

# Jules de Balincourt

“My work comes from direct experience: I am a sort of cultural sieve, processing my own global cultural detritus”



1 **Untitled** (2005)  
mixed media, 40.5 x 61 x 101.5cm

2 **Untitled** (2006)  
mixed media, dimensions variable

3 **US World Studies III** (2005)  
oil, acrylic and enamel on panel,  
150 x 183cm

4 **California Precontact** (2006)  
acrylic and oil on panel, 120 x 95cm

JULES DE BALINCOURT paints in a studio that looks out over the rooftops of Brooklyn, the island of Manhattan stretched out like a ribbon before him. It's an appropriate perspective for an artist whose recent work (shown at New York's Zach Feuer gallery in October) has been preoccupied with the state of the Union. He has painted distorted, satirical maps of America, views of the pleasure hideaways of the rich, and of the blasted cities they've destroyed and deserted. And, just occasionally, he tries to imagine pastel-tinged utopias where we all get along. *INTERVIEW: Morgan Falconer*

## Your surname sounds prestigious.

Well, my family was once part of the French nobility. They were officers in the army, barons and counts. One of my great-great-grandfathers was the Mayor of Bordeaux. Some people in France still regard it as a prestigious name, but the family fortune disappeared over a hundred years ago. My parents were liberal, hip, 60s Parisians, they worked in the fashion and art worlds, but my mother rebelled and left with my sister and me for California in 1979. Luckily, in California my name carries none of the prestige, it was simply something to be mispronounced by soccer coaches and surf punks.

## How do you see America now?

From the very beginning, my experience of the country has always been that there is this utopian ideal and then a level of deception. There is something adolescent and naive about American culture which is its charm but also its ultimate danger.

## What has shaped your work most of all?

I think emigrating to America had a profound effect on me – the whole process of assimilating to American public schools at the height of the conservative Reagan days. I was in a new world in which “Frenchy” was marginalised as “commie”, simply because most kids were ignorant, or brainwashed by all the “red scare” films. Also, growing up in LA is crazy! The sense of police authority, of police repression, made a powerful impression on me. When I was 16 a cop put a gun to my head. These experiences really bring up resentment and mistrust for authority. Later, I started to feel like I was part of some alternative, marginal culture. I spent a few months in a commune outside LA, I went to Rainbow Gatherings and Grateful Dead concerts. But quickly I came to realise that there was deception in all that as well, that it was basically a dysfunctional utopia, just a mindless free-for-all, which I experienced as an outsider observer of sorts.

## Would you call your work political?

I do want it to have a direct, confrontational, graphic quality, but I've never made a conscious decision to be a social, political artist. And I am not really interested in referencing someone else's ideas, history or philosophy – my work comes from my own direct experience. I am a sort of cultural sieve, processing my own global cultural detritus.

## Which painters do you admire?

I don't actually have such a tight connection with art history. Of course, I admire figures like Goya, Manet and Velázquez, but I tend to be inspired by all kinds of things; outsider art, 19th century French wallpaper, graffiti, advertising. I'm drawn to the iconographic quality of images, the qualities you find in propaganda or billboard advertising. There needs to be a quick read for me, both visually and conceptually.

## Your palette is often chaotically bright.

### Where does that come from?

Psychedelic drugs? No, I don't know. Painting is an intuitive process for me, I don't have a game plan, it's just what happens. To me, explaining my palette is like trying to describe the sound of my own voice; it's simply out of my reach.

## You've produced sculpture as well, but only occasionally. Why is that?

I just rarely come up with ideas that I feel need to be expressed in three dimensions. I made a tree house just after 9/11 because I wanted to express a notion of an isolated, binding, communal hub, a literal thing that brought people together. And I made a boat that I took out on the East River: that was the result of a self-imposed challenge to make a boat out of whatever I found in the streets of Manhattan, a sort of spoof on survivalism. If I have an idea that requires three dimensions then I make a sculpture, but I tend to have a hard time justifying this thing which occupies space. Maybe I just

don't believe in sculpture as much as I do in painting. Painting has a directness. It seems to me to offer the most elementary, basic transmission of vision.

## Some works, such as *Think Globally, Act Locally* [overleaf], appear to combine the real world with dream images...

I was not thinking of dream worlds – our real world is fantastical enough as it is. The beams are simply a formal way to convey the idea of broadcasting, or the beam of communication branching out on a global scale. It's this idea of a local community, like a small town in Ohio, having the potential for global potency or influence.

## Do you listen to music when you work?

I do, a lot. I listen to the staples, like Bob Dylan and Neil Young, but also some of the new bands from Brooklyn, such as Animal Collective, Coco Rosie, Devendra Banhart, White Magic – a lot of neo-folk.

## What's on your mind right now?

Right now, I'm running a community centre in a building that I've bought in Williamsburg [a Brooklyn neighbourhood]. We're doing performances and screening films. It's called the Starr Space. I didn't envisage this at first, but it feels like living some of the visions of my paintings in real life – the more positive, hopeful side of my work. We make everything happen under the same roof – films, yoga, concerts, Guatemalan baptism parties. It feels more like a new living sculpture of sorts.

## Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

There is no specific painting or sculpture that I feel the need to own. But I would like temporarily to own Gelitin [the Austrian performance collective], for maybe a year, and pull them out of my basement occasionally to entertain the masses with some of their interactive moments of beauty, hope, and mindless debauchery. ☺

**CV** Born: 1972, Paris, France Studied: Hunter College, New York; California College of Arts and Craft, San Francisco  
Lives and works: Brooklyn, New York, US Represented: Zach Feuer Gallery, New York



*Unknowing Man's Nature* (2007), oil, acrylic and spray paint on panel, 335.3 x 274.3cm



Remembering Our Great Dead Heroes (2007), oil and spray paint on panel, 91.4 x 121.9cm



Think Globally, Act Locally (2007), oil and spray paint on panel, 243.8 x 335.3cm



Untitled (Open for the Season) (2007), oil on panel, 81.3 x 58.4cm