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## Jules de Balincourt's challenging paintings confront societal notions of freedom

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*Created in the wake of the attacks on New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001, the nonfigurative paintings of French-born, California-bred artist Jules de Balincourt confront Western notions of freedom in our increasingly volatile global society. Working in oil on surfaces of exposed wood, de Balincourt employs a faux naive style that is sophisticated in conception and application.*

*An exhibition of de Balincourt's work opens at the Fine Arts Gallery at Vanderbilt with a 5 p.m. reception on Thursday. The painter, whose show also includes a sculptural centerpiece, will give a lecture at 7 p.m. Wednesday in Room 103 of Wilson Hall. Exhibit curator Joseph Whitt discusses the artist's legacy:*

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Jules de Balincourt was born in Paris in 1972. As a child, he emigrated with his parents to the West Coast of the United States and eventually settled in the suburban sprawl of southern California. His adolescence was marked by an unavoidable outsider status. Years that he spent imagining America as a "Disneyland of cowboys and Indians" were completely at odds with the reality of living among skate punks and Burning Man hippies as a teenager. The fact that he never fully integrated into any subculture became a seminal influence on his subsequent work as an artist. It afforded him a unique viewpoint from which to explore what he would later describe as America's "Utopian Dystopia."

De Balincourt's work has been exhibited at many leading international galleries and museums including Musée d'Art Moderne and Palais de Tokyo in Paris and has been featured in numerous major exhibitions including Greater New York at the PS1 Center for Contemporary Art and USA Today at The Royal Academy in London. His work is in several important collections including the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and the Saatchi Gallery.

Perhaps more than any other painter of his generation, de Balincourt scrutinizes the incongruity between the Western promise of freedom and an increasingly fractured societal reality bearing its weight. His God's-eye-view narratives, often composed from above or from afar, are peopled by small, painfully delicate everymen. Free will seems sewn shut inside each microcosm. Social roles are unclear yet fulfilled dutifully. Landscapes are skewed with a childlike conception of two-point perspective and teeter, as a result, with a perpetual sense of impending collapse.

There is also a truth to materials at work — roughness, an intentional transparency in showing how something is made that strikes a note of urgency in each piece. Exposed wood grains bleed through quick washes of oil paint meant to describe streets, skies and faces. At times, edges of picture planes reveal that de Balincourt has recycled fragments possibly discarded from some other construction. The artist's faux naive style feels adopted, but it is so meticulously rendered, so touched, that an experience that could have easily lapsed into agitprop becomes something disarmingly tender and empathetic.

The works in this exhibition are presented in the shadow of one of the most gripping political seasons in our nation's history. In addition to providing a primer for anyone new to de Balincourt's practice, they also posit a chronology of open-ended questioning that indirectly mirrors the



*Blind Faith and Tunnel Vision, oil and enamel on panel, 2005*

### IF YOU GO

**What:** The paintings of Jules de Balincourt

**Where:** Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery, 23rd and West End avenues

**When:** Thursday-Dec. 5, with a lecture by the artist at 7 p.m. Wednesday in Room 103 of Wilson Hall

**Admission:** free

**Contact:** 322-0605 or [www.vanderbilt.edu/gallery](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/gallery)

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