **You have a twin brother, how is your relationship with him?**

We have a good relationship. They say twins have a telepathic connection; I think that's true to a certain extent. Olmo is more involved in making movies. He finished producing his first feature length film, *Giants Being Lonely*, in 2019. A film directed by his close friend and partner Grear Patterson. It was in competition at the 76th International Venice Film Festival.



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### **Which artist would you like to work with and why?**

There are many artists I would like to work with. I am interested in working with both emerging and established artists, artists in Spain and from around the world. The medium I love most is painting, but I also love sculpture, photography, installation and conceptual art. One of my favorite artist right now is the Norwegian painter Ida Ekblad.

### **¿Cómo ve el panorama artístico actual en España? ¿Y en EEUU?**

There are some great artists working in Spain, however I think it has always been a difficult place to make a living off art.. There is not as strong of an art market compared to France, Italy or Germany. I have met many Spanish artists and people in the creative industries who have moved to Berlin or Mexico City, my guess is because the scene is more active and there is more opportunities for them in those places. Nonetheless, for classical and modern art there are some great institutions in Spain.

On the other hand, the US is very big, the scene is different depending where you go. I know a lot of young artists who have gone to LA; probably because there is more space and it's cheaper than New York. What I do know is that smaller galleries are having more difficulty and Mega-Galleries like Gagosian, Zwirner etc. are becoming more powerful.

### **What is your favorite Spanish artist?**

I am not sure if I have a favorite. It depends. I love the filmmaker Luis Buñuel. Joan Miró is great. The sculptor, Eduardo Chillida, is one of my favorite artists. From the classical period, I love Zurbaran, Velazquez, and Goya.

I have a personal connection to the work of Alejandro Garmendia. In Spain he is somewhat known. Around the world his life and work still remain relatively undiscovered, I will try to change that.

### **How do you define yourself?**

I am a curator and a writer.

### **Talk to me about your mother? I suppose she was interested in you knowing her roots...**

My mother grew up in Paris and then moved to San Sebastian when she was 10. She moved to Barcelona when she was 18 and then traveled a lot because she was working as a fashion model. Even though she only lived here for a short period it was very important to her for us to spend as much time as possible with our grandmother

and the rest of our family. I think if she had not emphasized that connection with her roots I probably would not feel as close to San Sebastian, and presumably, I would have never decided to move here and take on this project.

### **What is the advice that your father has given you to dedicate yourself to this world?**

That I should be fearless and confident.

### **What would you advise a curator who is starting out?**

Although I am pretty young and just starting, I think having your own personal sensibility and taste is important.

### **Do you think that art can be used to change the world?**

I think art can carry powerful messages and influence things like social change. In Post-Revolutionary Mexico, the Mexican muralist movement informed a largely illiterate population about their pre-Columbian cultural identity and the colonial past through painted images in public spaces. Picasso's Guernica had a similar effect to the kind of photojournalism that focuses on humanitarian and ethical issues today. It was one of the first images that informed the world about the atrocities committed by the Luftwaffe in the Basque town during the Spanish civil war.

### **Tell me about your next projects ...**

I would like to continue curating exhibitions at Villa Magdalena and writing about the art I choose to show. I am still deciding how many shows I would like to do every year in this space. I would love to spend part of the year in Mexico City and curate exhibitions there as well. I used to live there for a period. In my opinion it is one of the most dynamic cities in the world; modern and ancient, traditional but also very cosmopolitan. The kind of stimulation I get there is different than anywhere else I have been.