



## ACROSS THE MULTIVERSE

Artist **Jules de Balincourt** wants you to “think globally, act locally.” **Andy Spade** signs up for a refresher course.

**a**NDY SPADE IS EXPLAINING THIS NEW IDEA HE has for customizing a canvas tote bag: cover it with paint drips (all different colors) and on top of that jumble write “Jackson Pollock for Louis Vuitton by Jack Spade.” It’s meant to be a joke—maybe even an Absurdist gesture—but also a commentary on the increasing practice of fashion houses looking to piggyback on the popular glow of contemporary art. Who better then, we thought, to dispatch to Brooklyn for a conversation with artist Jules de Balincourt, one of New York’s rising stars. After turning heads last year in Charles Saatchi’s “USA Today” survey at the Royal Academy of Art in London, the 35-year-old painter readies himself now for a sort of homecoming with a new show at the Zach Feuer Gallery.

**JULES DE BALINCOURT:** You know I delivered art to your office once back when I was an art mover.

**ANDY SPADE:** You’re kidding? Were we nice to you? I hope so. But we’re always nice to people. So did that job make you cynical about the art world?

More than anything, it broke down the façade of the New York art world’s impenetrability, which was a good thing. One day you’d be going to Philip Johnson’s house, another day to Jasper Johns’, so there were great aspects to it. But then there was also the bitchy collector who doesn’t even remember what they’ve bought and it doesn’t fit in their house and it doesn’t match the couch. They buy the Cindy Sherman because everyone else has a Cindy Sherman and in order to build your social clout you jump on the bandwagon of what is cool—that part can be super depressing. But I’m sure it’s just like fashion or music or the movie industry. It’s show biz.

**When I first moved to New York my friend invited me up to Yale where he was in the painting program getting his MFA. I went back this year for the senior show and you couldn’t believe all the dealers and collectors they let in. I didn’t realize that existed. I guess I was naïve but I still thought at the student level, the art world was this magical place that isn’t about business, but expression. I guess the gestation period has gotten a lot shorter.**

It seems that collectors and dealers are obsessed with discovering the next “new” thing that will catapult someone into artist stardom. Quickly the artists are transformed into mini corporations of sorts. In order to meet the demand of starved dealers, collectors, and the onslaught of art fairs, artists are obliged to create a mini factory, and quickly the work suffers.... You might as well have a wood shop mass-producing chairs.

**Didn’t I hear something about one of your pieces going to auction recently?**

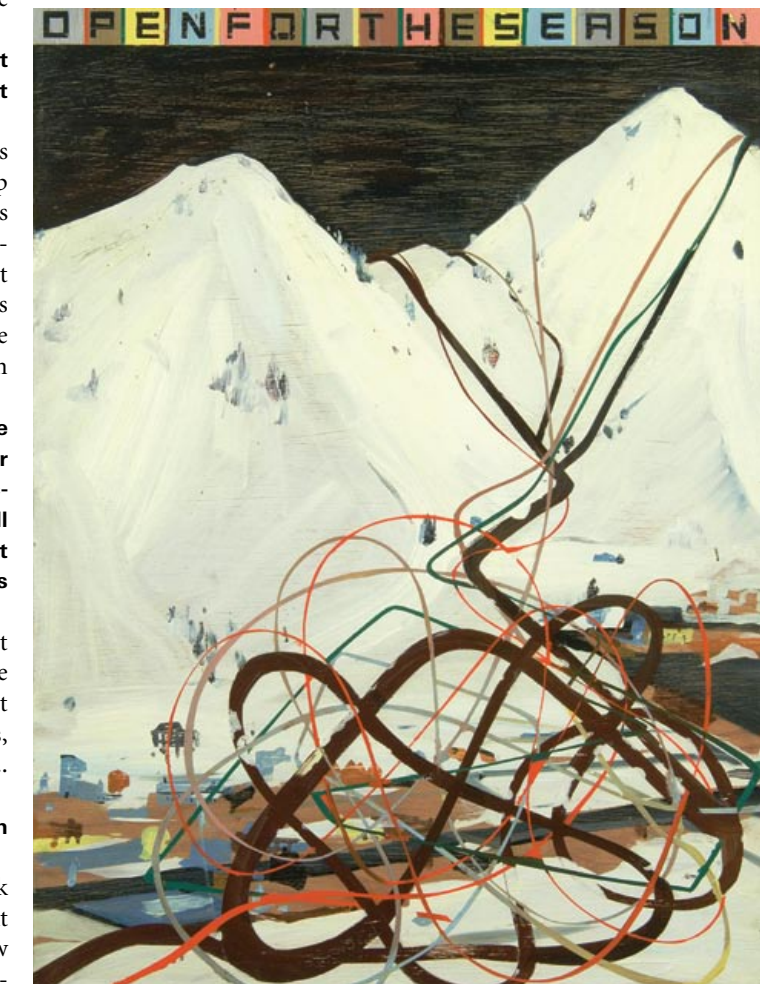
I suppose that is part of this game we are participants in. You make work unaware of the monetary value initially and suddenly your work is bought at a Hunter College auction for chump change and next thing you know your supposed avid fan is selling the drawing he loved to pay off his ac-

countant/lawyers/condo payments. It is unfortunately out of my hands. All I can do is only let out work that I think no one would ever want to sell, no matter how lucrative. The best thing to do in this case is pull your blinds, or have your dealer not sell to any sketchy speculators, which you cannot always sniff out.

**What was it like going to Hunter?**

Hunter was a wonderful sort of oasis among the armpit of New York: 41st and Tenth Avenue. Within this wasteland was our self-sustained compound of artists, teachers, and, most of all, studios. The studios had become my second home; my studio at one point had a tree house, stove,

Below: Jules de Balincourt’s *Open for the Season* (2007). Left: Andy Spade and de Balincourt at the artist’s Brooklyn studio.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW KIST

ART: OPEN FOR THE SEASON (2007) BY JULES DE BALINCOURT. OIL ON PANEL, 32" x 23". IMAGE COURTESY OF ZACH FEUER GALLERY.



Jules de Balincourt's Remembering Our Great Dead Heroes (2007).

beds, and a fridge. It was the perfect refuge away from all of the harshness of the city. It is through open studios where Zach [Feuer] first saw my work and offered me my first show.

**And you grew up in California?**

Well, I grew up in Paris, Zurich, and Ibiza in the '70s and then moved to California in the '80s when I was 10 years old and was constantly going back and forth to visit family in Europe. And then when I graduated high school I moved to Santa Barbara and then San Francisco.

**How did moving around so much as a kid affect you?**

More than anything I think I was simply introduced to different cultures, all western cultures but still all distinctively different. Whether it was living in Ibiza as a six-year-old hippie child, or in Paris at the Steiner school learning to knit, Zurich living with my grandmother, or in Los Angeles becoming a surf rat, it was all about different perspectives and being rocked out of the expected or traditional and then seeing these huge contradictions. I suppose that is what inspires me in America: these huge contradictions and differences supplied by people from all over. The difficulty for me in Europe is that things seem to be set in their place with less of a possibility for things to reinvent themselves or mutate. America seems to have more of an adolescent enthusiasm and naivety, with less regard to history or tradition, which as an artist can be suffocating. But then again this very enthusiasm and naivety that we as Americans have can be as charming, creative, and inspiring as it can be insensitive, arrogant, and detrimental. Maybe I got overly sensitized and my paintings are a way of being exorcised out of that.

**So you started these new paintings not really knowing where you'd end up?**

Before my work had more of an external gaze, now I'm trying to focus that inward. What are my internal politics? And how do I convey that energy without it just being pure pretty colors and lines? I like to juxtapose a more abstract piece by hanging it next to something more literal and creating this dynamic in which your brain operates on a more subjective interpretation of "abstract" work and the objective reality of decoding or understanding "figurative" work. I am interested in creating a sort of dialogue between these pieces in which loose, free, associative relationships arise and the viewer is asked to think in both conscious and unconscious terms.

**In the "USA Today" show, your pieces had a definite political slant.**

**Is that a challenge?**

Is that a challenge? Maybe for the viewer it is, but for me it was just a natural reaction to the current situation. It's funny people are labeling me as a political artist or simply want to talk politics with me. I am not a radical lefty, I simply am angry at the state of affairs in this country, just like any other "alert" or conscious human being should be. People were labeling me a Socialist, but I had no real agenda about changing the world in like a Barbara Kruger sense of political art. I was just making work in the climate of the moment. Sure, I've gone to a handful of protests, but I'm not picketing the G8 conference with my gas mask and Marxist buddies. I wanted to explore the contradictions I see around issues like freedom and liberty in America and my experience in it. I had been in Germany right before that where things honestly seemed more progressive and open and free than they are here. I suddenly was reminded again at how cleverly these words of freedom and democracy are used in America, in order to veil the very erosion of these values.

**That doesn't seem so leftist to me. More like you're making observations.**

I still want my work to have bite. I think since 9/11, the war keeps going and the public gets to a point where, I hate to say it, people slip back into apathy. The powerlessness I felt after the last elections really put a blow to any political motivation and stride. For me it's about how can I disperse my ideas of democracy in my own neighborhood, as that old Berkeley bumper sticker reads "Think Globally, Act Locally."

**You started a recreation center around here?**

It's called Star Street Project; we have all sorts of different venues. We do yoga, we have pot lucks, we do concerts, performances, burlesque, movies, lecture series, haircuts.

**Near here?**

Three blocks from my studio.

**Is it free?**

Most of the time. If there's a band playing then it might be a \$5 cover charge. Star Street Project has become a big side project—sometimes too time consuming—but also rewarding. I love the idea of having something in the neighborhood that is still indefinable, a space in which there is no clear label or obvious vision, a sort of neutral space in which a whole range

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of ideas and things can be shown. Where else can you host a neighborhood Mexican baptisms party, ping pong tournament (won by a Special Olympics bronze medalist), a Paul Chan video "Baghdad in no Particular Order," and experimental dance within the span of a month?

**Is it nightly?**

We do three or four events a month. It's too much for me to do it everyday. It's like all of a sudden, I'm a club owner? Initially this space was simply a community center of sorts but it is interesting to me to see these ideas of

social dynamics and community beyond my paintbrush and panels into the living engaged realm.

**But I can also see how that translates into your work.**

This idea of "Think globally, act locally." I wanted to take the potency of a small, all-American town, take the potency of its ideals and values. Unknowingly these people have a huge potential to broadcast that energy on a global scale so these lines, whether they are rays or lights, I think that's what they represent.

**I thought they were bombs.**

I worry sometimes that I'm too scattered thematically.

**But that's how the world is right now. It's almost like channel surfing.**

Some artists will say, "Okay this is the project I've been researching and devoted the last eighteen months to this one thing and now here it is and this relates to this relates to this." It's all mapped out. I can't work like that.

**I have this company where some people want everything to look the same and I'm always pushing against that. We shouldn't let the creative element be crushed under the weight of brand identity.**

Or labeled or quarantined. I just wanted to keep moving.

**Like mercury.**

That's why I like to be able to keep things open.

**Do people want you to keep to a signature style?**

I haven't felt that yet, you know, where people are saying "only do maps, or landscapes or text paintings."

**When you're not working what else do you like to do?**

I'm dealing with my rec center. I also have a roof garden at my house where I grow my herbs and tomatoes. I go on little trips with my girlfriend out of town. Some surfing.

**With the herb garden, are you like macrobiotic?**

No, nothing that radical, I eat beef and smoke so...

**What about that car you made?**

I made this self-sustained survivalist vehicle, the "in case of" vehicle. It's the ultimate getaway machine with everything: shotgun, fishing gear, gas mask. It was a little over the top, a little heavy-handed of a project. I wanted to address the marketing of fear in our culture and how that's used to get people to buy stuff.

**When I was in advertising I wanted to do a cigarette campaign that said "Hey, try it for a year and if you don't like it just quit." In another one the copy read, "I bought a new pair of sneakers and all I've done is smoke in them." My wife says I'm pathetic.**

*Below: de Balincourt at work in his studio. Upcoming exhibitions: Zach Feuer Gallery (LFL), Sept. 5–Oct. 13, 530 W. 24th St., New York, www.lflgallery.com; "USA Today," an exhibition of new American art from the collection of the Saatchi Gallery in London, visits The Hermitage Museum, Oct. 24–Jan. 13, 2008, Dvortsovaya Square, St. Petersburg, Russia, www.hermitagemuseum.org.*

