



VILLA MAGDALENA

ELLE

Cy Schnabel: 'San Sebastian has all the ingredients to become an artistic destination'.

Cristina Altozano
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Photo: Pablo Sarabia

New Yorker Cy Schnabel, son of painter and filmmaker Julian Schnabel and designer and former model Olatz López Garmendia from San Sebastian, welcomes us to Villa Magdalena, where he presents a new exhibition in his art gallery. In addition to talking to us about his facet as a curator and gallery owner, he reveals his "favorite tips" of the capital.

Cy Schnabel (New York, 1993) grew up surrounded by artists thanks to the cultural environment of his parents, visiting galleries, museums and treasuring exhibition catalogs. Although he studied political science, attracted by the interdisciplinary nature of the career, it was almost inevitable that he would dedicate himself to this world.

He spent his confinement during the pandemic in Villa Magdalena, the family home in the capital of San Sebastian, a typical 1920s farmhouse on the slopes of Mount Igueldo, designed by the architect José Martínez de Ubago. After having lived all his life in big cities -New York, Mexico City, he gave a change of direction to this cosmopolitan life, decided to stay here and embark on a new course.

Why did you decide to settle in San Sebastian?

I saw a unique opportunity to open an international gallery in a city that doesn't have a contemporary art scene. I wanted to strengthen the cultural life of San Sebastian with a project



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that would bring international artists to the city. However, I also work with many Spanish artists. I knew it would be a challenge because there is not a strong base of local collectors, however, in this global digital era it seemed viable because of how connected we are through social networks and the creation of virtual online platforms.

This city has all the right ingredients to become an art destination: a great film festival, world-class restaurants, the jazz festival, the Chillda Leku museum, Cristina Iglesias' new permanent installation, Hondalea, on Santa Clara Island. Cibrian, another young gallery that opened in 2018, shows mostly international artists. It's 40 minutes from Biarritz, where Lucy Chadwick, longtime director of Gavin Brown's New York firm, opened her Champ Lacombe gallery in summer 2021. Bilbao is nearby and attracts a global art audience with renowned institutions like the Guggenheim and the Museo de Bellas Artes-where former Padro director Miguel Zugaza has taken over since 2017 and reinvigorated the museum. Carreras Múgica, one of my favorite galleries in Spain, is also based there. Also, the airport is very well connected to the rest of Europe.

What was the definitive trigger?

Being used to living in big metropolises, moving to a smaller place, with a better quality of life and a slower pace, seemed like a necessity. Despite the shocking and unpredictable period that was the pandemic, I was lucky enough to spend the initial confinement at my mother's house, surrounded by nature and close to the sea. It was ideal. I watched a lot of movies, read a lot, became a better cook and finished a text on the work and life of the artist Alejandro Garmendia, my uncle. I found a balance and a personal structure that I lacked in New York. My mother's house is very inspiring and I have many memories. After a hard period I wanted to replace the sad and traumatic moments with something creative and positive. I always dreamed of having my own space where I could exercise the freedom to select artists and show my sensitivity towards art, my own critical eye. Writing is an important aspect of my approach as a gallerist as well; I write all my press releases and consider them more like essays. It brings me closer to the artists, there is a rich exchange of ideas that adds more substance to the exhibitions. I like writing because it is a more analytical and conceptual exercise.

How would you define Villa Magdalena?

It is an art gallery. I have worked directly with all the artists I have exhibited so far, except Miroslav Tichý who passed away in 2011. Almost everything I exhibit is for sale. However, I never thought of Villa Magdalena as something I

was going to make money from, it was simply an opportunity to present works by artists I liked in a unique space and to be able to write about what was exhibited. There were no strategic or calculated decisions in selecting the artists, I simply let my eye and intuition guide me. I knew this was my best bet because it would ultimately distinguish my taste and thinking from other gallerists and curators.



Cy in the garden of Villa Magdalena, a typical 1920's farmhouse, decorated by his parents respecting the austerity of Basque architecture. Photo: Pablo Sarabia

Villa Magdalena was born out of my multicultural identity as a New Yorker and someone who spent part of his life here in San Sebastian. I always perceived San Sebastian as my second home, and that allowed me to feel comfortable settling here and opening a gallery. New York sparked my interest initially because of the exposure to art I had through my father, and the access to incredible museums and galleries that the city offers you. I spent a lot of time looking at art alone, reading, listening to other people, and



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not feeling confident enough to express my own opinions. In the fall of 2020, I felt that all those past experiences were paying off because I finally had something to say. That's when I decided to open Villa Magdalena and start curating exhibitions.

Who was in charge of decorating the house?

My mother and father did. These are my mother's comments on the general concept of the interior design of the house:

My intention was always to Preserve the soul of the house, recreating the austerity and elegance that I perceive in the DNA of the historic architecture of the Basque Country.

Colors are fundamental to me, and in this case the intention was to offset the gray skies characteristic of the north. The furniture is simple, rustic, mostly from small antique shops throughout the region, especially in the French Basque Country, combining everything with elements that come from my travels in Morocco, Indonesia, India that give a touch of exoticism to the overall atmosphere of the house.

It was built by José Martínez de Ubago in 1920, an architect who built many houses in the same area. It offers the typical image of a neo-Basque house.

What differentiates it from a traditional art gallery?

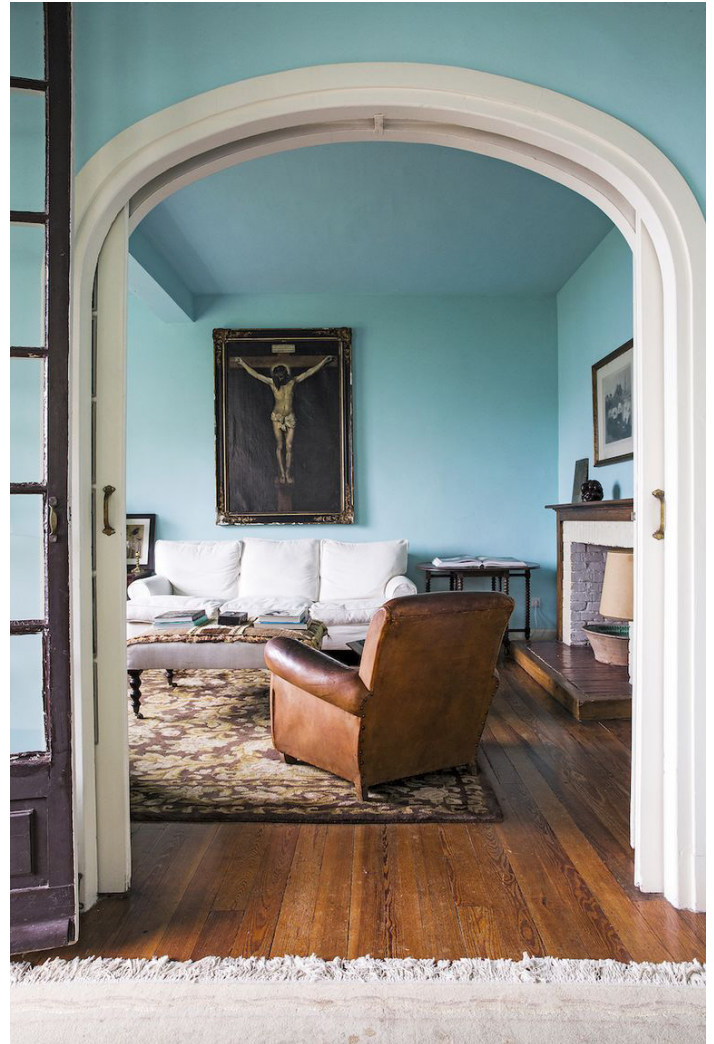
It's not a white cube space. Most galleries have a clear hierarchy with many designated roles for different employees. I alternate between curator, writer, gallery director and salesperson. My intention is to try to participate in all aspects of the gallery.

The fact that it is connected to my home allows me to bring friends, family and some visitors afterwards, which makes it a more intimate experience. For my exhibition openings, I invite visitors to the garden and pergola above the exhibition space. Sometimes I also cook, all of which encompasses an important part of the gallery experience as well. Most of the time I welcome visitors and I think this bridges the gap that can be felt between the art and the public in many galleries. People find it comforting to be able to talk to me directly. I want to make it as unpretentious as possible.

Who can visit and how?

Admission is free, all kinds of visitors are welcome: from a more general uninformed public such as children, to older people, to artists, to other kinds of art lovers, to collectors... really anyone who is curious enough to come and visit us is welcome. The last two years people have been

requesting appointments mainly through email, Instagram or whatsapp.



Villa Magdalena living room. Photo: Pablo Sarabia

Why did you choose this formula?

I decided on a private visit for a couple of reasons. The gallery opened its doors in the middle of Covid and I wanted to avoid the restrictions that apply to galleries and museums open to the public. Also, Villa Magdalena is not in a central location in the city; being located in a sloping residential neighborhood, there is very little pedestrian traffic, so it makes less sense to leave the doors open for a set amount of time waiting for visitors to stop by. Finally, since the space is connected to my house, I felt that this formula allowed me to control the situation without having my privacy invaded. I wasn't worried about people not knowing what I was doing because I felt it was unique enough to get their attention. I knew that I had to do as



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many exhibitions as possible and that more and more people would come because in San Sebastian people tend to find out about things by word of mouth.

You studied political science and you are a writer, although you grew up surrounded by artists. Was it inevitable to dedicate yourself to the art world?

Maybe you could say it was inevitable. I decided on Political Science when I was at Bard because I wanted to learn about the relationship between governments and individuals, it gives you a certain awareness of human history and how it varies in different regions. It's an obscure history for the most part. It introduces you to a number of concepts that help you understand the situation in different countries. You learn about the success or failure of international institutions like the UN and the World Bank, the political legacy of colonialism and free market economies in the so-called developing world. Reading books like Samuel P. Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* was very eye-opening and thought-provoking. I also thought about studying history, but Political Science is a very interdisciplinary major, encompassing history, human rights, economics, anthropology and sociology to a lesser extent, so I thought it would cover all my academic areas of interest.

Although at one point I considered majoring in Art History in college, I found Political Science to be more stimulating because I have been surrounded by art and artists all my life. Growing up with my father, his art collection and cultural milieu was an art history lesson in itself. Naturally, I visited art galleries and museums, and started building a library of art books (exhibition catalogs and artist monographs) so I could research on my own. I knew that I was very likely to pursue a career within art because of the time I spent looking at and thinking about art. I took a couple of Art History classes at Bard College and really enjoyed them. I attended a master class on the study of 20th century art with Alex Kitnick, a frequent contributor to *Artforum* and other prestigious art publications.

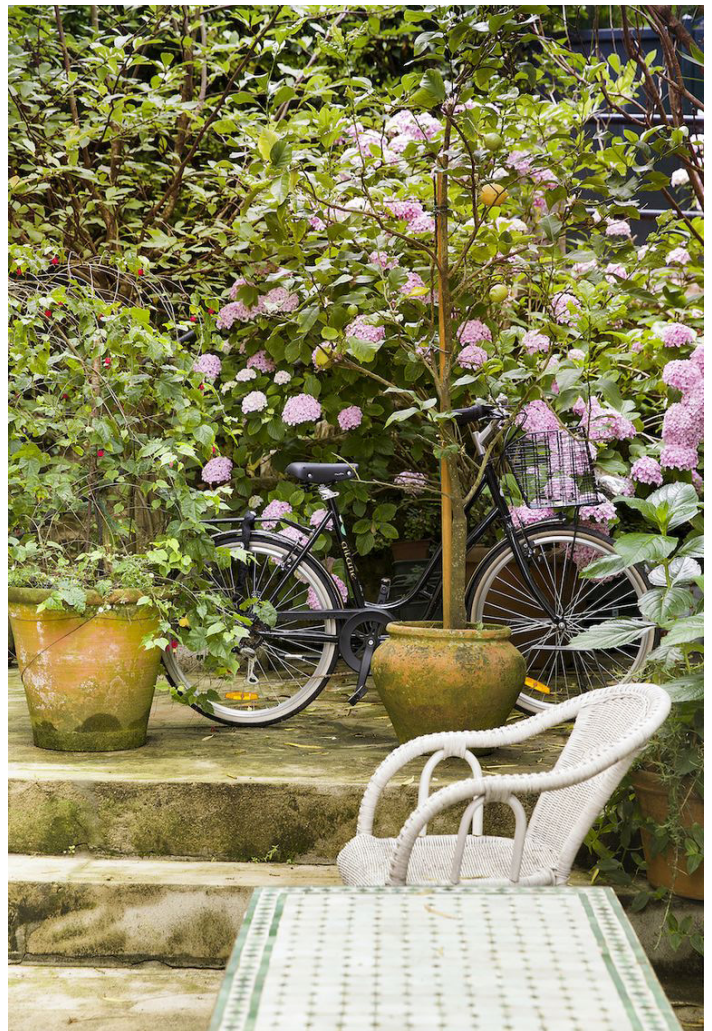
Some recent texts I have written that have been published were for my father's recent solo exhibition at the CAC Malaga, and two essays for monographs dedicated to artists Matias Sanchez and Milko Pavlov.

How do you select your artists?

I try to make as many studio visits as possible. Traveling within Spain and to New York, Berlin, Mexico City or Paris is always very constructive when it comes to selecting artists for my gallery. Villa Magdalena is closed during the winter,

so that is usually when I have the most time to organize trips, visit artists and plan exhibitions for the following season.

Many of the artists I have exhibited and would like to exhibit in the future I know personally and have seen their work in person. When you see things in person or spend time in an artist's creative environment, it's always a very clear moment, you can properly judge things and really see what resonates.



Garden corner. Photo: Pablo Sarabia

Who will we be able to see next at Villa Magdalena?

In October we will have work by Lucy Mullican (1994, New York), an emerging artist based between New York and Berlin who studied at the Glasgow School of Art. Lately she has been making watercolor paintings on wood panels. Visitors will be able to see some new large and small



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format examples of this series in our next exhibition. At the moment, I work mostly with mid-career artists; I think it's important for me to work with artists of my generation with whom I can evolve over time. Lucy I have known since we were children, she is a close friend and we have always understood each other in a very natural way. She describes her practice as "Representation of the spirit".

What is your favorite part of the house?

The garage at the entrance of the house where I have the gallery has always seemed impressive to me. From the outside it looks like an old fortress. I also like the terrace in the living room very much.

What memories do you have of San Sebastian?

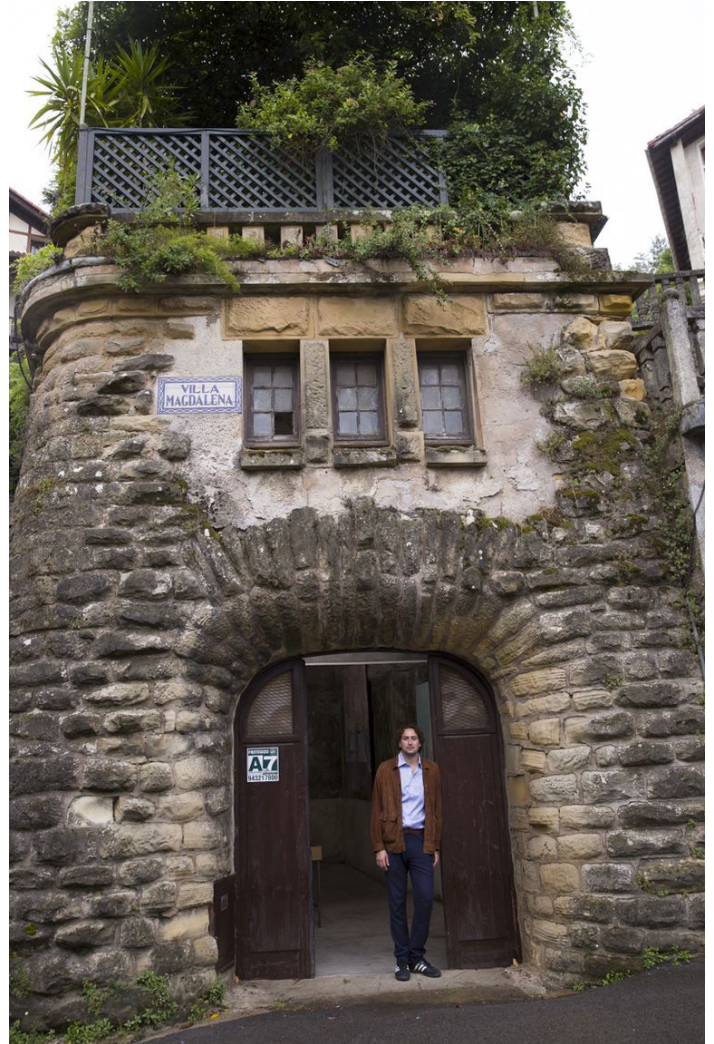
My grandmother Charo and my great aunt Antonia were always excited to be with us. As kids, when we came here in the summer or occasionally at Christmas or Easter, we spent most of our time with them. Unlike in New York, here we could go out at night and come home later than usual, which made us feel independent. Eating well was the norm, which is no surprise in this part of Spain. Going to villages lost in the countryside to eat in an old Basque farmhouse or a cider house was always a special plan. I surfed a lot with my brother; that's how we met many of our local friends. We would go to the beaches along the coast from Zarautz to Hossegor in France. I was very close to my cousin and uncle, both of whom had the ability to reinvent everyday life with alter egos and fictional scenarios. They were funny characters who loved to talk about art, music and cinema. Unfortunately, they are no longer with us.

My father painted a lot of paintings in his studio in San Sebastian, the space that I turned into my gallery. In this particular studio he worked a lot with portraits - he called this series Resin Portraits - which he finished with a layer of this material and sometimes white abstract forms were also added. In these works I liked the contrast between the meticulous rendering of each person's face and the loosely painted antique costumes he invented from his imagination. The enigmatic white marks he added at the end disfigured parts of the painting. It always seemed to me that he was inspired by the old Spanish masters, such as Velazquez and Goya.

What do you like the most?

The city is the perfect size and it's by the sea surrounded by mountains. I love where I live, I'm right in the center but also far enough away to feel a bit isolated, on the side of a mountain. I find it amazing that you can be in the old

town and in 10 minutes go up to Mount Urgull and find me practically alone.



Cy on the garage door giving access to the gallery. Photo: Pablo Sarabia

What makes it different from the others?

Within the city, which is quite small, there are three mountains, an island, a river and three beaches. I think that makes it very special.



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When friends from abroad come to visit you, what is the must-visit, the one that never fails and cannot be missed?

Going for pinxtos in the old town. Lunch or dinner at Elkano in Getaria. Spending the day in the French Basque Country and visiting St. Jean de Luz, Guethary, Bidart and Biarritz. Drive along the coast road from Getaria to Zumaia and then stop at Asador Bedua in Zumaia. Visit Chillida Leku, the museum of sculptor Eduardo Chillida. Take the boat to see the Cristina Iglesias installation on Santa Clara Island and then have lunch at La Rampa in the port. Take the excursion from San Sebastian to Pasajes via Mount Ulia. Visit the Sanctuary of Arantzazu. Have a drink at the bar El Polvorín, at the top of Mount Urgul. Going to the Iruin cider house in Zubieta. At night, have a drink in the Plaza de la Constitución, in the bars near Reyes Católicos or in the Plaza de Easo.



The island of Santa Clara and Monte Igueldo behind. Photo: Pablo Sarabia

What is it that most attracts your attention?

The microclimate. There are times when several seasons follow one another in a single day. One day in March 2018, it snowed in the morning, then the sun came out for most of the day and melted all the snow, at night there was a big storm. It's a dramatic light city that keeps changing.

What is your day to day life like in San Sebastian?

In the morning I do the shopping, I usually stop at the butcher's or fishmonger's, at the greengrocer's, and then I buy bread and have breakfast at the bakery. When I get home I work for a few hours and then I go jogging and go to the sea before eating at home. After lunch I keep working until 7 o'clock and go for a bike ride or play basketball on these courts by the sea. In the evening I meet friends downtown or in the old town for dinner and usually go to a *pintxo* bar for a drink.

What about a day off, how do you relax and what are your hobbies?

When I have a day off, the ideal is to spend the day surfing somewhere in France like Guethary, Bidart or Anglet. Before returning to Spain after a long day of surfing, it's nice to stop in Biarritz and have a drink at the Port Vieux.

A secret refuge in the city

The English cemetery of Mount Urgull

What is your favorite pintxo?

My favorite pintxo is the gilda; you can find it in almost any bar in the city. My favorites are Ganbara, Bar Antonio, Tamboril and Casa Nestor.

A must-visit place not to be missed?

The Sanctuary of Arantzazu, about an hour from the city.

What attracts you to Basque culture?

I find the Basques very loyal. They don't open up to you immediately, however, once you become friends you feel there is a trust that cannot be broken.

Do you often go to your father for advice?

We have always had a very healthy dialogue when we talk about art. There is a rich exchange of ideas, he has an



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encyclopedic knowledge. My father has always been a great source of information and he respects my ideas. I think he trusts my ambitions as a curator. It was an honor to be the author and co-curator of *Schnabel and Spain: Anything can Be a Model for a Painting*, an exhibition consisting of 23 paintings from 1997 to the present, showing his paintings in the context of Spanish painting and the evolution of his artistic production during this period.

Does the whole family get together often?

We are 7 siblings of different ages and it is difficult to see all of us together often, although they are always very special occasions. I would say 1 or 2 times a year at the most.

What is your next project?

I've been spending a lot of time in Mexico City since 2016. I did Villa Magdalena's first exhibition outside of San Sebastian there this past winter of 2022 during the last edition of MACO when my close friend Javier Estevez of Mascota Gallery hosted me and let me show one of my artists in one of the rooms of his space. It was a solo exhibition by New York-based Korean artist Mie Yim (Seoul, 1963) of new works on paper. I would like to continue planning exhibitions in Mexico City. Right now I spend 3 or 4 months a year there.