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THE PAINTING ISSUE | DAVID HOCKNEY | ADRIAN GHENIE | KAZUO SHIRAGA

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Strong Language

JULES DE BALINCOURT'S DYNAMIC VISUAL LEXICON IS AS ECCLECTIC AS IT IS DARING.

RACHEL WOLFF words ADAM GOLFER portraits



His name may conjure stuffy period films and French aristocracy, but in person Jules de Balincourt is every bit the Brooklyn artist. On a rainy Friday afternoon, he's wearing reddish skinny jeans, work boots, and a bright magenta scarf; his closely cropped light-brown hair is speckled with wisps of gray. He warns that he is going to chain-smoke throughout our interview but puffs at only two American Spirits during the hours we talk, distracted by his discussions of California culture, communes, and a recent motorcycle trip he took through India with friends.

Lining the walls of the artist's fourth-floor studio are bright oil-on-panel paintings of all sizes. Many will be shown at Deitch Projects, in New York, April 1 through 24, as one of the legendary gallery's final shows (it is set to close June 1, when Jeffery Deitch relocates to Los Angeles to assume his new post as director of the Museum of Contemporary Art). Over the past five years, de Balincourt, 37, has developed a highly nuanced artistic language that careens between the abstract and the representational. He lends to work on several paintings at once, flitting back and forth between panels and using one common (and thus unifying) palette. Some of his most recent works are pure form; the massive *Speculator*, for example, contains ribbonlike streaks resting atop the painting's title written in *brut* block lettering. Others are folksy and figurative: a lone tree with a coat and satchel hanging from a branch; young people gathered at an outdoor stage for what looks like a protest. It's just this playfulness and refusal to pigeonhole himself that have made de Balincourt a New York art world darling.

He moves around the studio with a

quiet energy, introspective but chatty, carefully confident, and plainly excited about his new series. "I've been painting more intuitively," he says. "The work is a bit more of a transitional space. A lot of the scenes are more pseudo-spiritual or metaphysical."

The metaphysical side is apparent in *Speculator*, in which colors and lines create a sense of 2-D momentum. In another picture, skinny strips of color shooting out from a central

nucleus create a burst of linear energy. A third builds a pixelated, *manga*-like portrait of what appears to be a young girl. The paintings are intuitive, even pseudospiritual perhaps, but they bear marks of his previous work, much of which had a faux-naïf look, containing subversive text and conveying a subtle criticism of corporate America, not to mention past and present imperialism.

"His technique is strange and unconventional, but that's not really the focus. It's his imagination and his critique that are center stage for me. The fact that he deals with critique at all breaks with many artists of his generation," says Kathy Grayson, a director at Deitch. Grayson curated last fall's "New York Minute" exhibition at the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Rome (MACRO), which included de Balincourt's work, and arranged for the April show after the artist unexpectedly split with his longtime dealer, Zach Feuer.

De Balincourt was born in Paris but moved to southern California with his mother when he was 10 years old. After high school he studied ceramics at a community college in Santa Barbara and lived on a commune there, making pottery and drums that were sold in local music stores as well as on the crafts-fair circuit. In 1998 he decamped to San Francisco to attend the California College of Arts and Craft, where he began dabbling in painting, depicting urban landscapes on giant slabs of clay—his "modern-day frescoes."

In 2000 de Balincourt drove to New York City, settling in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn. He worked as a deliveryman at a restaurant and then as an art handler—a job he likens to being a highbrow janitor—before enrolling, one



Peaceful Protesters, 2003. SPRAY PAINT AND ACRYLIC ON PANNEL, 30 X 48 IN. **TOP:** *Blind Faith and Tunnel Vision*, 2005. OIL, ENAMEL, AND SPRAY PAINT ON PANNEL, 78 X 58 IN. **OPPOSITE:** Jules de Balincourt in his Brooklyn studio, 2008.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Speculator, 2009. OIL AND
 ACRYLIC ON PANEL, 65 x 96 IN.
 De Balincourt in his studio,
 2009. *Accidental Tourism*
 and *The Art of Forgetting*,
 2006. OIL ON PANEL,
 43½ x 51¼ IN.

week after 9/11, in the Hunter College MFA program, where he found a strong, like-minded community. Although de Balincourt entered Hunter as a ceramics major, he quickly found himself gravitating toward painting. And politics.

"From 2001 to Obama's election, so much of my work was fueled by the political and social climate of America," he says. "All of a sudden we were living in this police state—people are waving their flags, and something like 90 percent of the U.S. is for going to war."

By spring 2003, de Balincourt had landed a solo show at Feuer's Chelsea gallery (then named L.F. Gallery). The exhibition brought out the artist's anti-Bush feistiness, with paintings of rural landscapes invaded by billboards and media blasts—beautifully rendered as bursts of color emanating from smallish satellite dishes—some of which incorporated such not-so-subtle texts as "Bush Sucks."

After this debut, de Balincourt built a name for himself locally, showing at Team Gallery, Deitch, and P.S.1, where he was part of the

pulse-taking "Greater New York" survey in 2005. For his second solo outing with Feuer, also in 2005, he exhibited a dark body of work featuring desolate landscapes and sterile corporate boardrooms. The pieces' political messages were less direct but still evident, as in a series of maps redistributing U.S. territories to their original Native American inhabitants. After that exhibition, de Balincourt moved to Berlin for a year. "I didn't want to be this angry, bitchy, whiny voice about America," he says. "Just the notion of America was fueling so much of my work at that time. I needed to get away."

When he returned to New York, in 2006, he bought a big warehouse space in Bushwick intending to make it his studio. Instead he and fellow artist Andrea Merckx converted it into a community center of sorts, Starr Space, as they called it, hosted fund-raisers, art/rock shows, and parties, including baptism celebrations and *quinceañeras* for the predominantly Hispanic church next door.

"There's still a certain liberty out in Bush-

wick," de Balincourt says. But freedom comes at a cost. The artist was jailed following one Starr Space event (he's mum on the details). And after three years of running the venue, he's throwing in the towel. It takes too much time and money, he says, and he really wants to turn the space into a studio.

Lately he's been traveling a lot: the motorcycle trip through India, along with treks through Japan and California. The images and themes emerging in his new paintings, he says, reflect the precarious point we're at as a country. The uncertainty manifests itself in ambiguous crowds—people with picket signs, strangers on foreign streets. And although de Balincourt has always painted from his imagination, now he's looking inward even more. "It's my own sort of escapism," he says. "Everything inspires my work: lived experiences, cultural and social phenomena. But it is more and more about that internal gaze, a mix of these utopian and dystopian ideals. It all sounds kind of New Agey, but these days, that's what I'm interested in." MP

