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The Reconsideration of Jean-Michel Basquiat's Work from the Hybrid
Cultural Perspective

by

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This thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Bachelor of Arts in Art History

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Introduction

In his short 27 years, iconic artist Jean-Michel Basquiat produced thousands of works of art that were quickly sold and bought on the New York art market of the 1980s. During the height of the demand for his work, Basquiat was generally appreciated as a young street artist who broke his way into the main stream art world. Much of his success was due to critics/dealers capitalizing upon his identity, rather than considering the complex cultural influences in his life and art. His primary achievement seems to be that he was a black artist, representing black themes, and successfully selling his work to the establishment. In my thesis, I look to reconsider the significance of Basquiat's work in the context of both street art and the booming gallery world of the 80s. My research will explore Basquiat's work from the context in which his art developed namely his upbringing, the hip hop generation, and surrounding influences in the art world.

The result of the dialogue between Basquiat and the art world of the 1980s was ultimately the construction of a Basquiat identity that constitutes an overall misrepresentation of his work. His need to fuel his compulsive drug addiction and aching desire for fame kept him bound to producing art. A rebel became an art world commodity. In an attempt to include art of the "other" in the art historical and critical canon, Basquiat was categorized as a black street artist whose work exemplified the struggles of an African-American man and the darkness of his heritage. In such a characterization the subtleties of Basquiat's work, his distinctive persona, his multicultural heritage and nuance appreciation of the world around him is sacrificed at

the expense of the preconceived and marketable image of a successful black youth making it from the streets.

My research suggests that the richness and variety of the contexts in which Basquiat worked allowed him to question how he was perceived and led him to search for a way to undermine stereotypical projections of identification by exploring the nuances of his own background. His work did not only capture the essence of street art, but also the struggles of a troubled young man struggling to find his own identity. The clear cut signification of Basquiat as a black man who paints about issues like slavery and discrimination because it is his cultural heritage is prejudiced. Such an understanding of Basquiat fails to recognize him as a highly complex young man with a damaging drug addiction and a fluid, amorphous identity. Basquiat was an artist who explored every facet of his own mind. His work was not about black identity, but about having the guts to figure out who you are.

Chapter 1

Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Life of an Artist

"Since I was 17 I thought I might be a star."

-Jean-Michel Basquiat

Jean-Michel Basquiat was born on December 22, 1960 in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn in New York City. He was the eldest son of Gerard, a Haitian emigrant, and his Puerto Rican wife, Matilde. In an interview with Phoebe Hoban, author of one of the most concise Basquiat biographies entitled *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art*, Gerard Basquiat claimed that his family came from "an elite, affluent background," and that he was forced to flee from Haiti after his parents were imprisoned and his brother killed because of their political activism.¹ According to his father, Jean-Michel was exposed to art and music early on in his childhood and was an avid drawer from the age of three.

¹ (Hoban 1998), 16

When Jean-Michel was five years old, the Basquiat family moved from Park Slope to the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, where they lived a seemingly ordinary middle-class life.² This representation of Jean-Michel's childhood, however, does not reveal the trauma the artist experienced in his youth, nor the extraordinary aspects of his childhood, both of which would inform and influence the essence of his art as well as create the still lingering controversy over the value and importance of Basquiat, the artist.

At the age of seven, Jean-Michel was struck by a car while playing in the streets of Brooklyn, and he was subsequently hospitalized and had his spleen removed. During his hospitalization, the artist's mother gave her son the classic book, *Gray's Anatomy*, a textbook published in 1918 that to this day is a master reference for illustrations of the human anatomy.³ This textbook provided the young Basquiat with a sort of anatomical diagram of healing that would become an important early influence on his work. In works like *Carbon Dating Systems Versus Scratchproof Tape* (1982) (Fig. 1), Basquiat incorporates crudely sketched body parts surrounded by text that reads "X-RYS," "BONE," and "MARROW." This was not the only impact Jean-Michel's mother had on his artistic sensibility. Growing up, Jean-Michel would go to museums and the theater with his mother.⁴ In Steve Hager's, *Art After Midnight*, a book that provides an insightful view of the 1980s East Village environment, Basquiat recalls scenes from the Broadway musical *West Side Story* and remembers his mother illustrating stories from

² *Ibid.*, 16

³ *Ibid.*, 17

⁴ (Regazzoni 2005), 176

the Bible on napkins. He credits his development as an artist to his mother by stating: "I'd say my mother gave me all the primary things. The art came from her."⁵

Basquiat's relationship with his mother, however, was far from ideal. In an interview with the writer Anthony Haden-Guest, the artist explained, "When I was a kid, my mother beat me severely for having my underwear on backwards, which to her meant I was gay. I was in kindergarten. She beat me for the longest time. My mother was very, very strict."⁶ The relationship between his mother and his father was also far from ideal. Basquiat, the son, frequently described scenes of domestic violence to his friends. He told Al Diaz, his future art partner, that his mother tied his father to the bed and beat him with a hanger. His mother also attempted to kill Gerard by driving their car off the road. When Basquiat was seven, his parents separated, with the artist's father receiving custody of the children and moving his family—the future artist and his two younger sisters—with him to Boerum Hill, Brooklyn. Speaking about his parents' marriage, Basquiat explained that "they broke up so often. Back and forth, back and forth. There was always this conflict."⁷ The young Basquiat's childhood was unsettled further when his mother was committed to a psychiatric facility when he was ten or eleven; she claimed that she went crazy as a result of her horrible marriage.⁸

The Boerum Hill neighborhood was part of a more gentrified Brooklyn, resembling a tree-lined suburban neighborhood. Jean-Michel Basquiat's father worked for the publisher Macmillan in New Jersey and was a jazz enthusiast who did not allow

⁵ (Hager 1986)

⁶ (Hoban 1998), 17

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18

Jean-Michel to touch any of his valued records. Gerard Basquiat was also an avid tennis lover who kept company with white friends, and all in all had little interest in his son.

Jean-Michel attended a private school, St. Ann's, until the fourth grade when he attended Public School 101. His teachers remember him as a child who was constantly drawing.⁹ Racial tensions were a problem at P.S. 101. In this environment, the young Basquiat was an angry outcast child; his constant drawing revealed his artistic inclinations and were an outlet for him. Cynthia Bogen Shechter, one of Basquiat's teachers, recalls that some of the comic-like drawings the young artist drew depicted his made-up Harlem gangs called the "Suicides" and the "Switchblades." These subjects seemed to be out of keeping with Basquiat's middle-class status. According to his father, Basquiat simply "wanted to paint and draw all night. He got thrown out of schools. Jean-Michel couldn't be disciplined."¹⁰ Apparently, Basquiat's father did attempt to discipline his children with belt beatings.¹¹

In 1974 Gerard Basquiat moved with his children to Mira Mar, Puerto Rico. It was during this period that Basquiat ran away from home for the first time though he only managed to stay away for a few hours, before he was sent back to his father. In 1976, Gerard was transferred back to New York for work, resulting in his return to Boerum Hill with his three children.¹² Upon their return to Brooklyn, Jean-Michel attended Edward R. Murrow High School. There, he received an incomplete in every class. When Basquiat talked about his childhood years, he would describe his works as

⁹ (Hoban 1998), 19

¹⁰ (Shechter n.d.)

¹¹ (Hoban 1998), 21

¹² (Museo d'Arte Modena 2001)

horrible and “too abstract expressionist.”¹³ He claimed that the ugliness of his work mirrored the ugliness he experienced at home. Basquiat’s stories, however, are somewhat inconsistent. In an interview with documentary filmmaker Tamra Davis, the artist told her the story of his father stabbing him in the buttocks when he caught him smoking pot in his room.¹⁴ He told his friend Al Diaz that the stabbing occurred when he was caught having sex with his male cousin. Either way, Basquiat ran away from home after this, at age 15. For a while, he roughed it on the streets of Brooklyn, later moving to Manhattan’s meatpacking district and eventually ending up in Washington Square Park. At this low point in his life, Basquiat refused to return home.¹⁵

Eventually, his father found Basquiat and with the help of the police brought him home. Jean-Michel entered the City-As-School program in the 11th grade with both an attitude and a drug problem. The school was intended as an outlet for talented yet hard-to-place kids in order to help them realize their potential. Taking advantage of New York City, City-As-School was based on the idea that the city itself could function as a learning tool and as a classroom. Students were provided with public transportation tokens to travel to classes that met in locations such as the Museum of Modern Art, throughout the city. Schedules were flexible, requiring students to meet with their advisors once a week.¹⁶

The idea of the City-As-School program may have been good in theory, but in practice the structure was easily abused. Basquiat and his friend Diaz often skipped

¹³ (Hoban 1998), 21

¹⁴ (Davis 2006)

¹⁵ (Hoban 1998), 22

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24

class and sold their tokens. When he did go to class, Basquiat brought his childhood past with him; he was hostile and disrespectful and was described as carrying a huge chip on his shoulder. Given the limited structure, the expected happened: drugs and sex were more frequent than class. Most of the students experimented with acid and their sexuality. Nevertheless, Basquiat managed to benefit from the program. His writing and drawing excelled, and he became an illustrator for the school newspaper and yearbook.¹⁷

It was in this context that the artistic movement of SAMO was born. SAMO was an acronym used by Basquiat and Diaz for the slogan, “same ol’ shit.” and SAMO came to signify an angst filled social commentary. The beginning of SAMO is associated with the publication of Basquiat’s work in the Spring 1977 edition of his school newspaper, the *Basement Blues Press*. Basquiat composed a satirical dialogue between Harry Sneed, who seeks a “modern and stylish” spiritual enlightenment, and Quasimodo Jones. In the restaurant, Papaya King, Jones offers Sneed a variety of religious experiences, all of which Sneed rejects. Jones finally peaks Sneed’s interest when he suggests “SAMO,” a “guilt free religion.”¹⁸

While attending City-As-School, in 1977 Basquiat joined the Family Life Theater. Here, at this theater therapy group, he and Al Diaz created a fictional character named SAMO, a preacher of ideologies that came in the form of cryptic messages, offering an alternative to mainstream art.¹⁹ The use of SAMO as a designation of social protest took off in 1978 when the acronym started to appear on the sides of SoHo and East Village

¹⁷ (Hoban 1998), 25

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26

¹⁹ (Regazzoni 2005), 177

buildings.²⁰ The witty acronym written in black Magic Marker and signed with a copyright sign became a common fixture all over the SoHo and TriBeCa neighborhoods of Manhattan.

The acronym remained anonymous until Basquiat and Diaz sold the SAMO story to the *Village Voice* newspaper for one hundred dollars. The ubiquitous SAMO acronym finally was connected to its makers, who wrote on any empty part of the city slogans such as: “SAMO as an end to mindwash religion, nowhere politics and bogus philosophy,” “SAMO as an escape clause,” and “SAMO saves idiots.” The use of the acronym came to an end when the slogan “SAMO is dead” appeared on a SoHo building in 1979.²¹

During the elaborate City-As-School graduation ceremony held in June of 1978 at Fordham University, Basquiat meticulously planned the “pie-ing” of the principal, a prank that where Basquiat would run onto stage and to the surprise of the principal, throw a pie in his face. The prank illustrates Basquiat’s desperate cry for attention. The artist explained that he carried out the prank on a dare: “He [the principal] was wearing a white jacket, so it looked like a magic trick.”²² Basquiat left the audience gasping in shock of the ordeal as he sprinted out of the auditorium. Pranks like this one have been attributed to Basquiat’s abusive childhood. A teacher of Basquiat’s notes that the artist “had this kind of paranoid quality, and he really responded to attention, like a puppy dog. He just lapped up any kind of approval desperately and indiscriminately.”²³

²⁰ (Hoban 1998), 27

²¹ (Basquiat, Jean-Michel n.d.)

²² (Hoban 1998), 30

²³ *Ibid.*, 31

Basquiat never completed his senior year at City-As-School; his antics prevented him from completing the program, as he was eventually asked to leave the school.

After leaving City-As-School in 1978, Basquiat mostly hung out around the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, a fine arts university located around Gramercy Park.²⁴ He was homeless and was again writing the SAMO slogans throughout the city. At the time of SAMO, the motif of wall writing was experiencing a rebirth as subject matter. This cryptic SAMO acronym written in the form of graffiti on city buildings marked Basquiat's unauthorized entrance into the art world. At the age of 18, without a place to live, and no high school diploma or artistic training, Basquiat was recognized as a "graffiti artist" on the art market.

It was Basquiat's 1979 acquaintance with Diego Cortez, a well-connected artist and filmmaker who was well-known in the night club world of New York City, that propelled the development of the artist's career. As Basquiat became a frequent partier at the wildly popular downtown *Mudd Club*, his persona became well known and recognized by Cortez. Cortez showed Basquiat's work to art dealers and sold some of his drawings, which at the time were done mostly with crayon and demonstrated an especially childlike style Basquiat implored at the time. Cortez also introduced Basquiat to Henry Geldzahler, the curator of twentieth-century art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, who became a supporter and collector of Basquiat's works.²⁵

Basquiat's artistic formal debut took place in 1980, when he showed his works in a group exhibition entitled *The Time Square Show*. Set in an empty space in Times

²⁴ (Hoban 1998), 32

²⁵ (Regazzoni 2005), 178

Square, the exhibition was enthusiastically received by the art world, which in turn legitimized artists associated with the club scene. Basquiat's work in *The Time Square Show* included a large SAMO installation that garnered Basquiat an entire wall space. His exhibited work was reviewed in well-known magazine, *Art in America*.²⁶ Later that year, screenwriter Glenn O'Brien chose Basquiat for the lead role in his film *New York Beat*, later to be renamed *Downtown 81*, and directed by the Lugano photographer Edo Bertoglio. With his pay from this acting role, Basquiat was able to buy art supplies which he used in the space in SoHo the production company allowed him to use as a studio temporarily. Now, she could seriously dedicate himself to painting.

In 1981, Cortez organized an exhibition called *New York/New Wave* at P.S. 1 in Manhattan that included Basquiat's work. Basquiat showed twenty drawings and paintings (Fig. 2). His work was noted by Annina Nosei, Emilio Mazzoli and Bruno Bischofberger, three of the most powerful art dealers of the time. Basquiat exhibited his works in a number of other exhibitions. In September of 1981, Annina Nosei included Basquiat in a group exhibition called *Public Address*, devoting the entire back gallery room to Basquiat. After the show, Nosei became Basquiat's dealer and provided him with a studio space. In May of 1982, he traveled to Europe for his first solo exhibition at the Galleria d'Arte Emilio Mazzoli in Modena, Italy. Basquiat's first solo exhibition in America was in the Annina Nosei gallery held in March 1983, and it was a huge success.²⁷ (footnote) His work received positive reviews from both critics and the public as it quickly sold off the gallery walls. It was then that Bruno Bischofberger approached

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 180

²⁷ (Regazzoni 2005), 184

Basquiat and offered to be his international dealer. Basquiat agreed. This new collaboration lasted until Basquiat's premature death in 1988 at the age of 27.²⁸

By the time he died that summer of a drug overdose in downtown New York, he had achieved his lifelong goal. In his seven year artistic career before his death, Basquiat had shown in 37 gallery exhibitions internationally, he had graced the cover of a national magazine, and reached iconic status. He had created his image and garnered the artistic fame that he felt he had always deserved. But what was it about Basquiat specifically that brought him such monumental success so rapidly? The combination of his image, identity, and timing is what created Basquiat, the international art star.

²⁸ (Regazzoni 2005), 188

Chapter 2

Reoccurrence: Symbols and Themes in Basquiat's Work

"I start a picture and I finish it. I don't think about art while I work. I try to think about life."

-Jean-Michel Basquiat

Jean-Michel Basquiat humorously referred to his frequently used subject matters in 1983's painting *Untitled (Biography)*, where he first writes a biting summary of his early life, following it with: "EARLY THEMES WERE: 1. THE SEAVIEW FROM VOYAGE TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA 2. ALFRED E. NEWMAN 3. ALFRED HICHTCOCK (HIS FACE OVER + OVER) 4. NIXON 5. CARS (MOSTLY DRAGSTERS) 6. WARS 7. WEAPONS 8. MADE DRAWINGS OF OOPICK+FRITZ+WAIR+YABOO WITH MARC PROZZO." Even to Basquiat himself, his working mind seemed all over the place, and the most unifying theme in his work is its lack of cohesion. Basquiat

maintained the mentality of a child throughout his artistic career, using a style as unsophisticated as possible, yet it was ingenious. He painted what he felt at that exact moment, what his most recent interest was, always shrouded with his deepest resentment and pride towards his upbringing and heritage. In every painting, Basquiat's raw street energy is apparent. The jagged brushstrokes and scratched out text express a kind of rebellion that is central to Basquiat's psyche. Although it is difficult to categorize Basquiat's work by theme or period, it remains important to understand the sometimes overt commonalities in subject matter that unite his entire oeuvre.

Basquiat was an intelligent artist; each and every aspect of his work is calculated in its placement, color, and size. His messages would create his image in the art world; therefore, his subject matter was well thought out. He was in charge of his own decisions. His elimination of technical skill in his work allowed for the true insight to shine. He abandoned any sense of adult logic and reverted to the immediacy of a child's mind. In his paintings, the field of vision is flattened and perspective is removed. Resounding flatness pushes space to one level in which the painting becomes an unconventional narrative or a math equation. The symbols are to be deciphered like a two-dimensional code where the viewer is left confused about the hidden messages that lie beneath. The general outcome of his work implies that Basquiat incorporated ideas, words, color, and images from various kinds of places and united them in a collage of objects, both mundane and unique, in his life.

Symbols and Technique

The copyright symbol, ©, is mostly used as a mark of ownership. The symbol is placed beside a brand name, a slogan, or a graphic icon to indicate the private rights of its creator. Of all the symbols Basquiat incorporated in his work, the copyright sign is among the most frequently used. Applied to his early SAMO works that he sprayed on public walls, the copyright symbol marked the legal ownership of the words he sprayed. Even though the actual act of painting walls was illegal, Basquiat did it anyway. The addition of his copyright sign indicated the artist's more significant form of ownership, which to Basquiat, placed higher value on the originality of thought over material ownership of property. The early use of the copyright sign served as his connection between his middle-class upbringing and the intellectual artist. He had the idea that having money was uncool in the New York underground scene, and his life growing up with what he thought was unimportant material property increased the importance of intellectual communication for Basquiat.²⁹

The symbol most famously linked with Basquiat's name is the simple yet powerful three-pronged crown, an image that appears in the majority of his paintings. With a skill for taking the most identifiable and loaded imagery and skewing their meaning into something more provoking, Basquiat used the crown, a symbol of royalty and authority, in many instances. In some, the crown floats above the heads of black men and heroes, elevating their historical importance when the viewer looks at the image. One of the most frequent wearers of the crown is one of Basquiat's most respected heroes, the jazz musician Charlie Parker. Growing up with a jazz-obsessed

²⁹ (Marenzi 1999), XXIV

father influenced who Basquiat idolized. Charlie Parker is one of the greatest and most significant jazz musicians and composers of all time. Some even argue that no other musician surpasses his saxophone skills.³⁰ In *CPRKR* (1982) (Fig. 3), Basquiat paints his version of a tribute to the musician, memorializing Parker's death. The painting consists of a scratchily archaic cross in the center of the off-white canvas with two vertical lines flanking it, giving the appearance of a tombstone. Above the "tombstone," Basquiat writes, "STANHOPE HOTEL APRIL SECOND NINETEEN FIFTY ~~THREE~~ FIVE," the date and place of Parker's death. Above the text is the iconic crown, giving Parker his royal status, which is furthered by the name, "CHARLES THE FIRST," written along the bottom. In this sparse canvas, Basquiat creates his own space for worship. His messages lie in their simplicity and lack of adornment.

There are various interpretations of Basquiat's symbolic crown circulating in art criticism. In his essay, "Pay for Soup/Build a Fort/ Set that on Fire," the art critic Luca Marenzi represents Basquiat's state of mind: Basquiat's feelings of emptiness implored him to create a world of his own through his works. The crown represents his craving for fame in his vacuous world.³¹ Critic Thomas McEvelley relates the use of the crown to "a sense of double identity, a royal selfhood that is lost but dimly remembered."³² Critics like bell hooks see the crown as a commentary, or mockery even, of the imperial white man's need for power.³³ This is the very appeal of Basquiat's work. Such basic symbolism is so ambiguous that any interpretation is possible. First, one sees the individual components, and then one looks at the overall image to decipher the artist's

³⁰ (Parker, Charlie 2007)

³¹ (Marenzi 1999), XXXVII

³² (McEvelley 1992)

³³ (hooks 1993)

tightly woven code. Symbols are assigned new values to create Basquiat's linguistic system, one without new subjects, just new perspectives.

Another visual mechanism Basquiat frequently uses is the repetition of text on his mediums. In his work, the repetition of words can, in a way, deaden the viewers' senses. Like a repeated saying that begins to lose resonance after a while, the words Basquiat reiterates changes the viewer's perspective and allows for the drifting mind. In a sense, the words lose their meaning and become repeated shapes, allowing for a more spiritual connection between viewer and image. The viewer is put into a state that transcends basic verbal meaning. Basquiat's body of work also suggests the artist's compulsiveness, as he himself moves away from the meaning of the word and becomes obsessed with the act of repeating it, the words becoming a rhythm. Much of Basquiat's work is about rhythm, and he elevates it once again, incorporating his urban sensibility into his artistic style, creating a visual language that correlates with the musical beats of hip hop and jazz. Like an improvisational jazz musician, he layers words, lines, and colors that create a rhythmic harmony. In his 1983 work, *Notary* (Fig. 4), there is a sense of rhythm that appears a bit off beat. On the left side of the canvas, lines of various lengths are connected by circles in a dynamic shape that looks as though it was painted in sync with an inner rhythmic beat.

On occasion, Basquiat will cross out a word with a single line through the center, still showing the viewer what word was written. The technique of negating the word with the cross out calls more attention to its existence. The viewer then is impelled to wonder why it was initially written and what made the artist change his mind. In 1981's

Cadillac Moon (Fig. 5), Basquiat signs the work with SAMO©, only to cross it out and resign in with "AARON," a reference to the baseball player Hank Aaron. This is one of the first examples of Basquiat's tendency for crossing out words. Here, he calls attention to the decreasing presence of SAMO in his work and the growing themes of black heroes, or, "Famous Negro Athletes."³⁴

Themes

In the summer of 1982, Basquiat released his first portfolio of prints entitled *Anatomy*, published by the Annina Nosei Gallery.³⁵ This marks the genesis of the recurring theme of the human body and anatomy in Basquiat's work. Basquiat's frequent incorporation of roughly drawn and labeled body parts, diseases, and images that resemble X-rays is often tied to his time spent in the hospital and his mother's gift of *Gray's Anatomy* in his early life. It is nearly impossible to keep track of just how many times Basquiat made anatomical images in his thousands of works; it seems almost as if the human body was a constant in his mind. Throughout his entire career, Basquiat was fascinated by the human form to the point where it infiltrated almost all of his work. The recognition of this apparent obsession is crucial to understanding Basquiat's working mindset. He paints bodily diagrams and labels most of them as if they were illustrations for an artistic medical manual. He exhibits an advanced knowledge, making it clear that he has researched this interest. This theme exudes a

³⁴ (Marenzi 1999), XXXVII

³⁵ (Chronology 1999), 200

childlike allure to experimentation and the constantly developing body, as if he will always be interested in change.

Basquiat's inherent interest in his black heritage is undeniable, once saying, "I'm interested in painting the black person. He's the protagonist in most of my paintings."³⁶ His interest in black people broadened into a continuing study of Afro-Caribbean culture and the representation of Africans. In general, Basquiat explores the topics of blackness and history in his heritage. Specifically, in *The Nile* (1983) (Fig. 6), Basquiat tackles his recurrent theme of heritage, representative of his using his work as a means to unite modern times in America and memories of the ancient world. In doing so, he creates an examination of his own unique heritage whose complexities lend to his confusion and rebellion. In *The Nile*, he makes numerous references to aspects of his history and background. Even something as simple as the appearance of Spanish text in his work has a direct correlation with Basquiat's personal culture, having learned the language as a child from his Puerto Rican mother. This piece contains text that says, "EL GRAN ESPECTACULO," meaning, "the grand spectacle." The title of the painting itself, *The Nile*, the African river, references what many African Americans see as a cultural touchstone. This painting is also an example of Basquiat's frequent use of hieroglyphs. He paints a hieroglyphic eye and waves in the top center of this canvas, incorporating an ancient African style of symbolic communication. Also in the painting, there is a subtle reference to how Americans overlook many of the origins that lie in Africa. He paints the word, "MEMPHIS," which most associate with the state of Tennessee. Underneath this word he paints, "THEBES," with a box around it for

³⁶ (Street to Studio: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat n.d.)

emphasis. Memphis and Thebes were originally significant cities in ancient Egypt, long before the United States was even born.

A reference to black history in *The Nile* lies in an eerie, flat black figure with the Spanish word for slave written on his chest, then crossed out by the artist. Basquiat often makes references to white imperialism, the struggle of the black man, and the slave trade. Images of the scales of justice paired with primitively dressed black figures, abstractly drawn goods with arrows and values, and the words, “my apologies,” imply Basquiat’s resentment in 1982’s *The Mosque*. Similarly, in *The Dutch Settlers* (1982) (Fig. 7), the title already suggests the subject matter. Upon looking at the image, one sees on the far left a saddened black figure with the word, “NUBIA,” written across his chest, then crossed out, suggesting the stripping away of his identity upon the beginnings of the slave trade. Above him is the word, “TOBACCO,” a commodity of the trade, and the iconic crown. As the viewer’s eyes move along the canvas, the slave’s journey abstractly unfolds. Basquiat again uses the combination of simple symbols to create a highly provocative commentary that forces the viewer to face the issue head on.

Basquiat used his work to communicate what he thought were larger problems and issues with humanity. Themes of injustice and the fight for equality fill many of his works. In 1981’s *Per Capita* (Fig. 8), Basquiat creates another visual code that ultimately sends the message of social discrimination and the struggle for freedom. In the center of the painting is a black boxer, who stands in a position similar to the Statue of Liberty. This image can be seen as an updated image of the iconic statue that represents freedom. The inclusion of the boxer implies strength in a struggle or fight, a

crusade for what is right. On the right, Basquiat writes the title of the painting, which is a term often used to refer to demographics and annual income. On the opposite side of the work, he lists the per capita of different states to underline the distinction between the rich and the poor. Again here, Basquiat incorporates the theme of greed and exploitation. Basquiat was a master of creating tense dichotomies in his pieces that harshly contrasted poverty and prosperity or segregation and assimilation.

The common themes and symbols in Basquiat's work are generally overt. His intentions, however, are mostly left to be questioned and interpreted. His combinations of specific images can be interpreted as both hopeful and optimistic, or, which is more probable considering Basquiat's known sense of humor, they can be read as sinister and sarcastic. Basquiat's work provided a fresh point of view from a troubled youth struggling to understand who and what he is.

Chapter 3

Transcultural Art: Basquiat, Boricuas,³⁷ and the Hip Hop Generation

"[New York City in the 1980s] was an era of greater sexual openness to different cultures, and interchange between races."

-Well-know art consultant and curator Jeffrey Deitch

Often, urban youths who felt displaced, as if they did not fit in because of culture and ethnicity clashes, marked their territory on the streets. These kids were most frequently the children of immigrants, first generation Americans who were seeking their own identity in the country of opportunity. The streets offered them the arena for cultural reinvention, and they weren't shy about making their mark. All across cities, from Los Angeles to New York, kids began customizing their names or giving themselves

³⁷ Puerto Ricans often identify themselves as *Boricua*

recognized amongst their cohorts for their individuality and creativity, their boldness and technique. Their tag was a form of personal promotion.

Like the pioneers of the graffiti movement, Basquiat got his start on the streets. Born and raised in Brooklyn, his first exposure to creative expression occurred right outside his home door. Basquiat understood the connotations of graffiti, the notions inherent in the bold spray-painted lettering. He saw the power this form of expression held for someone like him who had difficulty conforming and who longed to make a name for himself in some way. Basquiat believed that the impact of the word on the street would help him achieve recognition. A child of Puerto Rican and Haitian immigrants, Basquiat was also a child of the new hip-hop generation. He was a melding of two different cultures in a new world; he had a new American identity. He struggled to be neither this nor that, but all. As a high school student at the City-As-School program, Basquiat established SAMO, or “same ol’ shit.” This art movement of social protest became Basquiat’s primary outlet for his individuality. Primal and direct, the words of SAMO were sprayed onto the walls of the New York City.

Basquiat’s SAMO, however, was not just an ordinary tag. Basquiat was a great self-marketer, but his writing was not just about marking territory or delineating an identity. SAMO was loaded with meaning. Commonly, graffiti of the period was visually stunning in color and intricacy but consisted mostly of the tagger’s name. But Basquiat did not want to be regarded as just a graffiti artist. His tags differed drastically from the rest. They were monochromatic, unadorned phrases whose simplicity distinguished them. Basquiat used graffiti to convey complex societal commentaries. He intelligently

combined street style with social critiques. SAMO embraced community satire and pointed the finger at the ironies and idiosyncrasies of society. One tag read, “SAMO© FOR THOSE THAT ACCEPT ‘ETHNIC-ART’ OUT OF GUILT,” a blunt statement criticizing those searching to embrace “ethnic” art in a venue perceived by them as “ethnic.” In 1981, Basquiat was a featured artist in a show at the Mudd Club called *Beyond Words*, curated by legendary graffiti artist and hip-hop historian Fab 5 Freddie and artist Futura. His works appeared alongside other graffiti artists such as DAZE, ZEPHYR, and CRASH (Fig. 9). Basquiat exhibited as SAMO©.⁴¹

The appearance of the crown in a large number of Basquiat’s works is another marker of his graffiti and street culture roots. Pioneer graffiti artists like CAY 161, COCO 144, and JOE 182 frequently adorned their tagged names with a simple, three-tiered crown (Fig. 10). The crown was a loaded symbol with a bold impact. It was easily understood by all: the crown means king, king of that territory. Taggers were kings of the streets and they marked their territory with their insignia. Basquiat incorporated the crown symbol into much of his work. This obvious connection between the visual language of tagging and Basquiat’s work are often overlooked. Basquiat not only began his artistic career with tagging, but the language of urban street life remained a constant element in his work as he moved into the world of “high art.”

The development of Basquiat’s work runs parallel to trends in street culture. The graffiti movement and Basquiat were closely connected to the realm of music and rhythm. Close friend and colleague Diego Cortez once said in an interview, “I’ve always said that I don’t think hip-hop would exist if there hadn’t been the graffiti scene. I think

⁴¹ (Vassel 2007), 122

that the graffiti scene created a New York scene that later evolved into hip hop. O.K., there were The Last Poets and many spoken-word people and jazz that goes back and all kinds of things which hip-hop people draw on as their ancestry. But the real scene for New York was the graffiti artists who created this new outlaw high-profile public network.”⁴² Looking at Basquiat’s overall body of work, the impact of hip-hop is apparent throughout. Rooted in the graffiti network, the artists of the New York hip-hop scene also traces their ancestry to, jazz and spoken word. All three elements are recurring themes in Basquiat’s work, creating a unifying hip-hop essence that is evident of his generation. Throughout his life, Basquiat created a series of images dedicated to the legendary jazz musicians like Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. Jazz was an integral part of Basquiat’s upbringing. His father was a jazz aficionado and exposed his son to music. In his works, Basquiat depicts Parker and other jazz musicians as heroes of their race and culture.

Basquiat’s depictions of various famous black jazz artists, Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington among them, bring to the forefront the revolutionary energy of these musicians. In a way, Basquiat admires them as artistic father figures. For Basquiat, their aura and creative contribution personify a triumphant essence. Basquiat broadens the realm of competition between white and black males to the creative world of jazz, where he sees the ingenuity of his black heroes as surpassing that of their white counterpart.⁴³ These musicians set the precedent for Basquiat to freely and openly pursue genius in a framework defined by black artists. Basquiat’s artistic connection to black jazz artists,

⁴² (A Dialogue with Diego Cortez and Glenn O'Brien 2007), 15

⁴³ (hooks 1993)

however, is in no way an implication of his own musical or artistic aptitude. Rather, it serves as an affirmation of the artistic genius he idolizes. He was fascinated with the advanced aspects of jazz musical styling that include mixing and improvisation, and incorporated these elements in his own work. He favored those jazz artists who challenged the limits of typical white musical preferences. His jazz hero paintings are Basquiat's way of creating a black creative kinship that endows him with an artistic lineage.

Basquiat's work reflects distinct cultural characteristics of his generation as well as elements of his childhood in Brooklyn. Much of his work is about the everyday occurrences of life in the New York to which he was exposed. Frequently, Basquiat just painted what he saw outside his window. His father, Gerard, remarked, "A lot of his imagery, I feel, is Brooklyn born."⁴⁴ Basquiat's view from his room window provided unlimited artistic inspiration. He looked out on a beautiful city skyline and onto the street below. He was constantly stimulated by the flux of everything urban. In 1981, he painted the austere *FLATS FIX*, a representation of the FLATS FIX signs on 4th Avenue in Brooklyn. This minimal image represents an entire upbringing, something Basquiat never forgot. Similarly, in 1981, Basquiat frequently painted childlike images of indistinct cars and airplanes, ubiquitous objects from his city environment. He lived by LaGuardia Airport and planes flew over his home regularly. With crayons he drew depictions of hop scotch squares among building windows and stairs, all a common sight in the urban Brooklyn landscape (Fig. 11).

⁴⁴ (Basquiat 2007), 90

Latin American culture. In *Natives Carrying Some Guns, Bible, Amorites on Safari* (1982) (Fig. 13), Basquiat ties together themes of slave labor, religious subjugation, colonization, and the Spanish conquest. This powerful image that is loaded with meaning first appears as if it singularly addresses African slave issues. There is a stark distinction between the white power figure on the right controlling the black working oppressed on the left. Approached with an understanding of Latino culture, subtle signifiers of Latin American culture emerge. The word “colonization” implies a reference to Puerto Rico’s continuing colonial liaison to the United States. Basquiat writes the name of Spanish colonizer Hernán Cortez three times on the right of the canvas. The initial appearance of Cortez is a reference African and an American joint history. Then, Basquiat crosses out the “z” in the second and third writing of “Cortez,” turning “Cortez” into “Corte.” The second “Corte” is then crossed out. In Spanish, “corte” means both a cut and the court of law - the Royal Court.⁴⁶ Below this, there is another bilingual phrase that reads, “I WON’T EVEN MENTION GOLD (ORO).” Oro is the Spanish word for gold, and above it, he paints an arrow pointing to the three forms of “Cortez.” In this painting, Basquiat references three types of European domination in both America and Latin America: capitalism, colonization, and the judicial system.⁴⁷

Beyond the blatant use of Spanish text, Basquiat integrated Latino culture deeply into many of his works. With his Spanish heritage rooted in his mother, Basquiat uses creative tactics to avert direct associations with her person in his works but still attributed his heritage to her. Although much of Basquiat’s work is self-inspired, self-

⁴⁶ (Negrón-Muntaner 2004), 138

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 138

centered almost, the enduring influence of his mother's language ingeniously pays tribute to the women who nurtured him. Notably, in a work entitled *Arroz con Pollo* (1981), Basquiat alludes to the Latino dish of rice and chicken (Fig. 14). In the painting, a skeleton-like figure to the right serves chicken to a seated, voluptuous figure anxiously awaiting the dish. The seated figure on the left of the painting sits, cupping her left breast with her right hand, as if about to breastfeed her child. With a title that directly relates to his mother's Latino culture, the female figure is most likely Basquiat's mother. Spanish functions in Basquiat's work as a language symbolic of more than language itself; it is an indicator of the hybrid culture of his upbringing, of his Brooklyn streets. Language is yet another symbol to be contemplated and deciphered within Basquiat's work.

In a work entitled, *Riddle Me This Batman* (1987) (Fig. 15), there is a small figure towards the bottom of the painting that says "TIZOL," a reference to Puerto Rican trombonist Juan Tizol who played in several of Duke Ellington's bands. One who overlooks this reference misses the transcultural connotations of this work. It is well-known that Basquiat frequently paints tributes his jazz hero, Duke Ellington, arguably the most influential and famous black musicians of all time. The reference to Tizol, however, provides a far more subtle insight to the multicultural facets of Basquiat's world. Tizol died around the time when Basquiat made this work. His name also occurs in an associated drawing called *Harlem Airshaft* (the title of an Ellington piece) that depicts Tizol among Duke Ellington's band members. The often overlooked inclusion of

artists like Tizol in Basquiat's work misinterprets the cultural framework from which Basquiat draws his kings, the prophets, and star athletes.⁴⁸

Considering Basquiat's nuanced cultural references his imagery can be said to depend on the art of knowing.⁴⁹ It is the kind of art that requires a certain awareness or openness to all kinds of cultural connotations that define the streets of New York.

Basquiat's work more than anything else marks his devotion to the streets of Brooklyn, to his personal heritage. Arguably, those who catapulted him to gallery success in the early 80s overlooked the transcultural nuances of Basquiat's work, mostly pegging him as a black street artist. Basquiat's works make apparent that he was not depicting this or that "other", rather he was "othering" those uninitiated in the vibrant urban street culture of New York.

⁴⁸ (Troupe 2005)

⁴⁹ (Storr 1990)

Chapter 4

From the Streets of New York to the Galleries of SoHo

“New York is my kinda town...if you can make it there, you can sell people your unwanted hair.”

-Jean-Michel Basquiat

It didn't take long for the elite art world to develop an interest in graffiti art. As the 80s set in, Minimalism and Conceptualism was beginning to be viewed as remote, disconnected, cold, and unconvincing. The art world was ready for something “authentic” and loaded with meaning. Gallery owners were searching for something not yet tainted by the market, a bite of the real world. Graffiti became the new in as Uptown New Yorkers and Europeans jumped to buy anything that fell under the category.⁵⁰ Even as collectors groveled over the novelty of graffiti art, dealers compelled artists to produce more work with more explicit statements. Some pessimists saw the art world's

⁵⁰ (Chang 2005), 152

acceptance of graffiti art as a kind of reparation for the white man's guilt for the repressed other. In this art world, Basquiat went from living on the street to a world famous artist whose works sold for around \$10,000 per canvas in one year.

1981 was the breakthrough year of his career. In this year, he made the momentous transition from the street to the studio. At the start of the year, he was mostly painting and drawing on the street and on discarded objects like doors and windows. By the end of the year, he had his own working studio space in the basement of Annina Nosei's gallery on Prince Street where he painted on prepared canvases. In upgraded conditions, Basquiat's work became even bolder and more intricate. He blended the street aesthetic of graffiti with elements of the modernist vocabulary. In the course of a year, Basquiat was transformed from highly talented artist working on the street to a first-rate, crowd pleasing painter.

Friend and curator Diego Cortez who sought to link the 80s punk/new wave music scenes with the art community, was the first to discover Basquiat and to realize the potential of his work. Cortez recalls an early encounter with Basquiat. Apparently, Basquiat approached Cortez asking for spare cash. Cortez gave the artist some money and explained that he had seen and liked the graffiti Basquiat was making. He continued to talk to Basquiat and said, "You should start making drawings and paintings. I can sell them. You're a really good artist." Cortez gave Basquiat money to buy paint supplies and reconvened with Basquiat a few days later. He was awed by the work Basquiat had produced, and offered to try selling them. Cortez then contacted art

collectors whom he thought would appreciate Basquiat's work like Henry and Jeffrey Geldzahler.⁵¹

In 1981, Cortez exhibited a wall of Basquiat's work in the "New York/New Wave" exhibition that he curated for P.S. 1.⁵² P.S. 1 was the pinnacle of alternative art spaces in the 80s art scene. It first opened in 1976 in an abandoned Long Island City elementary school. Five years later, by the time "New York/New Wave" opened, P.S. 1 had become an alternative space for the Whitney Museum. On February 15, thousands of people took the trip to Long Island City and waited in a line surrounding the building to see the groundbreaking exhibition that showcased a new direction in art.

In August of that same year, the Fun Gallery, whose energetic co-director Patti Astor was an associate of Andy Warhol, became the gallery-esque equivalent to the Bronx's Fashion Moda of the 1960s. During the late seventies and eighties, Fashion Moda was a kind of community art gallery situated on 3rd Avenue and 147th Street in the south Bronx.⁵³ As a gathering spot for Bronx graffiti artists, Fashion Moda was the first establishment to see graffiti as part of the art world. Here, work was sprayed directly on the walls of the gallery. Twenty years later the Fun Gallery showed post-graffiti art in Manhattan. Works by artists like FAB 5 FREDDY were displayed in more traditional formats. Group shows like "New York/New Wave" and the Fun Gallery presented a stunning new perspective on art. Basquiat, who exhibited in both the "New York/New Wave" show and at the Fun Gallery, was the most successful cross-over artist from this

⁵¹ (A Dialogue with Diego Cortez and Glenn O'Brien 2007), 14

⁵² (Deitch, 1981: The Studio of the Street 2007), 10

⁵³ (Webster 1996)

(post) graffiti generation.⁵⁴ As graffiti became fashionable in the 80s, collectors grew hungry for a wild child, a new inner-city savage. Basquiat fit this part to a tee. He struck the perfect balance; he was a minority middle class youth who played the street kid convincingly enough to satisfy the collectors' need for marginality.

Basquiat had successfully graduated from the streets of New York to the gallery walls of the art elite. He had set out to gain prominence by tagging the city street, and he accomplished his by becoming part of the mainstream established art world. But in a sense, Basquiat was fated to succeed. On top of his talent, intelligence, and determination, there were two factors that generated the 80s art boom that catapulted him to stardom. First, the direction of art itself changed followed by a change in the art market.

After a recession in the late 1970s, the American economy had dramatically picked up under Reagan's first term. The newly established rich wanted invested in art both for status and for tax write-offs. Art dealers essentially became commodities brokers,⁵⁵ and artists became obsessed with financial success. This environment made possible Basquiat's rapid climb to fame; dealers clung to Basquiat as if he were an art producing machine. In 1981, his primary dealer Annina Nosei invited Basquiat to work in her gallery basement in an atmosphere that some liken to a sweatshop. Nosei was known to bring collectors unannounced to Basquiat's studio and strongly encouraged

⁵⁴ (Hoban 1998), 81

⁵⁵ (C. Marshall 1999)

Basquiat to swiftly produce works which she sold without his consent and before they were even fully dry.⁵⁶ In this basement, Basquiat made his leap from street to gallery.

Basquiat's art achieved popularity on the New York art scene because everything about it was an anomaly. He was a street artist with knowledge of the European avant-garde movements, he was a street punk who has attended private school, and most importantly, he was a brave black man making it in the white downtown gallery scene. It was these contrasting traits that made Basquiat a star; he was just enough thug and just enough conventional. He was part untrained but sophisticate.

To collectors and dealers, Basquiat exemplified a marginal youth with adolescent tendencies and a talent for graffiti whose talent could be channeled to create a conventional and financially successful artists. In works like *Aaron I* (1981) (Fig. 16), which portrays a rough man's head flanked by cartoonish cars, Basquiat's sharp edged crayon scribble is reminiscent of the work of Cy Twombly.⁵⁷ The coloring is similar to that of the works of Jasper Johns and the perspective recalls the works of Francis Bacon.⁵⁸ A later painting entitled *Philistines* (1982) (Fig. 17) shows the eerie gazes of three jaggedly drawn skeletons rendered in a Picasso-esque fashion. The wildly famous Pop artist Andy Warhol was a big influence on Basquiat and, eventually, became Basquiat's most notable collaborator.

Basquiat idolized Warhol ever since his days of selling t-shirts and postcards on the downtown streets of New York. He was formally introduced to Warhol on October 5,

⁵⁶ (C. Marshall 1999)

⁵⁷ (Gardner 1992)

⁵⁸ (Gardner 1992)

1982, when a dealer, Bruno Bishofberger, brought him to Warhol's Factory.⁵⁹ In 1968, Warhol and Bishofberger founded *Interview* magazine and had agreed that Bishofberger could use his judgment to present any rising artist he selected to Warhol for possible article coverage in the magazine. Bishofberger could also bring young artists to the Factory where Warhol would paint their portrait in exchange for a work from that artist. When Bishofberger mentioned that he would bring Basquiat to the Factory, Warhol, who was relatively unfamiliar with Basquiat's recent work, said he had met the artist a couple of times before. He remembered Basquiat being pushy about selling his street art that Warhol did not find impressive.⁶⁰

Basquiat came to the Factory and Warhol took his photograph with a Polaroid camera. Basquiat then asked Warhol if he could take his picture. Warhol agreed, and then posed for a picture with Basquiat. As Bishofberger and Warhol proceeded to lunch, Basquiat said his goodbye although he was invited to stay. About an hour and a half later, Basquiat's assistant entered the Factory with a large painting that was still dripping in paint. The assistant had walked the piece the fifteen blocks from Basquiat's apartment on Crosby Street to Warhol's Factory in Union Square because it was too large to fit into a taxi. The painting depicted Basquiat and Warhol together, an image Basquiat had fantasized about.⁶¹ On the left, Warhol stands in his archetypal pose, his hand on his chin as he looks on to the wild dreadlocked Basquiat on the right. Basquiat named this painting *Dos Cabezas* (two heads) (Fig. 18). When the painting arrived it was admired by everyone. Warhol, in particular, was shocked, and even claimed he was

⁵⁹ (Bischofberger 2005), 106

⁶⁰ (Bischofberger 2005), 106

⁶¹ (Hoban 1998), 205

envious of Basquiat's ability to paint so quickly.⁶² At the age of twenty three, Basquiat's fantasy had been met and even superseded; he had become Warhol's collaborator and colleague. The two artists became inseparable; they worked, played, and partied together. Warhol became Basquiat's father figure and confidant. He took Basquiat under his wing. Their relationship was symbiotic. Warhol had always had a following of young, emerging artists that he mentored and from whom he harvested artistic energy. In a 1985 interview with journalist Cathleen McGuinan, Basquiat spoke about Warhol:

Andy hadn't painted for years when we met. He was very disillusioned, and I understand that. You break your ass, and people just say bad things about you. He was very sensitive. He used to complain and say, 'Oh, I'm just a commercial artist.' I don't know whether he really meant that, but I don't think he enjoyed doing all these prints and things that his stooges set up for him. I think I helped Andy more than he helped me, to tell you the truth.⁶³

Despite their seemingly meaningful and harmonious relationship, Warhol was somewhat afraid of the young black artist. Before meeting Basquiat he had once said "Don't let that colored boy inside," when Basquiat was caught tagging his door.⁶⁴ But regardless of his apprehension, Warhol witnessed the rapid rise of Basquiat and desired to be a part of it. Warhol also was surrounded by uptight men in suits, and Basquiat represented the revolutionary persona he craved to have by his side. On a subconscious level, Warhol wanted to be pulled out of the white washed world in which he existed and be allow himself to admire a fresh black kid.⁶⁵ Each artist represented something the other craved. Basquiat wanted welcoming into the Factory world, while Warhol was looking for some trendiness in a world that had grown dull.

⁶² (Bischofberger 2005), 108

⁶³ (McGuinan 1985)

⁶⁴ (Colacello n.d.)

⁶⁵ (Cutrone n.d.)

Bruno Bischofberger also brought Italian artist Francesco Clemente into the collaborative mix. Clemente was a good friend of Basquiat's who had a studio close by.⁶⁶ Bischofberger explained the collaborative project as such:

The collaborations worked in the following way. I asked all three artists if they could agree to make paintings together. Each one agreed and I said, 'My terms are that you each do like twelve paintings, plus three drawings together, and each of you start four paintings without speaking to the other first. Do any kind of format, any kind of subject matter that leaves some room for the other to add something. And it switches around until everything is finished.'⁶⁷

Bischofberger showed fifteen of these collaborative works in his gallery in Zurich. But what he did not know was that Basquiat and Warhol had made their own arrangement on the side, and when the three partner arrangement ended, they began working on their own collaborative canvases. Works like *Arm and Hammer II* (1984) (Fig. 19), combined Warhol's obsession with logos and Basquiat's wide library of symbols. The painting arrangement lasted through 1985, and was often interrupted by Basquiat's heroin addiction. Andy Warhol wrote in his diary on numerous occasions about Basquiat's constant mood swings and highly unusually intoxicated working process. He recalls one instance when Basquiat fell asleep on the studio floor, looking like a bum, woke up, and immediately painted two masterpieces. He would move in slow motion as he painted, which Warhol attributed to the heroin use. He grew increasingly paranoid, constantly accusing Warhol of using him.⁶⁸

Although their work ethics were dramatically different, Warhol being a diligent artist and Basquiat lacking any routine or schedule, Basquiat still revealed being

⁶⁶ (Hoban 1998), 216

⁶⁷ (Bischofberger n.d.)

⁶⁸ (Hackett 1989), 604-5

connected to Warhol. His attachment to Warhol was more than just professional; he saw Warhol as a father figure. Two years later, on February 22, 1987, Warhol died during surgery for a routine gallbladder removal at New York Hospital.⁶⁹ Basquiat never recovered from the loss.

If Andy Warhol was Basquiat's father figure and ambassador of fame, art dealer Mary Boone was Warhol's female counterpart. Mary Boone was an art dealer who epitomized the hustling, celebrity-pawning market of the eighties. In 1979, she put on a Julian Schnabel show that in many ways kicked off the upcoming decade. At twenty seven years-old, Boone was the first art world yuppie dealer who comprehended the structure of the art market and knew how to control it.⁷⁰ Boone followed the model of exemplary modern art dealer Leo Castelli. In 1957, Castelli jumpstarted his career when he uncovered the emerging Pop art movement and its pioneers Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.⁷¹ Soon after, he discovered and showed such American artists as Roy Lichtenstein, Cy Twombly, and Andy Warhol. Castelli was known for his genuine passion and for the concern he had for the artists he represented. Many of the next generation dealers attempted to match his success, but no one came close. Until in 1977, Boone founded her first gallery at 420 West Broadway.⁷² Castelli had operated in this space in the sixties.

Boone's ambition was evident as she became one of if not the youngest dealer in the industry at the age of twenty five. Like her future star, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Boone

⁶⁹ (Hoban 1998), 283

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 226

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 227

⁷² *Ibid.*, 228

was determined to make an image for herself. Boone's gallery opened at the perfect time when a generational shift was taking place and when post war Minimalism was eased out by emerging Expressionism. In February of 1979, Boone showed Julian Schnabel's "plate paintings," which were paintings on broken ceramic plates and introduced the Neo-Expressionist movement.⁷³ Schnabel was the poster child of the new union of fresh minded artist, business savvy and hungry dealers, and the new money collectors that drove the art market of the 80s.

By the time Basquiat joined Boone's group in 1984, Schnabel had already left for the Pace Gallery. Basquiat was Boone's rebound artist. His first show with Boone opened on May 5, 1984, to a bumbling crowd that included Basquiat's father and Andy Warhol. The opening was like a popular night club, with people pushing against the velvet rope, waiting to get in as Basquiat looked on, letting in whoever he wanted.⁷⁴ For this show he painted his famous Warhol banana portrait entitled *Brown Spots* (1984) (Fig. 20), and twelve other large scale paintings. The works were priced from \$10,000 to \$15,000. Basquiat had gotten himself in a difficult predicament where he had to deal with living up to the image of a young phenomenon while also living up to his own defiance and coping with the lure of drugs.

Boone tried to overlook Basquiat's rebel conduct. She said,

Jean-Michel was a time bomb, and he was going to explode. I knew this when I first took him on....Unlike most of my artists, whether they are still with me or not, like Julian Schnabel, or Eric Fischl, or Ross Bleckner, these are artists I took my time getting to know, and that I felt I would represent for a long time. Form the onset with Jean-Michel, it was never like that....He was too concerned

⁷³ (Hoban 1998), 229-30

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 236

with what the public, collectors, and critics thought. He was too concerned about prices and money. He was too conscious of his place in the world, and who he had dinner with, and everything that implies. He was too externalized; he didn't have a strong enough internal life.⁷⁵

According to Boone, Basquiat had never sorted out his childhood issues and was still struggling to do so.

It is apparent in his work and life that Basquiat longed to be famous. He wanted to assume a place in history. Fame, symbolized by the crown, was the path he selected for himself. Basquiat empathized with those jazz and sports heroes that he adorns with the crown and who unfortunately fell into the two career paths that were stereotypically acceptable for black men to pursue the artist and the athlete. Like them, Basquiat played the game and quickly made his way into the white world, a desired but unknown territory. Art historian Fred Braithwaite, aka Fab 5 Freddy, put it this way, "The unfortunate thing was, once one did figure out how to get into the art world, it was like, Well, shit, where am I? You've pulled off this amazing feat, you've waltzed your way right into the thick of it, and probably faster than anybody in history, but once you got in you were standing around wondering where you were. And then, who's there with me?"⁷⁶ Basquiat jumped into the art world game with expectation and uncertainty. He was forced to reinvent himself into an artist that addressed the perceptions of the white imagination. Basquiat played a balancing act in which he was both marginal and not. He took on the identity of blackness as defined by the white imagination while maintaining a blackness that was not too different from the whiteness that surrounded

⁷⁵ (Jean-Michel Basquiat 1984)

⁷⁶ (Vassel 2007), 123

his success. To be accepted by the white world, Basquiat surrendered aspects of his own identity that were not superficially fascinating. He became both black and integrated.

Chapter 5

Reconsideration and Conclusions

This is a song for the genius child.
Sing it softly, for the song is wild.
Sing it softly as ever you can -
Lest the song get out of hand.

Nobody loves a genius child.

Can you love an eagle,
Tame or wild?
Can you love an eagle,
Wild or tame?
Can you love a monster
Of frightening name?

Nobody loves a genius child.

Kill him - and let his soul run wild.

- "Genius Child" by Langston Hughes

Nobody can refute that Basquiat was black, but the sole fact of his racial identity does not imply that his body of work belongs to a category of black art. When looking at the critical evaluations of Basquiat's work that emerged during his short life and after his 1988 death, it is evident that, with only a few exceptions, that the "primitive" style associated the artist's race was exemplary of the hype of the art market. The white art

institution's momentary infatuation with the black phenomenon, its capriciousness, and its primary concern with a marketable image rather than talent polluted the reception and appreciation of Baquiat's work.

Critics and art historians assessing Basquiat's work focused on his race rather than talent picturing him as the stereotypical black artist and as a creation of the 1980s market boom and its biases. For example, Robert Hughes, who reviewed Basquiat's 1992 Whitney Museum retrospective in a *Time Magazine* article entitled "The Purple Haze of Hype" focused on contemporary contextual trends including the popularity of marginal black artists and the consumerism boom when evaluating Basquiat's artistic contribution. Hughes concluded that the exhibition of around 90 works, "recapitulates the overhyping of a limited '80s talent."⁷⁷ *The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists* of 2004 identifies Basquiat as a "street artists" from New York and categorizes his work under the heading of Graffiti. The publication does not recognize the hybrid cultural traditions that inform Basquiat's work.⁷⁸

Basquiat's work is also frequently associated with "primitivism" as in Demosthenes Davetas 1986 publication of an interview with the artist published in *New Art International*. In questioning the artist, Davetas repeatedly used terms such as "primitive signs," "African roots," "graffiti artist," "fetishes," "cult," etc. In the published interview these terms appear without reservation while words such as "recognition" and "survival" are featured in quotation marks and appear to indicate

⁷⁷ (Hughes, *The Purple Haze of Hype* 1992)

⁷⁸ (Basquiat, Jean-Michel 2004)

Basquiat's need to justify his success. In fact, Davetas concludes that Basquiat's success stemmed from his capability of charming Andy Warhol.⁷⁹

Contrary to the opinions of such critics, Basquiat was a complex artist who did not hold the simplistic views of race that have been ascribed to his works. Basquiat's work blurred all sorts of demarcations as for example those between painting and drawing, high art and popular culture, and most importantly among cultural and racial identification. As a middle-class black of Caribbean descent growing up in Brooklyn, Basquiat saw himself from a number of angles and the emphases of his hybrid identity was not pinned down. He revered boxers and musical greats, like Charlie Parker and Cassius Clay. He confronted issues of exploitation and oppression, and sometimes did this in his mother tongue of Spanish. Unfortunately, the subtleties of his work were lost and he was promoted as a black artist. Basquiat bought into the going hype; he had always longed for fame and the power, and he had a drug habit to maintain.

Basquiat's work is too often interpreted along clear cut lines with and bound up with the identification of themes and inspirations. The desire to include "others" in the canon of art history has led to a restricted view of Basquiat's oeuvre. The timing of his success pigeonholed him as a marginal breakthrough artist. As a black man who occasionally addressed racial issues Basquiat garnered the reputation of a "Black Artist." Instead, Basquiat's work is the product of a young man coping with an abusive upbringing, struggling with a drug addiction, and attempting to fit into a commodified art world. He was not quite the poor street kid that the elite art market made him out to be. Being raised in a middle-class house hold, he had more opportunities than actual

⁷⁹ (Davetas 1986)

street kids. It was Basquiat's blending of marginality and convention that made him the token black man and therefore so marketable. Basquiat's art, just as that of most artists was, for the most part, a manifestation of his deep sentiments that he had accumulated over his entire life. In 1983, his good friend Michael Stewart was brutally murdered by police officers when he was caught tagging. This incident had a profound effect on the psyche of Basquiat, who was 23 at the time. He grew increasingly paranoid, recognizing that it could have been him who was caught and killed. His 1981 work entitled *Irony of a Negro Policeman* (Fig. 21) is a potent commentary not just on police brutality but also on his own fears.⁸⁰ It is too easily dismissed as a socio-political commentary by a black artist.

Even though Basquiat came from a middle-class upbringing, collectors and dealers preferred to see him as a genuine representative of the urban underworld. Basquiat's work also has been analyzed from a Eurocentric perspective, emphasizing those characteristics of his work that conform to western artistic traditions. Critics Thomas McEvelley writing on Basquiat explained that, "this black artist was doing exactly what classical-Modernist white artists such as Picasso and Georges Braque had done: deliberately echoing a primitive style."⁸¹ By suggesting this, McEvelley negates all of Basquiat's direct linkages to a culture and heritage that are so called "primitive" practices.⁸² McEvelley went on to claim that Basquiat was, "behaving like white men who think they are behaving like black men."⁸³ What McEvelley fails to understand is

⁸⁰ (Troupe 2005)

⁸¹ (McEvelley 1992)

⁸² (hooks 1993)

⁸³ (McEvelley 1992)

Basquiat's struggle with his connection to a primarily black lineage and his enthrallment with white western tradition.⁸⁴

It is wrong to evaluate Basquiat's work in term of the similarities of his work with the oeuvre of such "Western" artists as Andy Warhol or Cy Twombly. Basquiat himself wrestled with the subject of black collusion. Works like *Quality Meats for the Public* (1981) (Fig. 22) articulate the horror of being tormented by the pursuits of white masters. In the painting, commodified and enslaved black bodies are not full figures; they are left unfinished. The work suggests that adaptation and acceptance of white archetype can lead to self-objectification that is just as degrading as being subject to racial discrimination. The work is a metaphor for Basquiat himself, whose self image was fragmented by the white elite. Basquiat personally experienced the isolation that comes with integration.⁸⁵

It also is a deficient assessment of Basquiat's works, like *Untitled (Sugar Ray Robinson)* (1982) and *Jack Johnson* (1982) (Fig. 23 and 24), to simply explain them away as celebrations of black heritage. In these works once again black male bodies are shown incomplete, not fully formed or even somewhat disfigured. The black figure takes on the iconographic symbolism of nonexistence. In these works Basquiat points his finger at the incapacity of the white art elite to abandon feelings of racial superiority and domination. His 1982 work, *Obnoxious Liberals* (Fig. 25), depicts a mangled naked black figure hanging on chains and labeled "SAMSON." Next to the hanging figure is a black figure in contemporary formal garb wearing a sign that reads, "NOT FOR SALE."

⁸⁴ (hooks 1993)

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Presumably this sign serves to protect the formally attired man from the domineering white figure on his right. Despite Basquiat's rapid rise to fame due to his wooing of the white art gallery elite and as a result of his networking skills, the artist choose to criticize the commodification of the black man.⁸⁶

Diego Cortez put it best when he spoke in an interview with Jeffrey Deitch about his late comrade. Commenting on the comparison of Basquiat to politically driven artists like Jenny Holzer, he stated, "I don't think that Jean-Michel was interested in that kind of thing." Later on in the interview, Glenn O'Brien, another of Basquiat's friends and host of a cable program called *TV Party*, agreed with Cortez saying,

I think that he fragments everything. He throws it into the mix and blasts it. So it becomes all these details and little fragments. It's like you take the history of art and throw it in the blender. Is that politics? No! It is not politics....That is one of his main achievements, and it's not a political act. It's a conceptual act that has to do with fragmentation, and it's more closely akin to psychology because we are a civilization becoming more and more fragmented.⁸⁷

Like Cortez and O'Brien emphasize and reiterate, Basquiat's work is not so much about making a loud statement as it is about expressing the disjointed existence of a young, confused, Brooklyn man with a multicultural heritage living in a culturally hybrid environment.

Conclusions

⁸⁶ (hooks 1993)

⁸⁷ (A Dialogue with Diego Cortez and Glenn O'Brien 2007), 19

In his portrayal as “artist” and “icon” in art history and popular culture Basquiat has been cheated. It is true that much of Basquiat’s popularity and exposure is rooted in the hype of his image created in the booming art crazed 80s market, but in a large and unfortunate way, this context obscured his true concerns and contributions as an artist. Basquiat’s critics and fans readily acknowledge his prolific imagery and artistic gift of communication, but such recognition is too often linked with race and the labels of “Black Artist” and “primitive.”⁸⁸

Basquiat often painted historically inspired images informed by race, but his work is also varied in its emotional charge and reflective of his personal circumstances. To look at the civil rights movement, for example, as Basquiat does in paintings like *All Colored cast Part II* (1982) (Fig. 26), and associate it only with the black race is to overlook the deep sentiments of identification that Basquiat held not as a result of direct experiences in such events, but as a consequence of the unfolding of his life. His work does not necessarily represent Black History as much as the narrative of racism and pain which involves the raceless sentiments Basquiat empathized with and knew all too well. First and foremost, Basquiat represents in his art those with whom he identifies through his own experiences: the oppressed, abused, enslaved, invisible, and incomplete. These individuals cannot be tied to any one race or type of men or to a restricted set of historical events. Basquiat’s identity was fragmented and unstable in his own mind, reconstructing it as one thing or another simply does not do the artist justice.

Basquiat was all about identity, but just not identity of any particular kind. Rather, he was concerned with his lack of identity, and the impossible drive to define

⁸⁸ (McGuinan 1985)

and understand himself and his upbringing, and to make a name for himself as an individual. Basquiat succeeded in imagining himself, but within the tornado of the art world his self portrayal fell victim to greater forces. His art spoke of his inner torment, but no one really listen. Dealers, collectors, and critics were too distracted by dollar signs and numbers to value Basquiat's personal struggle with identity. Basquiat was a "genius" whose preoccupation with this very construction is what contributed to his early demise.

Appendix of Images

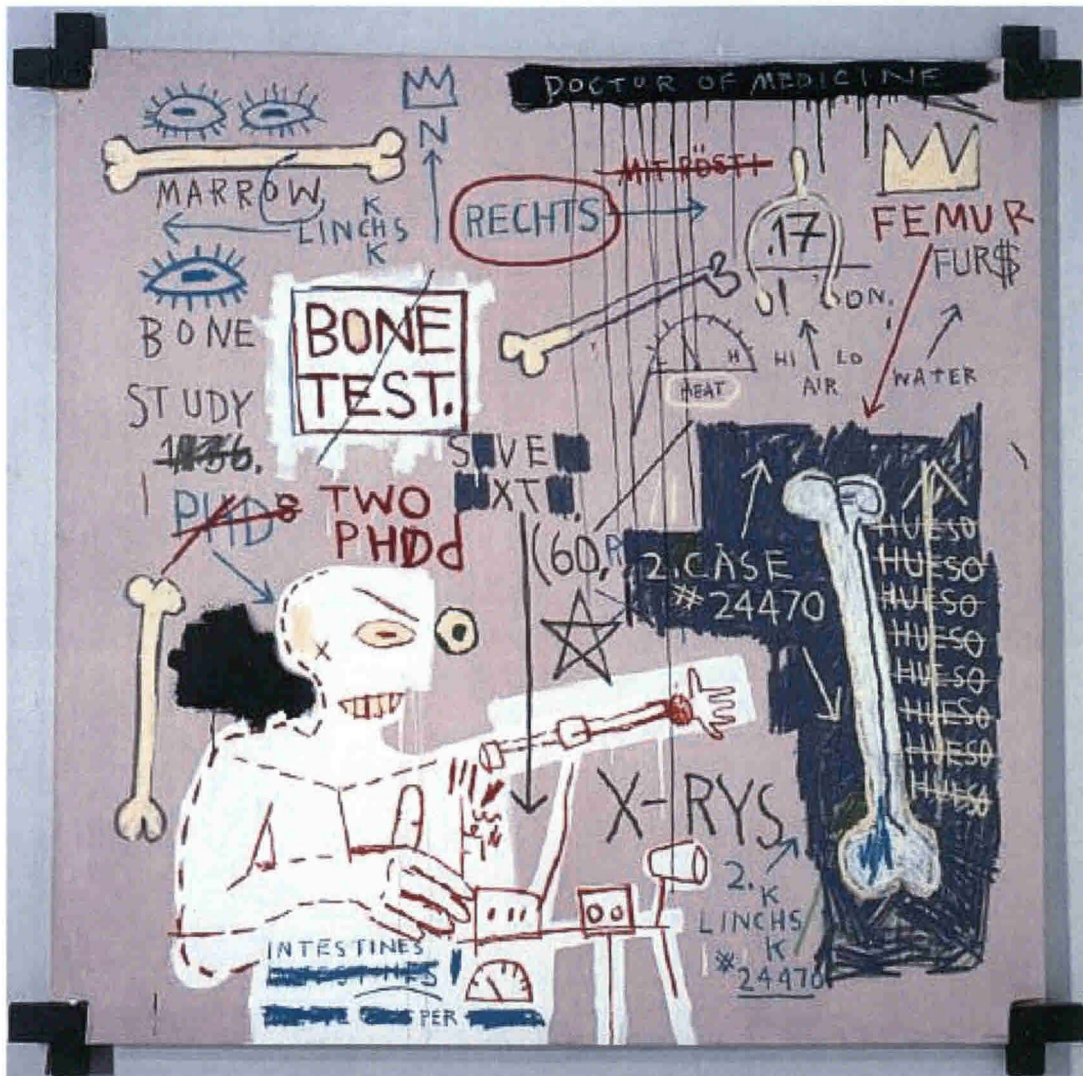
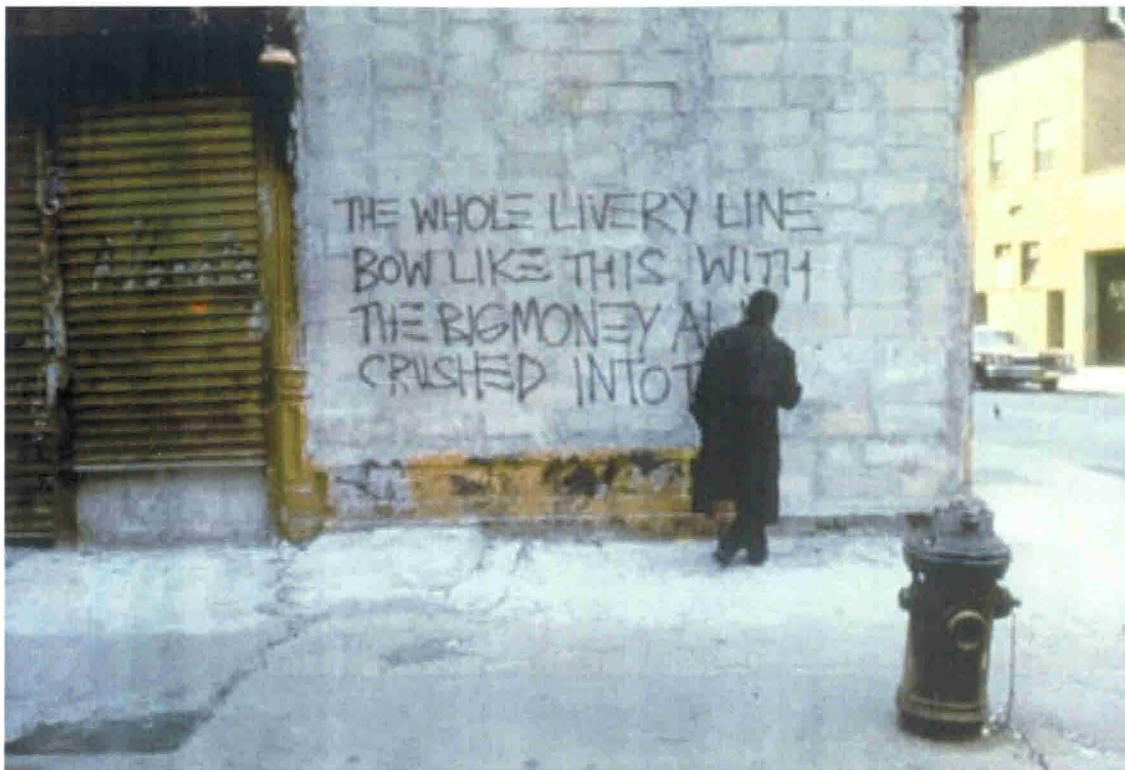


Fig. 1: Carbon Dating Systems Versus Scratchproof Tape. 1982



Basquiat tagging a SAMO slogan.

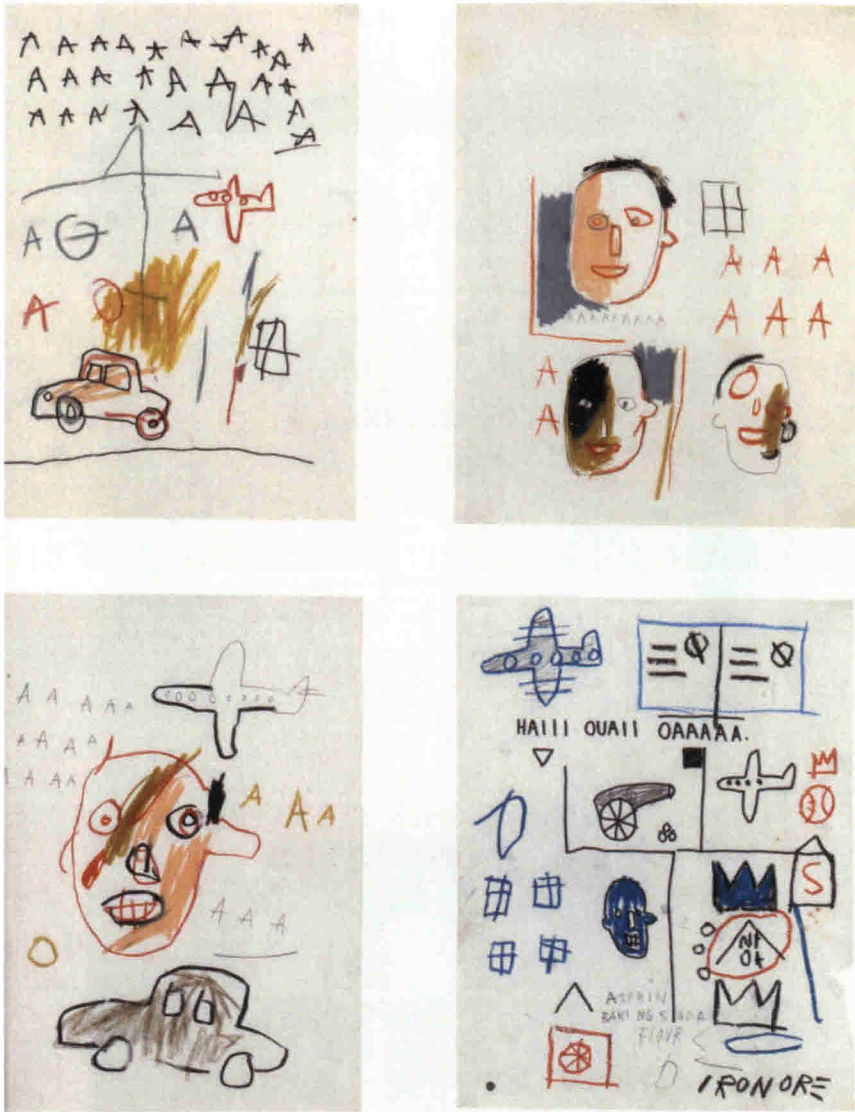


Fig. 2: Untitled (Group of 4 Drawings. 1981



Fig. 3: CPRKR. 1983



JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

THEY SAY I AM BLACK

Fig. 4: Notary. 1983

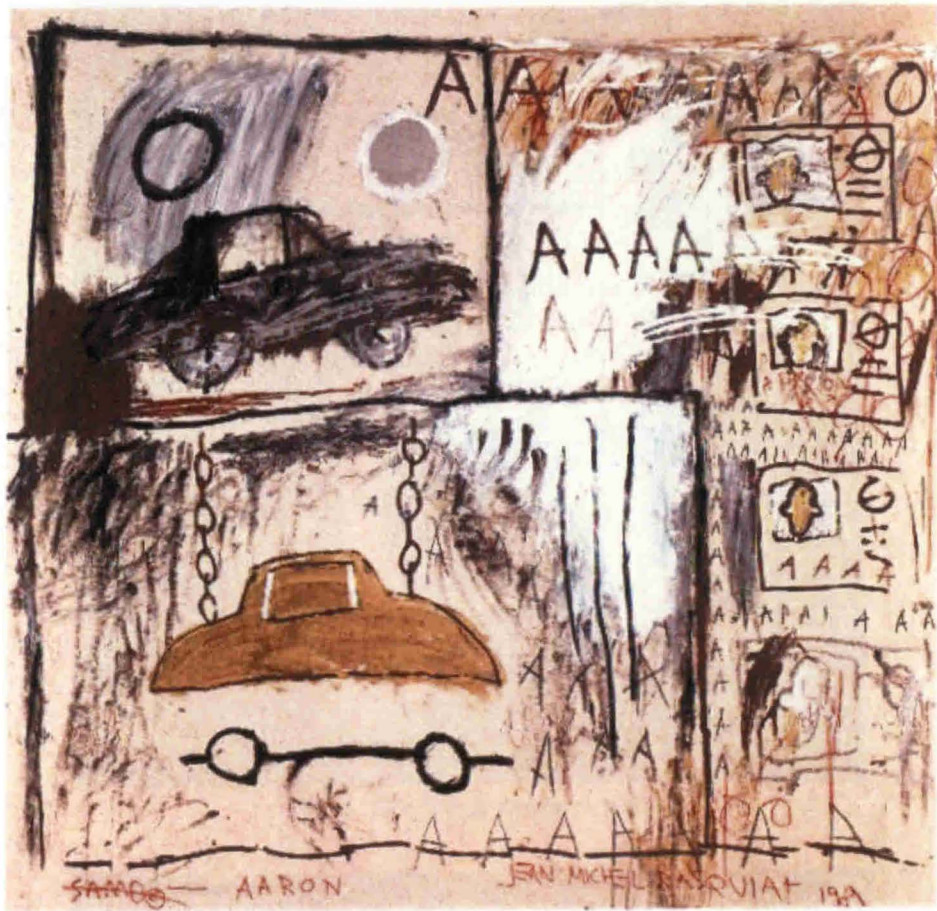


Fig. 5: Cadillac Moon. 1981



Fig. 6: The Nile. 1983



Fig. 7: *The Dutch Settlers*. 1982



Fig. 8: *Per Capita*. 1981

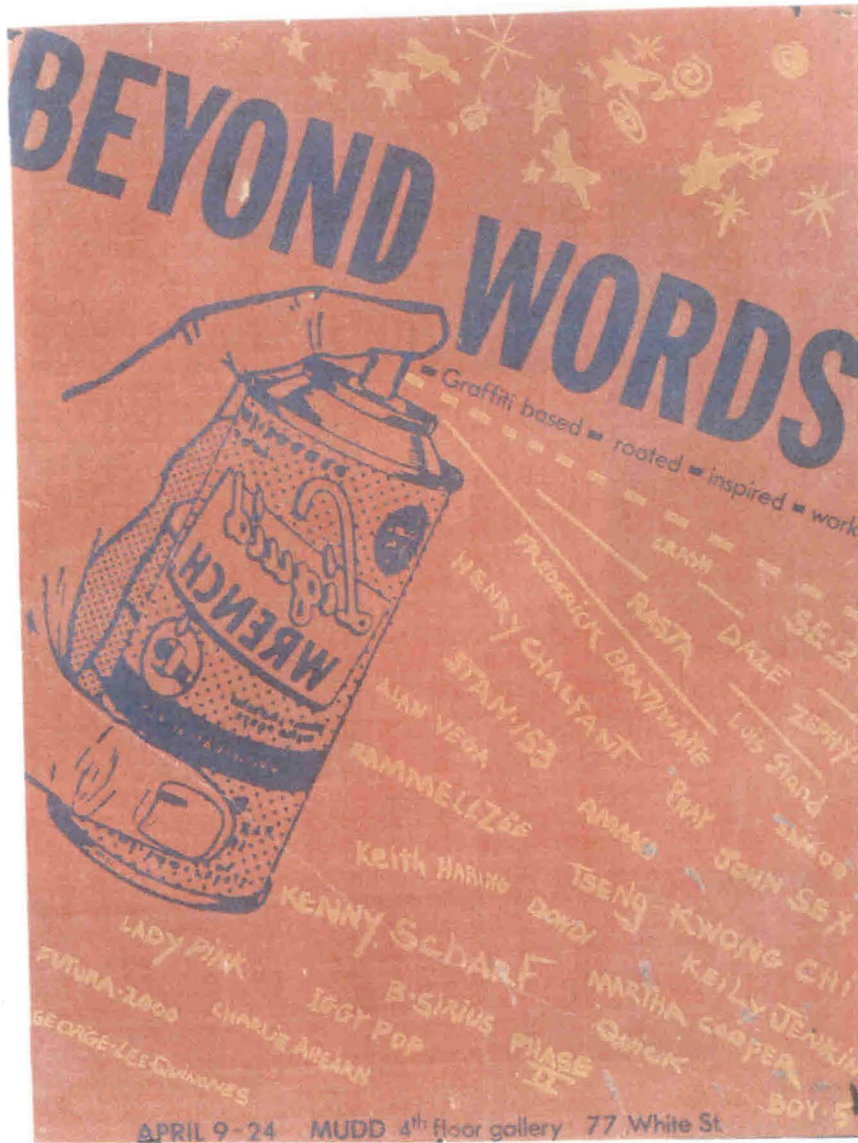


Fig. 9: Poster for *Beyond Words* show.
Curated by Fab 5 Freddy and Futura at the Mudd Club
April, 1981



Fig. 10

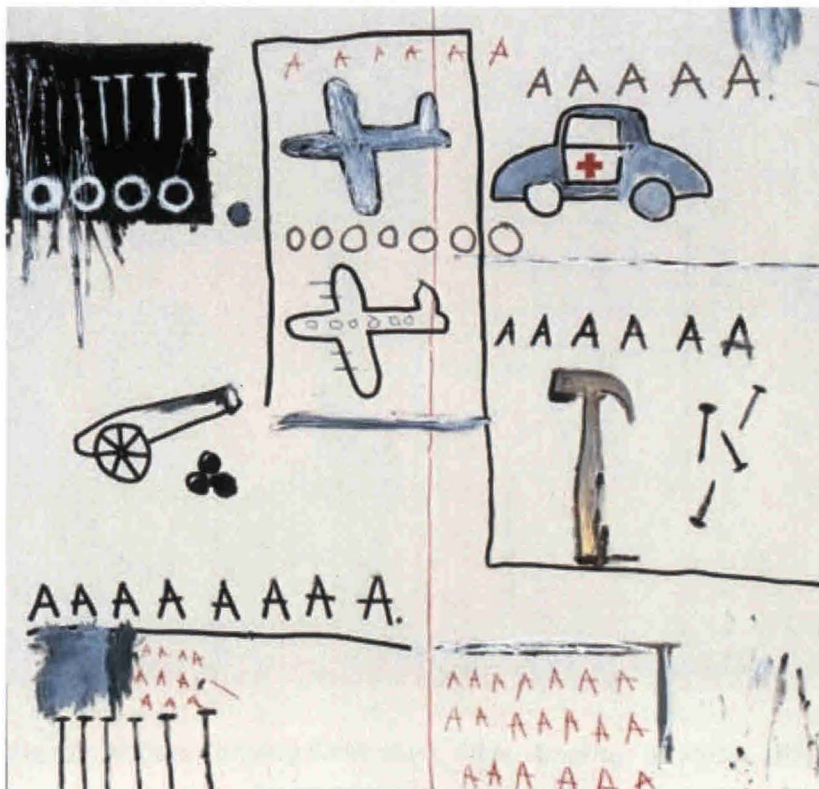


Fig. 11: *Untitled*. 1981

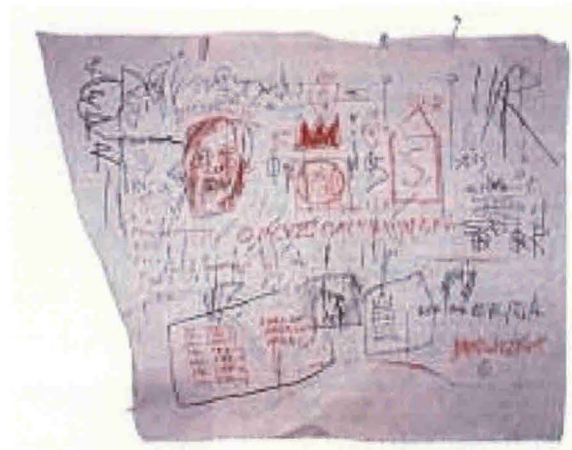


Fig. 12: Gringo Pilot. 1981

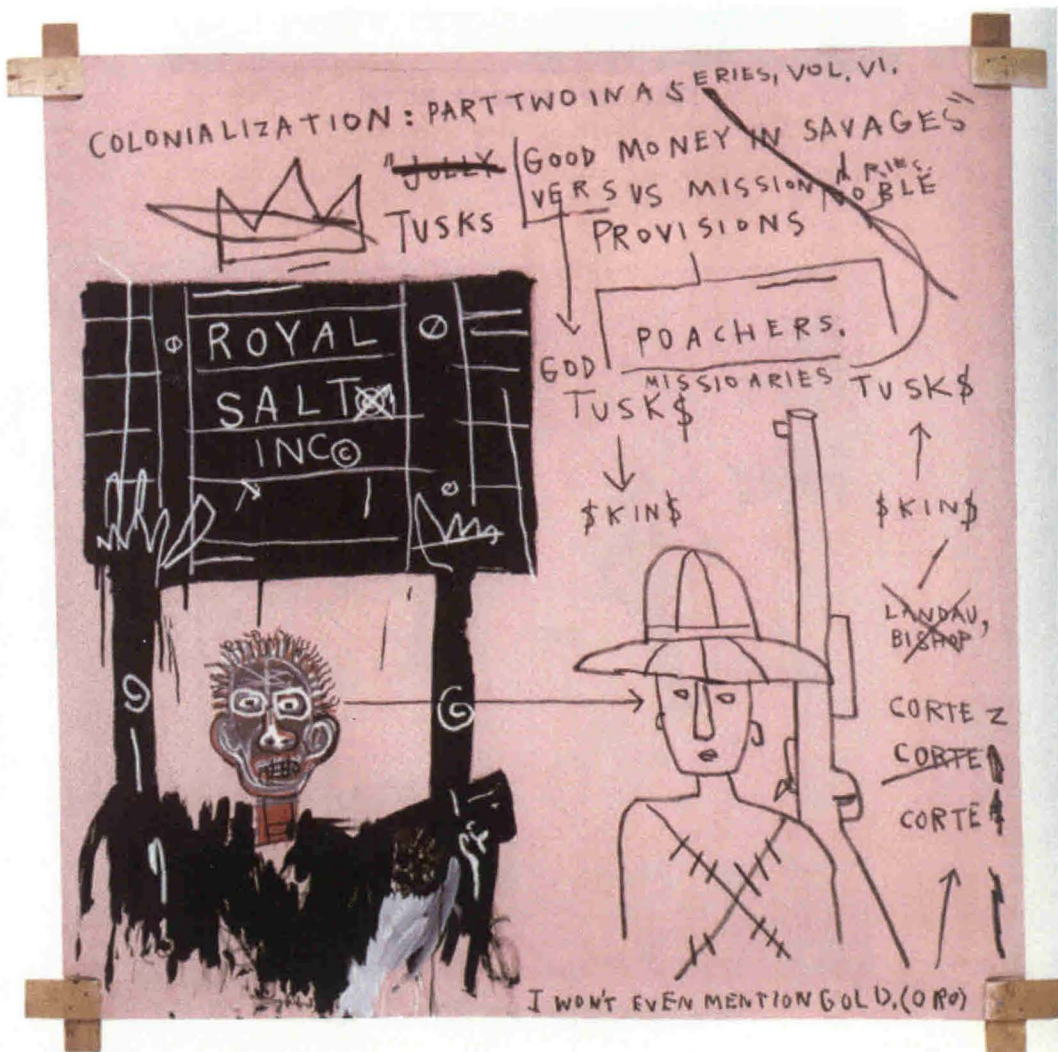


Fig. 13: Natives Carrying Some Guns, Bible, Amorites on Safari. 1982



Fig. 14: *Arroz con Pollo*. 1981



Fig. 15: *Riddle me this batman*. 1987



Fig. 16: *Aaron I.* 1981



Fig. 17: *Philistines.* 1982

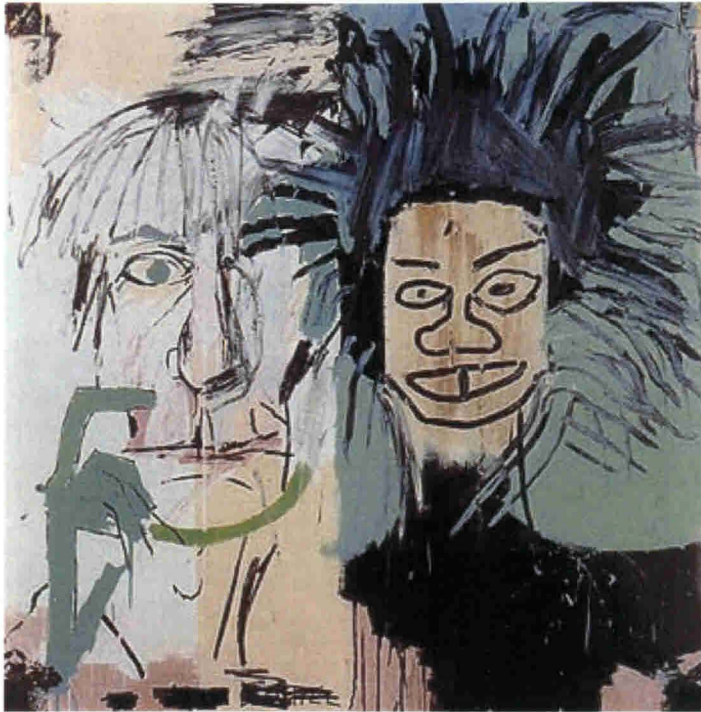


Fig. 18: *Dos Cabezas*. 1982

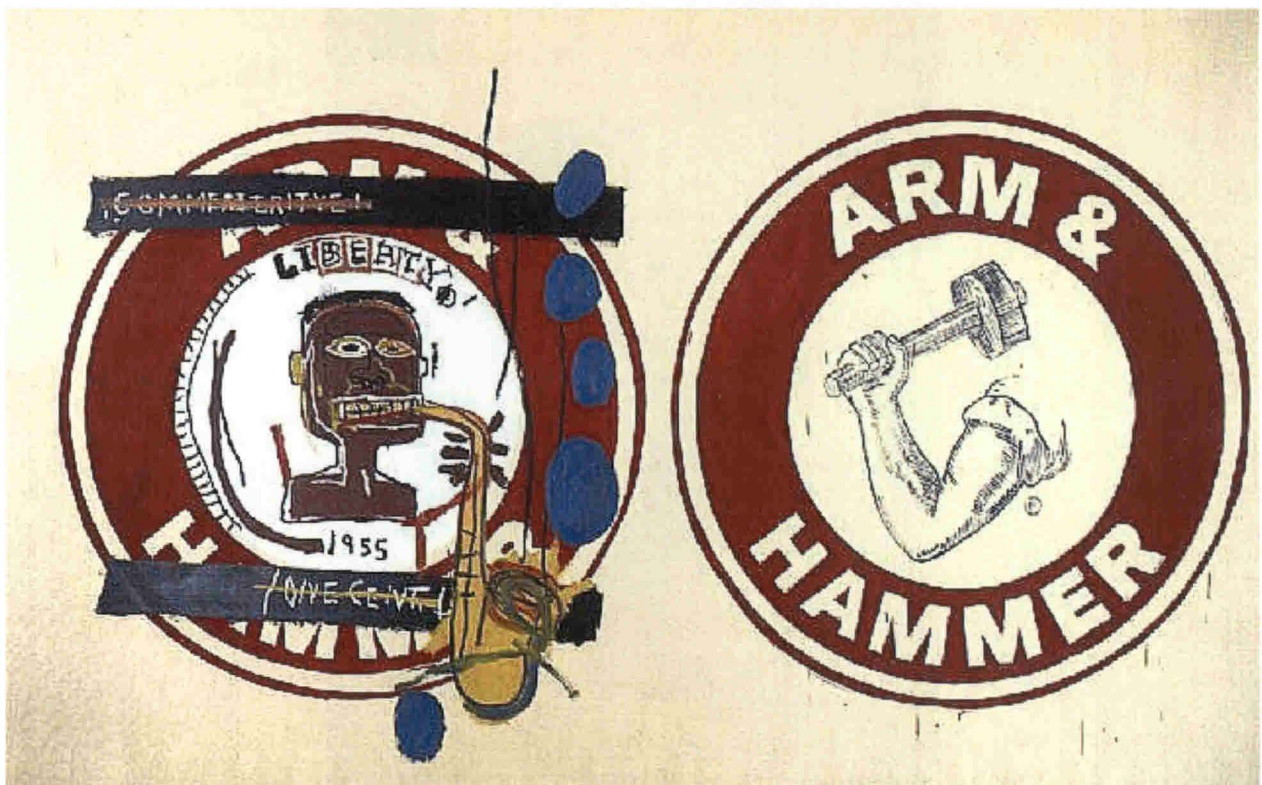


Fig. 19: *Arm and Hammer II*. 1984



Fig. 20: *Brown Spots*. 1984



Fig. 21: *Irony of a Negro Policeman*. 1981

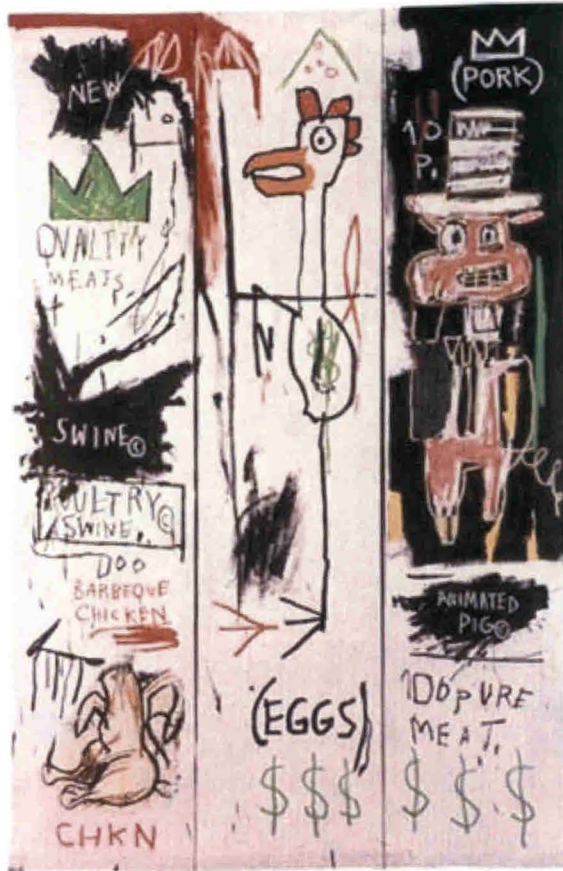


Fig. 22: *Quality Meats for the Public*. 1981



Fig. 23: *Untitled (Sugar Ray Robinson)*. 1982



Fig. 24: *Jack Johnson*. 1982



Fig. 25: *Obnoxious Liberals*. 1982



Fig. 26: All Colored Cast part II. 1982

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