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Reading Jean-Michel Basquiat

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REVIEW Damon Willick

Reading Jean-Michael Basquiat

Jean-Michel Basquiat

Basquiat

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

July 17–October 10, 2005

Organized by the Brooklyn Museum of Art

March 11–June 5, 2005

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

November 18, 2005–February 12, 2006



Some of the largest crowds at the Jean- Michel Basquiat retrospective at Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art can be found in the museum's basement reading room viewing Tamra Davis's previously unreleased interview *A Conversation with Jean-Michel Basquiat*. The twenty- minute video is mesmerizing. Basquiat^[SEP]is charismatic, intelligent, and coy as he speaks on such issues as his childhood, feelings of alienation, and current art world success. Yet, when one listens closely to the interview, Basquiat deliberately obfuscates and exaggerates. As the artist admits at the outset of the interview, "I don't think its good to be honest in

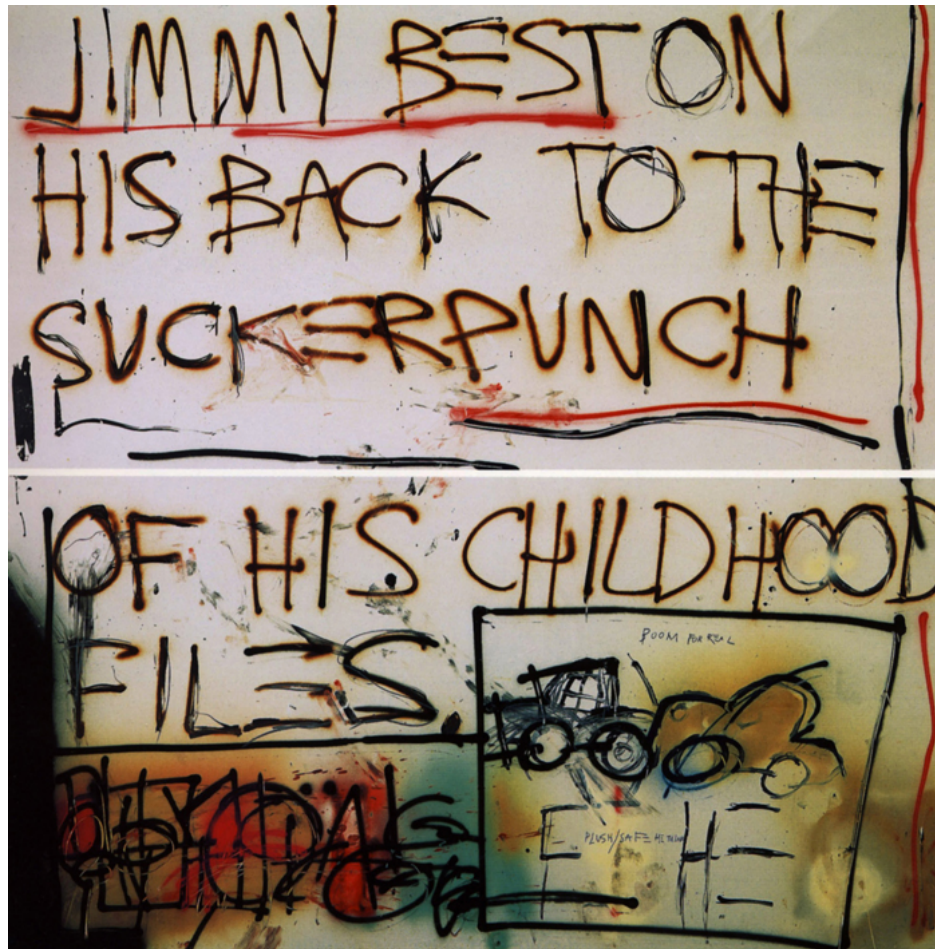
interviews. It is better to lie.” It is with such candor that Basquiat proves to be both more and less than his myth. The works in the retrospective, and their installation at MOCA, bears this out.

The prominence of the Basquiat myth can lead to overly biographical readings of the artist’s work. Much scholarship on the artist revolves around Basquiat’s life—his race and activities. The stories of the artist’s mercurial rise from homelessness to art stardom, his struggle with drug addiction, and his tragic overdose at the age of 27 create an image of the artist as martyr (an updated Van Gogh or Pollock). Fellow painter Julian Schnabel’s successful 1997 film, *Basquiat*, is evidence of Basquiat’s romantic, made-for-Hollywood legacy. Such biographical conceptions of Basquiat conflate the artist and his work^[SEP] into the-artist-as-a-work, marking the^[SEP] heroic artist as distinct and unique among men. Art historian Catherine Soussloff has identified this heroic artist-figure with art market forces.¹ In the case of Basquiat, such a conflation of the artist and his art has undoubtedly influenced his critical reception and market value. JP Morgan Chase & Co’s sponsorship of the retrospective’s national tour, and their ownership of the artist’s work, speaks volumes to the artist’s marketability.

The booming art market of the early-1980s fueled the rise of a core group of male painters in New York which included Basquiat and Schnabel, among others. These artists, many of whom played up the heroic image, fulfilled the market’s demand for commodifiable paintings at a time when conceptualists, minimalists, and body artists were dominant. The so-called East Village Scene became the glamorous, updated version of the Abstract Expressionist’s masculinist New York School. One only has to view the concurrent Blake Byrne exhibition at MOCA to get a sense of the allure of Basquiat’s work and persona. The aesthetics of Basquiat’s painting contrast sharply with the conceptual documents, photographs, and ephemera of the Byrne collection, and Basquiat’s talismanic image

is the antithesis of the intellectualism of the conceptualists. It is not surprising, then, that the market responded immediately^[SEP]to Basquiat, especially to the large scale, expressionistic, and colorful canvases such as *Acque Pericolose* (1981), *Untitled (Two Heads on Gold)* (1982), and *Boy and Dog in a Johnnypump* (1983). Such work is, on first impression, overtly decorative, expressive, and, thus, commodifiable.

However, Basquiat's legacy is not simply^[SEP]the result of myth and market. The over 100 paintings and drawings of the retrospective allow for a much-needed reevaluation and rethinking of the artist. The enormity of^[SEP]the show—it takes up over two-thirds of MOCA's Grand Avenue galleries—includes a variety of Basquiat's work beyond his best-known paintings. Basquiat's oeuvre is not monolithic in style, content, or media. Unlike the Brooklyn Museum's chronological hanging—which failed to address the fact that Basquiat's eight-year career did not develop linearly—co-curator Fred Hoffman has organized the MOCA exhibition thematically, creating opportunities for fresh re-readings and new perspectives. Themes do reappear as leitmotifs throughout the artist's production. Basquiat repeats such images as American cityscapes, *Gray's Anatomy*, African-American contributions^[SEP]to entertainment and athletics, African American laborers, and autobiographical symbols like crowns and dreadlocks. Hoffman devotes a number of the galleries to single themes like black athletes and musicians, but most of the exhibition space is not so obviously hung.



Art historical surveys of contemporary art identify Basquiat as a Neo Expressionist and, oftentimes, mention the artist in relation to Manhattan's graffiti art scene. Both classifications are incomplete and restrictive. Neo Expressionism includes such artists as Schnabel, Anselm Kiefer, Sandro Chia, and Francesco Clemente, and was lauded for returning contemporary art to the familiar practice of self-discovery^[SEP] and expression in painting. In paintings^[SEP] like *Untitled (Baptism)* (1982), *Eyes and Eggs* (1982), and numerous self-portraits in the retrospective, Basquiat conforms to the Neo Expressionist's penchant for large scale, painterly works. In these paintings, the artist combines Jackson Pollock's drips with the random scribbles of Cy Twombly and the

childlike drawing of Jean Dubuffet. Other art historical references include Edouard Manet, Pablo Picasso, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol. Art historian Hal Foster has identified such borrowing as little more than a conservative entrenchment or pastiche of modernism, labeling Basquiat and other Neo Expressionists Neo Conservative Postmodernists.² Such labels, however,^[L]_[SEP]fail to account for much of Basquiat's production. For example, *Untitled (Maid from Olympia)* (1982) is neither simply the conservative pastiche per Foster nor is it straightforward expressionism. In the work, Basquiat depicts the African maid of Manet's 19th century *Olympia* by crudely painting the woman's face in the center of a multi-colored canvas mounted on tied wood supports. Basquiat writes "DETAIL OF MAID FROM 'OLYMPIA'©" upon the work along with the word "FEET" and the numbers "100/49" and "27." Cultural critic and author bell hooks has read Basquiat's work as the product of African American art history and the unique expression of a black man. hooks has questioned art history's reception of Basquiat as narrowly Eurocentric.³ Yet, even hooks' interpretation does not resolve the meaning of "FEET," "100/49," and "27." This, to me, is Basquiat's strength as an artist. At his best, Basquiat defies simple classification and interpretation, allowing for an openness and multiplicity of viewer responses.

Throughout the retrospective, there are numerous opportunities for such re-reading and rethinking of Basquiat. Basquiat's use of language within many of his paintings elevates the written word to subject and transforms traditional viewing into a type of reading. The exhibition asks if Basquiat can be both a Neo Expressionist of rehashed modernism *and* a conceptually savvy postmodernist. Those who claim the one over the other miss the artist's significant achievement.



The second gallery of the retrospective provides the opportunity to rethink Basquiat's practice. In *Untitled (Suite of Fourteen Drawings)* (1981), Basquiat frames on paper the cryptic words and phrases he spray-painted throughout lower Manhattan's gallery districts under the pseudonym SAMO. Basquiat created a market for himself by strategically tagging New York City, and when SAMO became Basquiat, there was a waiting audience. In Basquiat's *Jimmy Best...*, the artist literally transfers a SAMO tag to the gallery by spray-painting the phrase "JIMMY BEST ON HIS BACK TO THE SUCKERPUNCH OF HIS CHILDHOOD FILES" directly on a metal sheet for exhibition and sale. The aesthetic here is meant to mirror the SAMO street look. The untitled suite of fourteen drawings in the retrospective not only references this graffiti background, but shows the artist to be conversant with the practices and theories^[1] of conceptual art. Basquiat's phrases, like "GOLD WOOD©," "A DOG WATCHING A DOG ON TELEVISION BITE EACH OTHER," "IGNORANT EASTER SUIT©," "NO MUNDANE OPTIONS." and "MILK©," confound simple reading or interpretation. The writing of the drawings is not graffiti-like, but emphasizes the black and white, administrative aesthetic of conceptual art. Basquiat's words here are reminiscent of Ed

Ruscha's, in that the phrases confuse any coherent reception or literal interpretation. What exactly does "PLUSH. SAFE HE THINK" mean?

Basquiat is most effective when he thus employs text within his expressionist paintings. Paintings such as *Piscine versus the Best Hotels* (1982), *Jawbone of an Ass* (1982), and *Pegasus* (1987) are as cluttered and random as the flash of images one experiences while riding on a city bus or turning the television from station to station. The inundation of Basquiat's words, symbols, and brushstroke seem to cancel each unique expression, leaving behind a chaotic array of visual stimuli. By combining disparate elements within a single work, Basquiat negates simple narrative and the bombast of gestural painting. In his catalog essay, co-curator Marc Mayer warns against literal interpretations of the array of Basquiat's images and words, and perceptively identifies the artist's sophistication: "I can't help feeling that a painstaking analysis of Basquiat's symbols and signs is a trap that lures us away from the abstract and oneiric purpose of these pictures. They are not sending us coded messages to decipher, so much as confusing us at once with their discursive sleight of hand."⁴

Overall, the retrospective shows Basquiat's diversity and complexity. In the artist's eight-year career, Basquiat produced an array of work from the overtly expressive to the complicated and mysterious. *Time* magazine art critic Robert Hughes criticized Basquiat's painting as vapid⁵ and empty. Might we reconsider this "emptiness" as a strength? The visual white noise produced by Basquiat mirrors the deafening, multimedia bombardment common to contemporary experience. Basquiat's aesthetic is not simply a pastiche or rehash of modernism, but shows the artist is very much a product of his time and place—artistic, historical, and theoretical. Basquiat depicts the postmodern, fractured aesthetic at a time when cable television, the internet, and theories of

globalization were just developing. The MOCA Basquiat retrospective exposes an artist who has consumed and regurgitated a plethora of images of the postmodern world, but in a way not immediately exhausted by the typical biographical readings of his work. Basquiat's real contribution to contemporary art is this unique filtering of late-20th century experience and extends beyond the rehearsed myths and hype of the artist's life and feelings.

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Footnotes

1. Soussloff writes: "The resultant image of the artist marks and produces the illusions required by a culture invested in aestheticizing the commodity and endowing the maker with a higher moral character than other humans." Catherine M. Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist: The Historiography of a Concept* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p.158. ↵
2. See Hal Foster's *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985). ↵
3. Bell Hooks' "Altars of Sacrifice: Remembering Basquiat," *Art in America* vol.81, no.6 (June 1993) pp.69-75, 115. ↵
4. Marc Mayer, "Basquiat in History," *Basquiat* ed. Marc Mayer (London and New York: Merrell, 2005) p.49. ↵
5. See Robert Hughes's *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Knopf, 1997). ↵