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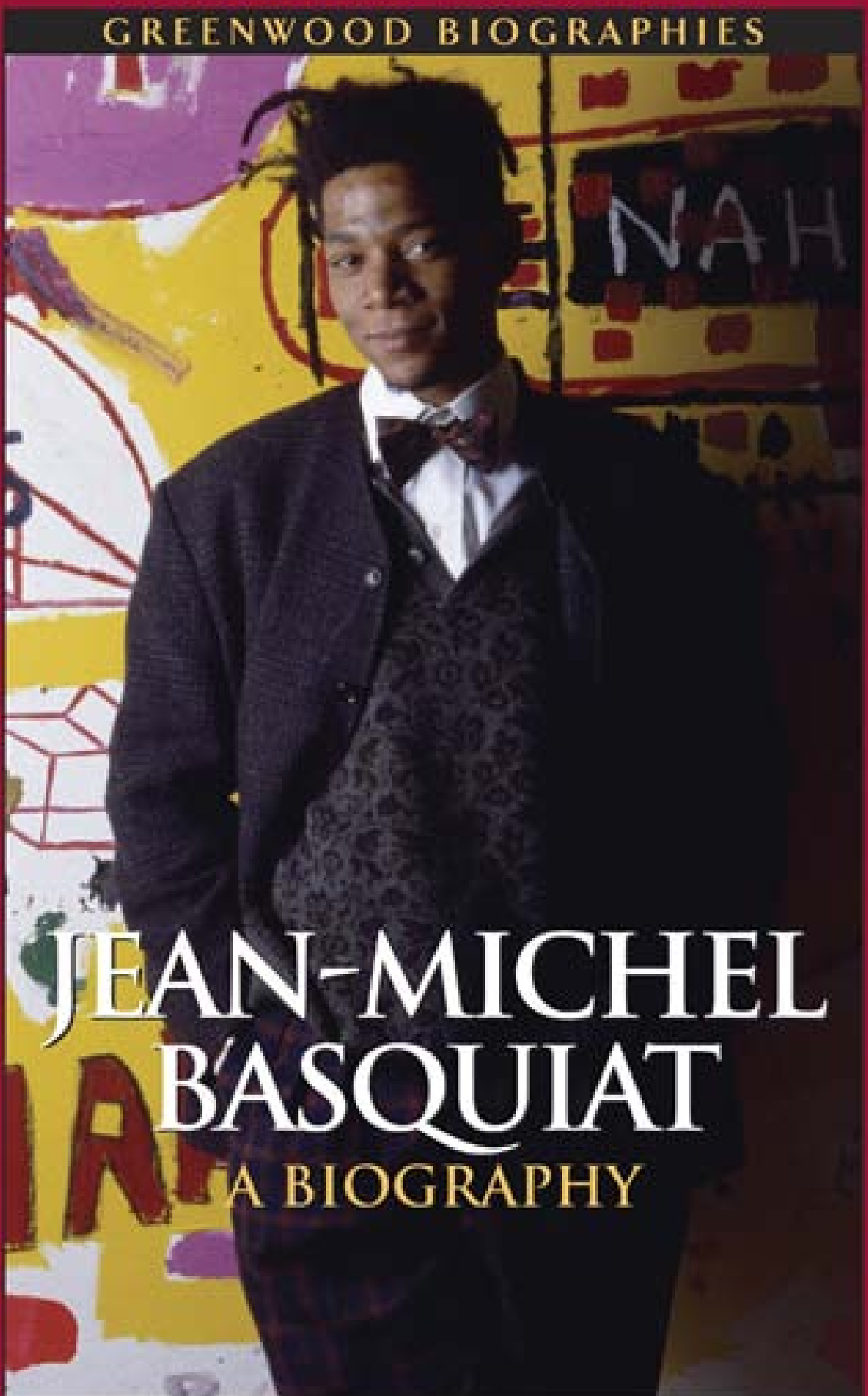

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

A BIOGRAPHY

ERIC FRETZ

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

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A Biography

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GREENWOOD

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SERIES FOREWORD

In response to high school and public library needs, Greenwood developed this distinguished series of full-length biographies specifically for student use. Prepared by field experts and professionals, these engaging biographies are tailored for high school students who need challenging yet accessible biographies. Ideal for secondary school assignments, the length, format and subject areas are designed to meet educators' requirements and students' interests.

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pioneers like Margaret Mead, from the greatest minds of our time like Stephen Hawking to the most amazing success stories of our day like J. K. Rowling.

While the emphasis is on fact, not glorification, the books are meant to be fun to read. Each volume provides in-depth information about the subject's life from birth through childhood, the teen years, and adulthood. A thorough account relates family background and education, traces personal and professional influences, and explores struggles, accomplishments, and contributions. A timeline highlights the most significant life events against a historical perspective. Bibliographies supplement the reference value of each volume.

PREFACE

My aim in writing this book is to produce a biography of Jean-Michel Basquiat that is based on a critical respect for his work. I have tried to place that work in the context of his life and times in a way that does not sensationalize but is interesting and accessible for readers coming to the subject for the first time. The book describes his life and follows a chronological pattern, while striving to give a flavor of the milieus he lived in. His work deals with important themes, especially African American history, and so the book includes brief descriptions of some figures found in his art.

Looking at his work provides an opportunity to learn some of the many ways that art critics and art historians, in fact anyone who wants to appreciate art, look at and understand a work. This is not an art book, based on plates of color pictures, which often gets looked at but goes unread. It attempts to provide an interesting story of a life. But what makes Basquiat's complex life especially interesting is how many of the strands come together in individual artworks.

Each work discussed in the text is listed in an appendix, giving details and references to available books or online sources that illustrate

the work in full color. The author's Web site, www.basquiatbiography.com, was constructed especially to support this book, giving links to pictures of the works discussed, extra commentary, and updates on new exhibitions of Basquiat's work.

INTRODUCTION

It is New York in the mid-1980s. Jean-Michel Basquiat, a very young African American artist, is pacing in his studio filled with large finished and unfinished paintings. He lives and works in a large loft building on Great Jones Street rented from his friend, the pop artist Andy Warhol. He is anxiously waiting for Cathleen McGuigan, the reporter writing a *New York Times Magazine* feature article about him. He's wearing an expensive Armani suit for the interview, but it is splattered with paint; his hair is in dreadlocks; and his feet are bare. He is already famous in the art world with exhibitions at the hottest SoHo galleries and works shown in the Museum of Modern Art. He knows this interview could make him famous with a whole new audience. Only a few years earlier, he had been homeless; a few years later he would be dead of a heroin overdose.

"Since I was 17, I thought I might be a star," Basquiat confided to McGuigan in the interview. "I'd think about all my heroes, Charlie Parker, Jimi Hendrix. . . . I had a romantic feeling of how people had become famous." Both jazz musician Charlie Parker and rock guitar hero Jimi Hendrix were famous for their artistic genius and their stylistic innovations. They also had died young of drug-related causes.

Basquiat admitted that after the galleries first started selling his paintings, he too "was completely reclusive, worked a lot, took a lot of drugs. . . ." But at the time of the interview he seemed pleased with his new work. "I think I'm more economical now," he said. "Every line means something."[1]

The article, "New Art, New Money," covered 14 pages and had a carefully staged full-color picture of Basquiat on the cover. At first Jean-Michel was thrilled. The day it came out, he and Warhol bought a pile of copies on the newsstand and went to Basquiat's father's house for dinner where he proudly signed copies for members of his family.

But the bulk of the article was really about the art world, how the opulent 1980s were creating a new audience for modern art, and new "art stars" out of nowhere. On reflection, Basquiat was angered by the way the article seemed to imply that it was the "new money" that had made him famous—"As though I didn't do it myself," he exclaimed.[2]

The cover photograph of Basquiat in a suit, paintbrush in hand and barefoot, propped up on a chair in front of his huge painting, became an icon of hype in the art world. This became the pattern of writing about Basquiat. Even before the *New York Times* article, no review of his paintings seemed to be complete without mentioning his Haitian and Puerto Rican ancestry and how he had started out in graffiti. To this, he would often reply angrily that he was not a graffiti artist. After his death, writing on the artist tended to treat him as a symbol of the excesses of the 1980s and not give sufficient attention to the groundbreaking achievements of his art.

Basquiat (a Haitian name pronounced BAS-kee-ah) has now gone down in history as an important contemporary painter, working in a unique style. At auctions, his work continues to bring the highest prices, with some paintings selling for over $10 million. While many of the Neo-Expressionist painters from the 1980s have been almost forgotten, Basquiat is still in the public eye. He has left behind a large body of colorful and expressive work that continues to attract interest with new generations of viewers, even those who do not follow modern art. This is even more impressive considering his death at such an early age.

Basquiat's popularity is understandable. He was a young artist without formal training who quickly moved from an unknown writer of graffiti to an internationally recognized painter living a celebrity lifestyle. Some

found this a reason to be attracted to his myth, others a reason to dismiss him. But for both sides the hype can get in the way of seeing the work itself. The 1996 movie *Basquiat*, made by fellow painter Julian Schnabel, contributed both to public interest in him and to the myths about his life.

Interest in his work has been supported by several large museum retrospectives, museum catalogues, and many smaller exhibitions. This has helped in reevaluating his work.

Basquiat's art is in many ways a highly personal one, and certain themes from his childhood continue through his adult paintings. But it is not a body of work that is walled off from the outside world. Basquiat incorporated what he saw around him and what impacted on him. And what he saw was not just people, images, and words (which do show up in the paintings), but racism, inequality, and injustice. Often, what affected him immediately was translated into historical events, whether illustrated by the horrors of colonialism or the triumph of black athletes.

Basquiat's work relates to many different schools of art. A unique feature of his paintings and drawings is the way they integrate the written word, an obsession going back to his early graffiti. He holds this in common with more intellectual text-based artists of his time, such as Jenny Holzer. Yet his large figurative paintings were part of a very different Neo-Expressionist style, along with colleagues like Julian Schnabel or the Italian Francesco Clemente. Basquiat never went to art school. In this way, the talk of his rising from the streets and having his roots in graffiti is true. He got his start from a few teenage years as the satiric and poetic graffiti writer SAMO. But he also went to museums as a child and maintained an interest in modern painting, from Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* to the abstractions of Jackson Pollock, the constructions of Robert Rauschenberg, and other less famous modern painters. His studio was packed with sources for his paintings, including books on history, modern painters, Leonardo da Vinci, and tribal African art. Comic books and television cartoons also give visual elements to his work. Some compared his compositions to the hip-hop mixture of rapping and DJ scratching. His work is filled with references to music, especially the bebop jazz he was introduced to as a child and which became his favorite style. Jazz musicians and other figures from

African American history are never far from his work. All these disparate influences are combined with the hectic rhythms of the New York City streets.

At its best, Basquiat's work can stop you and pull you into its visual power, ignite your curiosity about the images and words used, and lead you back out into the world.

NOTES

1. All quotations in this paragraph come from Cathleen McGuigan, "New Art, New Money: The Marketing of American Artist," *New York Times Magazine*, February 10, 1985. http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/08/09/specials/basquiat-mag.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=cathleen%20mcguigan%20new%20art%20new%20money&st=cse.

2. Anthony Haden-Guest, *True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), p. 131.

TIMELINE: EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

1960 Jean-Michel Basquiat is born December 22, in Brooklyn Hospital. His mother, Matilde, is artistic and Brooklyn-born to Puerto Rican parents. His father, Gérard, is a Haitian-born accountant.

1967 At age six, Jean-Michel's childhood drawing is encouraged by his mother, who takes him to New York art museums.

1968 Jean-Michel is hit by a car while playing in the street, resulting in a broken arm, internal injuries, and removal of his spleen. During a month-long recuperation in the hospital his mother gives him a copy of the book *Gray's Anatomy*, which greatly influences his later work.

His parents divorce. Jean-Michel and his two sisters stay with his father.

1970 Matilde is committed to a mental institution when Jean-Michel is 10 or 11 and subsequently spends time in and out of institutions.

1971–81 In 1971 the graffiti tag "Taki 183" becomes ubiquitous throughout New York City, especially in the subway,

jump-starting the modern graffiti movement. By the mid-1970s graffiti on whole subway cars turns many trains into moving graffiti murals. Jean-Michel notices these works and they influence his later use of graffiti to gain fame.

1974–75 Gérard Basquiat takes a posting to Mira Mar, Puerto Rico, and moves there with his three children. Jean-Michel runs away for the first time but is brought back. The family moves back to Brooklyn at the end of 1975.

1977 Basquiat first develops "SAMO" comic character with friends at City-As-School high school.

1978 After throwing a cream pie in his principal's face at a high school assembly, Jean-Michel runs out of school and never graduates.

In June he runs away from home for good and spends time homeless and staying with friends in Manhattan.

With friend Al Diaz, Basquiat paints many graffiti phrases in downtown Manhattan signed "SAMO."

December 1978 *Village Voice* article on the SAMO graffiti interviews Basquiat and Diaz.

1979 In May Basquiat helps found a short-lived noise band called Gray. He is now well known on downtown scene.

Still without his own home, he befriends future artist Keith Haring and other School of Visual Arts students.

1980 In June an abstract graffiti-like work in the alternative Times Square Show gives Basquiat his first one-line mention in the art press.

Basquiat moves in with Suzanne Mallouk, with whom he continues an on-again off-again affair until 1982.

Basquiat is picked for the lead role of a down-and-out painter in *New York Beat*, a film showcasing New York's downtown music scene. Filming starts in December 1980 and finishes in January 1981.

1981 In January Republican Ronald Reagan becomes president of the United States. His presidency (1981–89), a period of mostly economic growth, increasing inequality, and the rise of the "yuppie" culture, coincides with Basquiat's career as a painter.

In February Basquiat's sophisticated use of childlike images in New York/New Wave exhibition at the alternative P.S. 1 (in Queens, New York) brings him to the attention of more adventuresome figures in the art world.

Basquiat is invited in September to join Annina Nosei's SoHo gallery and set up a studio in the gallery basement. In November Nosei's Public Address group exhibition includes several large figurative paintings by Basquiat.

1982 In March Basquiat's first U.S. solo exhibition, at Annina Nosei Gallery, gets rave reviews. From this point on he supports himself from the sale of his paintings.

In the fall of 1982 Basquiat is working at his new Crosby Street loft. He develops a busy style mixing many words and images, often done on intentionally primitive handmade stretchers.

Basquiat's November Fun Gallery exhibition in the East Village is a popular and critical success.

December *Artforum* publishes René Ricard's "The Radiant Child" article, which brings Basquiat to international attention.

1982–83 Basquiat has a brief relationship with future pop star Madonna, from fall of 1982 to early 1983.

Basquiat stays in Los Angeles for the winter, where he has show at Gagosian Gallery. Madonna visits for Christmas holiday. In Los Angeles, Basquiat produces *Beat Bop* album.

1983 Basquiat (along with young graffiti artist Keith Haring) is included in 1983 Biennial exhibition at the Whitney Museum.

In August Basquiat rents a loft at Great Jones Street from pop artist Andy Warhol, where he lives and works.

September 15 graffiti writer Michael Stewart dies after police arrest and beating. Basquiat commemorates the event in the painting *Defacement*.

1984 Basquiat joins Mary Boone Gallery in March and has his first show there in May. The crowded show of smaller paintings gets mixed reviews, but is a commercial success.

In May his paintings are included in the Museum of Modern Art's reopening exhibition, International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture.

In August he has his first solo museum show in Edinburgh, and two works are included in Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art in Pennsylvania.

In the fall Basquiat begins a love affair with Jennifer Goode, an employee of the Area nightclub.

In September the exhibition Collaborations: Basquiat, Clemente, Warhol shows 15 collaborative works at the Bruno Bischofberger Gallery in Zurich.

From fall of 1984 to summer of 1985 Basquiat spends several days a week working on collaborative works with Andy Warhol in Warhol's Factory studio. The two often go out at night together as well.

1985 February 10 Basquiat appears on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine*.

Second exhibition at Mary Boone Gallery in March. The varied work includes the striking *Gold Griot* painted on wood boards. The catalogue essay by Robert Farris Thompson mentions "black vision," "blues typography," and "kreyol" aspects to his work.

Curator Henry Geldzahler arranges for Basquiat to paint a mural in newly opened Palladium nightclub.

The September Warhol-Basquiat collaborative show at Tony Shafrazi Gallery is panned by critics. Basquiat breaks off his close relationship with Warhol. Friends worry about his drug use.

1986 Basquiat travels to Ivory Coast, Africa, for an October exhibition in Abidjan.

He makes a final break with the Mary Boone Gallery on return from Africa.

Basquiat joins drug rehab program but leaves after a few weeks. His relationship with Jennifer Goode ends.

1987 On February 22, Andy Warhol dies unexpectedly after undergoing a routine gallbladder operation. Basquiat is devastated and depressed. His drug use increases, and he spends more time alone in the studio.

1988 June 11 exhibition at Baghoomian Gallery (his first New York show of paintings in over two years) is a success and is seen as a comeback.
Basquiat travels to Hawaii in June in an attempt to kick his drug habit on his own.
Basquiat dies from "acute mixed drug intoxication" in his Great Jones Street loft on August 12.

1992 Posthumous Basquiat retrospective exhibition at Whitney Museum, New York. Reviews of the exhibition, and especially the museum catalogue, further the serious study of the artist.

1996 Artist and director Julian Schnabel's feature film *Basquiat* is released, starring Jeffrey Wright as Basquiat, with David Bowie as Andy Warhol. It brings the painter new fans, but it is criticized by those who knew Basquiat as distorting his life.

2001 Independent film *Downtown 81* is released, starring Jean-Michel Basquiat in footage taken in 1980 and 1981 for unfinished *New York Beat* movie.

2002 At Christie's Contemporary Art Auction in May, Basquiat's *Profit I* (1982) is sold by Lars Ulrich, drummer for rock band Metallica, for a record $5.5 million.

2005 Brooklyn Museum organizes a large Basquiat retrospective exhibition, which travels through the United States in 2005–2006. The catalogue for the exhibition becomes the most popular produced by the museum. Reviews of the show are overwhelmingly positive and place Basquiat among the important contemporary painters.

2007 On May 16, an untitled Basquiat painting from 1981 is bought at auction for a record $14.6 million.

2008 *Untitled* (Boxer), painted in 1982, from the collection of Metallica drummer Lars Ulrich, sells at Christie's for $13.5 million.

2010 May 9 through September 5, a large retrospective exhibition of Basquiat's work is organized by the *Fondation Beyeler* in Basel, Switzerland, to mark the 50th anniversary of his birth.

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Chapter 1

BROOKLYN CHILDHOOD

Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat is associated with downtown Manhattan: the SoHo galleries, his nearby studio lofts, and the downtown club and music scenes. Yet his father, Gérard Basquiat, noted the influence on his early work of his Brooklyn childhood. "Jean-Michel grew up in Brooklyn," said Gérard. "A lot of the imagery, I feel, is Brooklyn born."[1]

In 1955, Gérard Basquiat moved from Haiti to Brooklyn, New York, to escape the political instability that had plagued his country for decades. That same year, a political coup, one in a long series, brought to power yet another dictator. Gérard, at age 20, was also undoubtedly seeking a better life for himself. Once in Brooklyn, he enrolled in night school to study accounting. Soon after that, he met and married Matilde Andradas, a young Puerto Rican woman. Jean-Michel, their first son, was born a short time later, on December 22, 1960. His parents had radically different temperaments: one had the sensibility of an artist; the other was an accountant. It was his mother who encouraged and nurtured Jean-Michel's creativity. His father on the other hand was stern and exacting. He demanded the best from his son. Matilde was plagued by depression and mental instability and it was Gérard who became the mainstay of the family. In fact, their marriage would fall apart

by the time Jean-Michel was eight. These contradictions within the makeup of his family would probably play an important role in shaping and defining the young artist. It has been noted that "from his father, Jean-Michel learned confidence and toughness" and from his mother, "he learned to place this toughness in a creative presence."[2]

Jean-Michel's Afro-Caribbean background also shaped his later artwork. Matilde was born in Brooklyn to parents who emigrated from Puerto Rico. He called Matilde's mother "Abuelita" (grandmother in Spanish) and later depicted her in a painting (*Abuelita,* 1983). Matilde's father played guitar and led a small Latin band in New York. Jean-Michel's Spanish-speaking grandparents sometimes looked after the young child. He would often sit and listen intently as the band practiced the new salsa music.

Jean-Michel's father was born in 1935 into an affluent family in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, right at the end of U.S. rule there. Although Creole was Haiti's official language, the elite spoke French and looked down upon Creole as for the uneducated. Jean-Michel used to brag that his grandmother was a "blueblood" and the "Diane von Furstenberg of Haiti."[3] (Von Furstenberg was famous as a successful fashion designer who married a prince and was friends with pop artist Andy Warhol.) However, by the time his father left Haiti in 1955, the Basquiat family was no longer well regarded there. Gérard told a biographer that his "family got into some political problems. My mother and father were jailed. My brother was killed in Haiti in the seventies."[4]

Gérard never went back, and Jean-Michel never saw the island. Gérard worked mostly with white people in his job as an accountant and was not part of any Haitian social groups in Brooklyn. Haiti was an abstract concept for Jean-Michel but still one that appeared in his work. In general, Haitian people are especially proud of their heritage and the early history of their nation, the first in the world to overthrow slavery. In Basquiat's painting *Toussaint L'Overture versus Savonarola* (1983), Toussaint is the ex-slave who led that successful revolt.

A BROOKLYN CHILDHOOD

When Jean-Michel was born, Gérard and Matilde had moved to Park Slope, "an integrated middle class section of Brooklyn" as he later

described it, though quite affordable at the time.[5] Jean-Michel later told an interviewer about his middle-class upbringing, "I grew up in a, you know, a pretty typical American vacuum."[6] He would also say: "My childhood was really just ordinary," ignoring some rather turbulent later years.[7] From the beginning, his multilingual and multiethnic environment gave him a unique perspective on life. He learned French (though not Creole) from his father. His mother spoke English and some French, but to her children she spoke in "Caribbean Spanish."[8] And so Jean-Michel, fluent in three languages from an early age, effortlessly switched from one to the other according to his audience: Spanish with his mother and her side of the family, French with his father, and English in his everyday life.

Jean-Michel "was absolutely so bright, absolutely an unbelievable mind. . . . He drew and painted all of his life from the time he was three or four years old," his father remembered proudly.[9] One photograph from these early years shows Jean-Michel concentrating on his drawing, with a pencil in one hand and other pencils stuck into his hair. His mother would sometimes sit next to him at the table while Jean-Michel drew his pictures based on cars and TV cartoons on paper his father brought home from the office. Jean-Michel remembered his mother "drawing stuff out of the bible, like Samson breaking the temple down."[10] His mother's artistic flair was now mostly expressed in her neat and color-coordinated house, but she had an interest in sketching and had done a little fashion design in the past. "His mother got him started and she pushed him," his father later recalled, "She was actually a very good artist."[11] Jean-Michel agreed when asked about it later in life: "I'd say my mother gave me all the primary things. The art came from her."[12]

The family was still living in Park Slope when Jean-Michel's sisters were born, Lisane in 1963, and Jeanine in 1966. Soon after Jeanine was born, the family moved to a larger place in East Flatbush, farther out in Brooklyn. East Flatbush was a largely white, working-class neighborhood. In the mid-1960s the population of East Flatbush was just starting to shift from Jewish and Italian to Caribbean. This was part of a general "white flight" from Brooklyn and other inner city areas. In the 1960s New York City saw a net loss of half a million white residents. As whites became more affluent and moved to the suburbs, they were

replaced with African Americans and African Caribbean families. Today, Flatbush is a large Caribbean neighborhood, with immigrants from the English, Spanish, and Creole speaking islands.

The move to East Flatbush was one of many during Jean-Michel's childhood. Just as turbulent for him were all the different schools he attended following these moves around Brooklyn. In 1967, soon after arriving in East Flatbush, Jean-Michel started at Saint Ann's, a newly established private school in Brooklyn. It shows the importance his parents gave to education that they managed to send him to this already well-regarded school, rather than to the free public school nearby. Although attached to an Episcopalian Church, it was a nonsectarian school where intellectually curious students were encouraged to learn for the sake of the learning itself, not for grades. He was a bright young child, and by age seven was already a prolific reader in all of his three languages.

But his real love was still drawing. His second-grade teacher at Saint Ann's, Coco McCoy, remembers that he "drew a lot whenever he could and grinned when he came for more paper." She describes his drawings of the time as a "thought process elaborated with icons, symbols, edits and a message."[13] This description could very well summarize much of his later work as a famous artist.

At the time, his subjects were those typical for young boys: wars, cars (mostly dragsters), and the character Alfred E. Neuman from *Mad* magazine. Jean-Michel claimed to have sent a picture of a gun to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover in third grade, with no reply. He made some new friends at the school, and with one, Marc Prozzo, wrote and illustrated a children's book, with simple made-up characters called Oopick, Fritz, Hair, and Yaboo. Although Jean-Michel's first childhood ambition was to be a fireman, he soon switched to wanting to become a cartoonist.

His mother, recognizing his precocious interest in art, and perhaps compensating for her lost career in fashion, signed him up as a junior member of the Brooklyn Museum. The Brooklyn Museum is famous for its wings of American furniture and design as well as its extensive collection of art from Egypt and Africa. In trips there with his mother, Jean-Michel was able to absorb a wide range of different art, enriching his experience as a young child.

The pair also explored all that the city had to offer. They wandered around the great halls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with its grand classical style and enormous staircase. They were fascinated by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and its less conventional collection. At MoMA, Jean-Michel was exposed to modern styles like the fragmented depictions of Pablo Picasso's Cubist period and the messy "drips" of Jackson Pollock's huge canvases. Years later Jean-Michel remembered enjoying Claude Monet's huge and thickly painted *Water Lilies* in the museum.[14] But when asked about his first strong artistic impression, he replied: "Probably seeing *Guernica*, it was my favorite thing when I was a kid."[15]

Picasso's *Guernica* was a huge somber canvas, depicting the horrific effects of the Nazi bombing of the Spanish town of Guernica, which had dared to resist the Fascists during the Spanish Civil War. It was hung in a room of its own at MoMA, surrounded by drawings and sketches that Picasso had made in preparation for it. Picasso returned to a simplified Cubist style to depict the horrors of the first saturation bombing of a civilian town. The effect was graphic and visceral. *Guernica* has become an international symbol of the horrors of war and of resistance to it. For a child interested in cartooning it must have been especially interesting how Picasso's individual cartoonlike studies came together in a painting of such power.

Besides museums, his mother also broadened Jean-Michel's education by taking him to see musicals, and the whole family would occasionally go out to see a film. In addition to his grandfather's Latin band, Jean-Michel recalled his early musical influences as the musical *West Side Story*, which his mother took him to, and the haunting Brazilian beat from the movie *Black Orpheus*. Jean-Michel never learned a musical instrument as a child; his personal obsession was always drawing, but music was still important to his life. His father remembered: "There was always music at home. I've always been a lover of jazz and classical music," although Jean-Michel would not share his father's taste in music until later.[16]

Jean-Michel also enjoyed sports and was a good athlete. He ran for the school track team and played softball in Prospect Park and stickball in the street. And like all children, he went out to play with his friends. A popular game at the time was skelly. The game was played

with bottle caps flicked along a numbered diagram drawn on the sidewalk or street in chalk. Players aimed to move their bottle caps up the court and knock out their opponents' caps. Some of the puzzling diagrams in Basquiat's early paintings more than a decade later are actually depictions of skelly courts.

CRASH

In May of 1968, Jean-Michel was playing ball when a car hit him and caused serious injury. Basquiat never forgot the moment: "I was playing on the street . . . it seemed very dreamlike. It was just like in the movies, when they slow it down,"[17] and then he saw "everything through a sort of red focus. . . . That's not the earliest memory I have, but it's probably the most vivid."[18] He was taken to the hospital with a broken arm and more serious internal damage. The surgeons had to remove his spleen and he spent a month at King's County Hospital before he was allowed home.

To while away his time in the hospital, his mother gave him a present of a very large book: the classic medical text, *Gray's Anatomy*. This very serious study of human anatomy describes in minute details, with labels and cutaway views, the human body's muscular, skeletal, and nervous systems, and all the internal organs. This was an odd gift for a child this young. Matilde knew that artists often studied anatomy to learn how to better draw the human figure. However, this was not an artistic anatomy book but one aimed at medical students. Jean-Michel had lots of time to pour over the detailed book in his hospital bed. No doubt he looked up pictures of the spleen.

It has been suggested that the gift was almost magical thinking on his mother's part, as if her son could use it to visualize the damaged organs and help in his recovery. His later painting, with its depictions of internal organs, was felt to be part of an ongoing process of visualization and healing.[19]

There is no doubt that this episode had a deep impact on his life. Many critics have suggested that *Gray's Anatomy* influenced his art, whether in his depiction of the body or his use of text mixed with images. It is also true that the theme of cars and car crashes became an obsession in Basquiat's early work, referring directly back to the accident.

The timing of the accident marked a dividing line in Jean-Michel's life in more ways than one. Things got noticeably worse at home between his parents after he came back from the hospital. Their relationship had been rocky for a while and perhaps the stresses of the accident worsened his mother's mental illness. Soon after Jean-Michel returned from the hospital, his parents separated. When his mother and father could no longer live together, it was Matilde who had to leave the house, and the children stayed with Gérard.

A seven-year-old child could not help taking the event personally, and it must have seemed as though he was abandoned by his mother. Even years later, Annina Nosei, the first gallery owner who exhibited Basquiat's work, noticed how "he talked about his mother as all very angry adolescents do, as if she'd left him."[20]

However, with a little distance, Jean-Michel could see that his parents' relationship was a troubled one. "My father is a businessman. . . . My mother went crazy as a result of a bad marriage . . . to my father," he recalled.[21] He remembered her as having been beautiful when she was young, but with "a worry line on her forehead from worrying so much." He found it hard to talk about his mother, but he did tell one interviewer that she had been committed to an institution when he was about 10,[22] and he later told the pop artist Andy Warhol that he had felt neglected because his mother had been "in and out of mental hospitals."[23]

After the separation she would come to visit with her children without coming into Gérard's house. Later Jean-Michel would have to visit her in mental institutions.

To the poet René Ricard, who helped launch his career, he said that his mother was a *bruja*, a Spanish word meaning witch, but with the ambiguous meaning suggesting power and creativity.[24] His mother had given him both emotional and artistic support in his early years. When his strict father took over the care of the three young children, though Gérard was certainly a loving father, Jean-Michel felt that a certain balance in his life had gone.

Jean-Michel's life was in flux. During that same period, he left St. Ann's and went to P.S. 181 in East Flatbush. His worries at home, combined with his creative and independent nature, led him into all kinds of troubles in many of his classes. At one point, after the family moved from

Flatbush to Boerum Hill, closer to downtown Brooklyn, he was bused from there to P.S. 101, an elementary school in the Bensonhurst area of Brooklyn. Bensonhurst to this day is a primarily Italian American neighborhood where race relations have historically been strained. Only a few years earlier other black students bused from Park Slope to Bensonhurst needed a police escort because of threats against them. Busing was one of the failed (and extremely controversial) experiments to integrate schools, and Jean-Michel's time there was a difficult one.

He was one of the very few black students in the school, and he faced resentment, and at times outright racism. He later said some of the Italian kids would beat him up.[25] He had a hard time adjusting and was known as an angry child. His teachers again commented on his constant drawing. He wanted to be the best artist in the class but found his work was not neat enough. It was "abstract expressionist . . . really messy," he described it later. "I'd never win painting contests. I remember losing to a guy who did a perfect Spiderman."[26] He still dreamed of becoming a cartoonist and would have drawn cartoons all day long had it been up to him. One strip he created had a full cast including a mad scientist called Dr. Oopick, a character recycled from one he had used with his friend Marc Prozzo as a young kid.

Whether Jean-Michel secretly wanted to fit in or not, he acted as if he did not care. Being ostracized for being black made him more interested in exploring his own racial identity. A mural-sized work he created at P.S. 101 only to rip up afterward illustrates this interest. Through it, he also mocked the stereotypical view held by the Bensonhurst students of their black classmates. Titled *Teenage Gangs of the Fifties*, it shows young members of the "Switchblades" and the "Suicides," some carrying knives, on a block in Harlem. He may have gotten the inspiration for this mural from seeing *West Side Story* with his mother. That movie, and the musical it was based on, updates the warring gangs of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to the modern Italian and Puerto Rican gangs of 1950s Manhattan. In fact, real life was a step ahead of the movies, and during that period, there were a series of gang fights closer to home. Puerto Rican and Italian gangs fought, sometimes with knives, for their turf on Fifth Avenue in Brooklyn, not too far from where the Basquiat family lived. These scuffles culminated in several shootings, 12 injuries, and the firebombing of

the headquarters of the Puerto Rican nationalist group El Machetes in 1973.[27]

FATHER AND SON

If life at school was tough on Jean-Michel, things at home with his father were not always that easy either. Gérard certainly did what he thought was right for the children, but Jean-Michel thought him too strict and demanding. His father was frustrated with him because, although he appreciated how intelligent his son was, Jean-Michel wanted to do his own thing in his own time. And what he wanted to do most of all was to draw and paint. His father complained that he could not be disciplined, and "gave me a lot of trouble."[28]

On the other hand, Jean-Michel complained of his father's strict discipline. Gérard would often use a belt on his children as punishment. Gérard Basquiat had grown up in Haiti, an authoritarian and at times quite violent country, and therefore thought it normal to be a harsh disciplinarian. When Jean-Michel was asked about his childhood drawings, he said "my work had an ugly edge to it" at the time, because "there was a lot of ugly stuff going on at the time in my family."[29]

Despite the differences, Gérard instilled some strong values in his son. Robert Farris Thompson, who knew Jean-Michel Basquiat and had met his family, thought that "Basquiat's well-dressed, hard-working, tough-minded, ambitious father, Gérard, set examples of style, heart and drive."[30] Perhaps Jean-Michel, as most teenagers do, wanted to prove his father wrong. Just the same, he ended up adopting a kind of ambition and drive reminiscent of his father's—if different in style and substance.

Gérard spent many hours working at his job, and Jean-Michel would sometimes have to look after his two young sisters while at home. Gérard remembers Sundays being the only time he could stay at home and listen to his music, a special time. "As a child he used to draw on the coffee table, or on the floor while I played my jazz and read. For him, the ear would be listening to music and the hand would be making art."[31] But he also remembers when "Jean-Michel did not like jazz. He didn't understand it. He used to play his rock and Elton John songs loudly upstairs."[32] Like most teenagers, he turned away from the music

he heard at home to the music popular with his peers. If he did listen to Elton John, he would not admit to it a few years later, when he had developed more experimental tastes in music. He even adopted his father's taste for bebop jazz, but not until he had left home.

When father and son were both home together, they did find common ground watching sports on TV. They both loved baseball and watched with proud excitement the progress of Hank Aaron, the African American ball player who had won the record for most career home runs in 1974. Gérard remembers that when he watched baseball with Jean-Michel, Aaron was a "major, major player and he was on the verge of breaking the Babe Ruth record. He was a very fascinating player, and Jean-Michel understood that."[33]

Jean-Michel would also join Gérard in watching boxing matches on TV. Gérard said, "I was a big fan of boxing, and when he was a kid, there would be fights on television every Friday. We would sit together and watch. He talked about Joe Louis, Jersey Joe Wolcott, all of them—the great boxers of years past."[34] In fact, these black historical sports figures would later turn up in Basquiat's paintings.

Gérard's enthusiasm for young black athletes (these were the days of boxer Muhammad Ali's crowning fame after all) made the young Basquiat think that he too could do something one day that would make his father proud. Like many young boys, Jean-Michel looked up to his favorite sports figures as examples of how someone could break out of the ordinary. His success would come, however, not through what his father tried to instill in him, hard work and homework, but through his own creativity. The young Basquiat did not want a staid and boring life like the life his father had mapped out for him. He complained about the "frustration" of his empty life at home: "I went to school, I came home, and that was it . . . over and over again."[35]

RUNAWAY

Another significant change in Jean-Michel's life came when he was 13. In 1974 his father received a promotion at the Berlitz company and was sent to Puerto Rico. He took the three children with him to Mira Mar (near San Juan) for a year and a half. Jean-Michel attended a local Episcopalian school, where he was taught in Spanish. A friend

of the family, Annette Minkalis, knew him there and remembers him as a lanky, spirited kid with lots of energy, who nonetheless seemed to demand a lot of attention. One day he confided to her that he smoked pot, and she felt that she had to tell his father, "who did not take it well."[36]

It was also in Puerto Rico that Jean-Michel ran away from home for the first time. He spent some hours at a local radio station with some DJs he had befriended before being brought back home by his father.

When the family returned to New York in time for Thanksgiving of 1976, they moved back into their three-story Boerum Hill brownstone. When Annette Minkalis was in New York for work and visited Gérard and his children there, she found that Jean-Michel "still talked fast, walked fast, and paced" but now called himself "Jean."[37] His relationship with his father had not improved. He had started to spend as much time as he could away from home, and the "frustration in the way I grew up" really began to bother him.[38] He would soon have more trouble in school, run away from home, and see his father remarry.

In the nine years since Gérard broke up with Matilde, he had dated other women, and in 1977 he married his girlfriend, a white woman named Nora Fitzpatrick. When Nora moved into the Boerum Place brownstone, she tried to befriend Jean-Michel and partially fill the role left empty by his mother. But Jean-Michel still felt that she was on his father's side and could not help feeling resentful toward the new woman in his father's life.

When Jean-Michel returned from Puerto Rico he enrolled at another Brooklyn school, Edward R. Morrow High School. It was a good school, but he again did not apply himself in this traditional academic setting. He soon ran away from home a second time. "I left home when I was 15 and lived on the street for a while," he said. Panhandling for change and going hungry was a miserable experience. "Everybody just seems rich and you're really bitter and you hate everybody."[39] In an interview, he explained how he hung out in Washington Square Park in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of downtown Manhattan. He told the interviewer that he "just sat there dropping acid for eight months. Now all that seems boring. It eats up your mind."[40]

His father put out an alert for him. He had a good idea where to find him because he remembers him "when he was about 15 or 16 . . . seeing him on Fourth Street (in the Village) by the basketball court sitting on the floor and selling his work to tourists. They were just drawings . . ."[41]

When his father brought him home, Jean-Michel turned to him and said "Papa, I will be very famous one day."[42]

HIGH SCHOOL DAYS

The prophecy did eventually come true, but at the time he received an incomplete in each of his classes at Edward R. Morrow High School. "I had a lot of problems with the authority figures and I had to leave," he said.[43] Luckily for him, he was able to transfer to City-As-School, a new alternative high school that best suited his style. Based on the philosophy of learning by doing, the school saw the city as a learning opportunity, and the students were encouraged to explore New York as part of their curriculum. City-As-School pulled in students from across New York City, and Jean-Michel made friends from outside of Brooklyn. He was happy to be able to stay over in Manhattan at times. One of the students he met was Al Diaz, a resident of the Jacob Riis housing projects on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Diaz had previously been an early and young participant in the New York graffiti scene, using the tag "Bomb I." The two quickly bonded, and Diaz helped show Jean-Michel around downtown.

At school, Jean-Michel was freer than ever to practice his art. He had already decided to become an artist rather than a cartoonist. He submitted illustrations to the school paper, and he designed the cover for the 1977 yearbook. His cover, done in October of that year, was a surrealist architectural fantasy crowned by a rose. This was the early days of the punk movement, but he was still drawing in a style of the 1960s: "It was very flowery and LSD influenced. Actually, my basic influence was probably Peter Max," he later admitted, referring to the designer of psychedelic hippy posters in the 1960s.[44] But they were not just hippy heads. Some of the social consciousness of the 1960s was there as well. His high school drawings, "executed in a bright Peter Max style, sympathetically depicted the homeless and sarcastically mocked bourgeois values."[45] The high school yearbook includes a photo

of him with a small afro, and more significantly, a photo of one of his new SAMO© graffiti slogans: "SAMO© AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO PLASTIC FOOD STANDS. . . ."

The character of SAMO (pronounced Same-Oh) was first developed by Jean-Michel, with his friends Al Diaz and Shannon Dawson while they were at high school together. Basquiat took the lead, creating a series of comics featuring a character called SAMO in a "Religio-mat" selling sham religions: a false answer to everything.

Basquiat claims the name was first developed in a stoned conversation with Diaz, calling the marijuana they were smoking "the same old shit," then shortening the phrase to "Same-Old," then "SAMO" for short. "Imagine marketing it as SAMO©," they laughed. They later developed the concept as a criticism of consumer society, where everyone is selling the same old thing as an important change. "It started . . . as a private joke and then grew," explained Jean-Michel.[46]

The comical character of SAMO was further developed by Jean-Michel and friends in a drama-therapy group in upper Manhattan called Family Life Theatre—another part of his City-As-School program. Al Diaz remembers: "Jean started elaborating on the idea and I began putting my thoughts into it."[47] Jean-Michel, Al, and Shannon helped create a comic-style advertisement of the false religion, then turned it into a photocopied pamphlet to be handed out. The pamphlet included cartoon heads "before" and "after" getting SAMO and phrases such as, "I tried it. It changed my life" and "I used to be a lamo before I started SAMO©."[48] Diaz remembers then taking the next step: "We decided to start leaving these cryptic messages around: SAMO© is coming. . . ." In the bathroom of City-As-School they wrote the message "SAMO© AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO ALTERNATIVE EDUCATON."[49] The first SAMO graffiti appeared on the walls of downtown Manhattan in late 1977, painted by the team of Al and Jean-Michel, with their distinctive uppercase writing and the ironic copyright symbol always attached to the name.

While still involved with the SAMO graffiti, Jean-Michel never stopped drawing at home, and he broadened his artistic interests beyond the psychedelic comics. He visited MoMA on a high school trip and renewed his interest in Picasso's *Guernica* which had fascinated him as a young child. He also discovered more contemporary American

artists, especially the pop artist Andy Warhol. "Since I was 17 I thought I might be a star," Jean-Michel would recall.[50] This interest in fame drew him to Andy Warhol, even though he would never share Warhol's emotionless style of art. In 1970s New York, Warhol was the only visual artist to be treated like a Hollywood movie star. Years before reality television, it was Warhol who ironically predicted "in the future, everyone will be famous for 15 minutes."[51]

At this point Jean-Michel's fame was limited to his fellow students. His artwork and graffiti activity, along with his charm and good looks, helped make him a popular figure at City-As-School. But even in this unstructured environment he still got in trouble. There was the time when he and his friends were caught selling the subway tokens given to them to visit museums and other places, and instead using the money to buy marijuana. But the real trouble came on the eve of his friend Al Diaz's graduation, a year before his own. This prank was the last one he was to play in school.

He and his friends had begun discussing the idea of throwing a pie in the principal's face during graduation. "It became a dare," said Jean-Michel. "I bought some whipped cream and tried to fill a box, but it didn't work. Then I tried a can of shaving cream."[52] Jean-Michel snuck from behind the curtain and reached around to get him straight in the face. At first, the principal found it hard to breathe and the audience stood in shocked silence. Jean-Michel ran out a side door and never returned for his final year. "There didn't seem to be much point in going back," he said.[53]

What Jean-Michel did not mention was his father's reaction. No doubt Gérard was horrified at the prank and very upset at his son's dropping out a year before graduation. But Jean-Michel was 17 now and determined to do what he wanted. In the summer of 1978 Jean-Michel left home for good. His father was not happy about his leaving, but when he realized it was inevitable he gave his son some money and wished him luck.

NOTES

1. Deitch Projects, Glenn O'Brien, Diego Cortez, et al., *Jean-Michel Basquiat 1981: The Studio of the Street* (New York: Deitch Projects; Milan: Charta, 2007), p. 90.

2. Robert Farris Thompson, "Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat," in Richard Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (New York: Abrams; Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), p. 29.

3. Stephen Torton, interview with the author, August 23, 2009. See also Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 16.

4. Hoban, *Basquiat*, p. 16.

5. Anthony Haden-Guest, *True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), p. 127.

6. Jean-Michel Basquiat, interview with Mark Miller, in Paul Tschinkel (producer), *Jean-Michel Basquiat: An Interview*, ART/New York No. 30A, 1998, videocassette. Distributed by Inner Tube Films.

7. Steve Hager, *Art after Midnight: The East Village Scene* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 39.

8. Robert Farris Thompson, "Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets," p. 29.

9. Franklin Sirmans, "Chronology," in Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, p. 233.

10. Jean-Michel Basquiat, interview with Becky Johnstone, in Tamra Davis (director), *A Conversation with Basquiat* (21 mins.) USA, 2006. Distributed by Arthouse Films.

11. Sirmans, "Chronology," p. 233.

12. Steve Hager, *Art after Midnight*, p. 39.

13. Lisa J. Curtis, "Homecoming." http://www.brooklynpaper.com/stories/28/16/28_16basquiat.html.

14. Haden-Guest, *True Colors*, p. 127.

15. Davis, *A Conversation*.

16. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 90.

17. Davis, *A Conversation*.

18. Hoban, *Basquiat*, p. 17.

19. Robert Farris Thompson, "Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets," p. 29.

20. Steve Hager, *Adventures in the Counterculture: From Hip Hop to High Times* (New York: High Times Books, 2002), p. 210.

21. Hager, *Adventures*, p. 171.

22. "My mother was committed when I was a kid . . . about ten, eleven, something like that. . . . My mother has been in institutions

many, many times. . . . She's very frail." Basquiat interview with Anthony Haden-Guest, quoted in Hoban, *Basquiat*, p. 18.

23. "He sort of resents her, though he said she's been in and out of mental hospitals and he felt neglected." Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, eds., *The Andy Warhol Diaries* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), p. 603.

24. René Ricard, "World Crown Bodhisattva with Clenched Mudra," in Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, p. 49. On the meaning of the term *bruja*, see Frances Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2004), p. 139.

25. "He said that when his father lost money he had to be bused to a public school that was a lot of Italians and the boys there used to beat him up and he didn't like it." Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, eds., *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, p. 592.

26. Jean-Michel Basquiat, interview with Henry Geldzahler, "Art: From Subways to SoHo, Jean-Michel Basquiat," *Interview* 13 (January 1983), p. 46.

27. Michael T. Kaufman, "Feud Keeps Park Slope on Guard," *New York Times*, June 29, 1973, p. 39; and John T. McQuiston, "Park Slope Talks Yield Agreement; Puerto Ricans and Italians, to Try to Ease Tensions," *New York Times* June 30, 1973, p. 34.

28. Franklin Sirmans, "Chronology," p. 234.

29. Geldzahler, "From Subways to SoHo," p. 46.

30. Robert Farris Thompson "Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets," p. 28.

31. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 90.

32. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 90.

33. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 90.

34. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 90.

35. Tschinkel, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*.

36. Annette I. Minkalis, "The Memorable Jean-Michel," in Richard D. Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat in Word Only* (New York: Cheim & Reid, 2005), unpaginated.

37. Annette I. Minkalis, "The Memorable Jean-Michel."

38. Tschinkel, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*.

39. Davis, *A Conversation*.

40. Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 118.

41. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 91.
42. Franklin Sirmans, "Chronology," p. 234.
43. Davis, *A Conversation*.
44. Haden-Guest, *True Colors*, p. 128.
45. Andrew Decker, "The Price of Fame: The Turbulent Life and Art of Jean Michel Basquiat," *Art News* 88 (January 1989), pp. 96–101.
46. Philip Faflick, "The SAMO Graffiti . . ." *Village Voice*, December 11, 1978, p. 41.
47. Hager, *Adventures*, p. 173.
48. Faflick, "The SAMO Graffiti," p. 41.
49. Faflick, "The SAMO Graffiti," p. 41.
50. Cathleen McGuigan, "New Art, New Money: The Marketing of American Artist," *New York Times Magazine* (February 10, 1985), p. 34 http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/08/09/specials/basquiat-mag.html.
51. Andy Warhol, in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 16th ed. (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 1992), p. 758:17.
52. Hager, *Adventures*, p. 173.
53. Hager, *Adventures*, p. 174.

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Chapter 2

LEAVING HOME

Tensions at the Basquiat home with Jean-Michel's father and new stepmother meant that Jean-Michel could no longer stay there. When Jean-Michel got on the subway to Manhattan in the summer of 1978, he knew that he was never going back. He was just 17 but he felt ready for the big city. Unlike in his earlier attempts, he now had a network of friends across Manhattan, people he had met at school and in other programs who could put him up. Still, at times he found himself with nowhere to go and had to spend the night in the streets or on the subway.

He later told a funny story of going to Harriman State Park 30 miles north of New York City "with two valises full of canned food" determined as he was, to "never go home again. . . ." The park was not a place for an inexperienced teenager with a couple of suitcases. He slept outside but soon discovered "it gets really dark in the woods" and was as scared by the locals with their beer coolers as much as he was by being alone.[1] Back in the city, he was flat broke, living from place to place and sleeping on friends' floors.

When Jean-Michel was out of touch with his family for a long time, Gérard was beside himself. He and Nora drove around looking

for him in parks, runaway shelters, anywhere they could think of to find him. Family friend Annette Minkalis clearly remembers "the angst during a phone conversation as Gérard told me they had walked the Bowery looking for signs of Jean-Michel; while they hoped to find him, they also hoped it would not be in this neighborhood. Gérard spotted SAMO writings in various places—it was the only way he knew his son was alive."[2]

When Jean-Michel arrived in Manhattan in the late 1970s the economy was in a slowdown and New York City damaged by a major fiscal crisis. President Gerald Ford had turned down a request for an emergency bailout, relayed to the city in the now famous *New York Daily News* headline: "FORD to CITY: DROP DEAD." On the Lower East Side there were many run-down inexpensive apartments and lots of boarded up buildings. Heroin addicts used them as "shooting galleries," and rats and roaches were rampant. Many of these properties would remain empty or be consumed by fire, until the economy—and the rents, picked up a few years into the 1980s. Sometimes Jean-Michel and Al Diaz, still collaborating on the SAMO© graffiti, would sleep in an abandoned building on the Lower East Side.

One night Diaz and Basquiat were up all night after taking acid (the psychedelic drug LSD). In the morning Basquiat told his friend, "I know I'm going to be a star. I know it, Al, I really know it."[3] But for now, he was broke and he had to figure out a way of making some money.

PUNK ROCK AND POSTCARDS

Through friends Jean-Michel found odd jobs here and there, but he did not last long at any of them. For a while he assisted a carpenter who was also a sculptor. "I was also selling handmade postcards and hand-painted Abstract Expressionist sweatshirts to make money."[4] The postcards were postcard-sized drawings and collages he sold for $1 each on the streets.

He still drew whenever he had the chance. By this time his drawing was evolving from the curvy psychedelic heads of his high school comics into a more punk-influenced style. In the late 1970s a simple and aggressive punk rock music was starting to become popular in a subculture centered in downtown Manhattan. It loudly rejected both the bland

music of Top 40 radio and the heavily produced disco then popular. The music was accompanied by extreme haircuts, often dyed unnatural colors, ripped clothes, and safety pin ornaments. Album covers and fan magazines started incorporating a punk aesthetic of ripped paper, cut out letters, and photos stuck down at off-kilter angles.

On arriving in Manhattan, Jean-Michel immediately found himself in the midst of this scene. He appropriated this technique for the postcards he sold on the streets. He pasted them together and took them to a photocopy shop on Prince Street to be turned into cards. In the 1970s color photocopying was still a novelty to the public. Basquiat and others influenced by punk were fascinated by the distorted but vivid colors these photocopiers automatically produced. Sometimes Basquiat added scribbled drawing or spilled paint to the photocopied surface.

In Jean-Michel's cards, pieces from newspapers and comics were stuck in at dynamic angles along with bar codes, drawings of televisions, and labels from Pez candy. As if to illustrate his wish to become famous, some of the cards featured photo-booth pictures of him, alone or with friends, cut out, pasted into the composition. The use of modern commodities and images from the popular press was reminiscent of pop artist icon Andy Warhol. But instead of Warhol's cool detachment, these images derived their energy from a punk sensibility.

A popular theme in the collaged cards was the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy by Lee Harvey Oswald. Another was pictures of baseball players and teams making an ironic reference to traditional baseball cards and perhaps influenced by the games Jean-Michel watched with his dad. He sat on the street and sold them around Washington Square Park and elsewhere in the Village, West Broadway in SoHo, and sometimes uptown on the street outside the Museum of Modern Art.

Jean-Michel also adopted a sort of punk style in clothing. This was shocking even for New York, but it suited him as an aspiring artist with little money. "Jean would splatter a lab coat with paint and walk across the Brooklyn Bridge with his face green and a Nosferatu haircut. He was a real attention getter," remembered Al Diaz.[5]

Soon Jean-Michel started hanging out in the late-night punk clubs. He was one of the very few African Americans who were part of that scene at the time. He now kept his hair longer and black in the back,

but shaved it to a dyed blond peak in front. The young black kid with the blond Mohawk was soon a recognizable figure at CBGB's punk music club on the Lower East Side and the newer nightspots. While he was homeless, the clubs were a place to stay during the nighttime hours and a place to meet others like him. With his charming manners, he was often able to find people who would offer him somewhere to sleep in the daytime after the clubbing hours.

Whenever he had a place to stay for a while, and a chance to work, he would continue to draw. He would draw on anything he could find, testing ideas for the postcards.

MEETING ANDY WARHOL

Jean-Michel was trying to sell his handmade postcards on the streets of SoHo when he first saw Andy Warhol, the artist he had learned to admire in high school. Jean-Michel was 17 and still had his partially shaved, partly dyed haircut when he spotted Warhol. Warhol, easily recognizable in his trademark blond wig, was walking into a restaurant with a large man wearing a suit.

Jean-Michel was awestruck and stood outside for almost a quarter of an hour trying to work up the nerve to follow them in. The Pop Art movement of the 1960s, and Warhol in particular, had changed what art could look like. By incorporating everyday objects, and commercial techniques, they also transformed the relation of art to the public. While some did not consider Warhol a serious artist (especially in the late 1970s), everyone agreed he was an extremely important figure in the art world. There was no doubt that he personally created the idea of the *artist celebrity*. To Jean-Michel who yearned to be famous, and whose Pez dispenser postcards would have been impossible without Warhol's soup cans, Warhol was almost a hero.

Finally, Jean-Michel walked into the restaurant with a handful of his xeroxed cards and walked over to the table where the two men were talking. Shyly he asked if they wanted to buy any of his artwork, only $1 a card. What Jean-Michel did not know was that the man with Warhol was Henry Geldzahler who had just left his post as curator for 20th-century art at the Metropolitan Museum to become commissioner of cultural affairs for New York City. Warhol shuffled through

the pile of cards, but Geldzahler dismissed the work as "too young." Jean-Michel was angered by being labeled too young but could not show it since he was intruding on the two men's lunch. Luckily for him, Warhol thought the cards were interesting enough, and taking pity on the young man, bought a card for $1. But the two men got back to their business, and Jean-Michel left. Jean-Michel should have been glad; he had sold a postcard to his idol! But he was still upset at being dismissed so abruptly. He may have been only $1 richer, but he left with an ambition to get in touch with Warhol again and prove he was someone to be taken seriously.

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST SWEATSHIRTS

Painting sweatshirts was the other way Jean-Michel tried to make money. The original punk clothing was handmade by fans. The few downtown stores that started to carry it hired young people who were into the punk look to alter jeans, T-shirts, and sweatshirts through ripping, dying, silkscreen printing, or just painting on them. For a while in 1978, Jean-Michel had a job painting sweatshirts in the Unique Clothing Warehouse, a big source of inexpensive but hip clothing downtown on lower Broadway. He often ate lunch in Washington Square with friends from the store. Norman Scherer who worked with him remembers him well because "there was something to him that left me an impression."[6] Thirty years later Scherer would uncover an envelope from his days at Unique, along with some old clothes. In it were 18 xeroxed postcards by Basquiat. He was offered thousands of dollars apiece for the cards Jean-Michel would have sold on the street for $1.

As a side business for himself, Jean-Michel painted more shirts and would try to sell them, along with his postcards, to tourists on the street. These are what he called his "Abstract Expressionist sweatshirts," after artist Jackson Pollock who would drip paint onto a canvas on the floor, producing webs of paint in great curving lines across the picture. But Jean-Michel's painting was even brighter and more frantic. He mixed ideas taken from Pollock's paint dribbles and cursive scribbling like that of painter Cy Twombly with Warhol's

pop images and the newer punk look. Some of the clothing even had SAMO-like phrases painted on them, and he hand-painted his own "MAN-MADE" logo on the back of the clothing. This only raised pocket change, never enough to get him off the street and pay his own rent.

Basquiat was still homeless and on the nights when he was not lucky enough to convince someone to put him up, he would end up sleeping on the streets. Hanging out around Washington Square Park meant he met students at nearby New York University. A writer and acquaintance of the time remembered, "He was sleeping on the floors of a rotating set of NYU dorm rooms then. He had no money at all. He moved in with my friend . . . and ate all the cans of black-eyed peas her mom sent from Detroit. . . ."[7] After staying with people he would often leave a hand-painted T-shirt or sweatshirt behind. He gave away so many that none of his friends knew what to do with them, and most ended up being thrown away.

As if commenting on his own homelessness, Jean-Michel created a series of his postcards by altering the title deed cards from the Monopoly game. One features Park Place, another Pennsylvania and North Carolina Avenues, covered with blood-like red paint and torn newspaper, but with the rent clearly visible. Paul Shapiro, another Unique employee, was given the Park Place card by Basquiat "personally when he crashed at my house in 1979."[8]

Besides what Basquiat made for sale on the street, he was still constantly drawing. "In those days I never had enough money to cover a whole canvas. I wouldn't be surprised if I died like a boxer, really broke, but somehow I doubt it."[9] While he could not afford painting materials, or even proper drawing paper, he worked out ideas on paper bags and any object he could find.

At the time, no one expected these messy drawings to be worth anything. Although Jean-Michel may have learned from producing the painted clothing, collages, and color xerox cards, he had not been able to make much money off of them. His own drawings were virtually unseen, except by the people who put him up and found he had scribbled all over their possessions. What was to first get him noticed was not his work on cards, his other drawing, or the clothing he made. It came from a very unexpected direction: his graffiti.

THE SAMO© GRAFFITI

Jean-Michel and Al Diaz still went out at night spraying graffiti with the anonymous SAMO© tag. Spray paint made it easier than markers to write in larger letters. One of the first they did in Manhattan was "SAMO© IS NOW," followed by "SAMO© . . . AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO GOD" outside a church on SoHo's West Broadway.[10]

Many played on the SAMO comic strip of his high school days:

SAMO© SAVES IDIOTS AND GONZOIDS . . .[11]

SAMO© . . . 4
THE INDIRECTLY INVOLVED,
THE EASILY CONVINCED &
THE BAFFLED . . .[12]

Most of these were just words, and the copyright symbol, but a few were accompanied by pictures. These were done with spray paint in a large version of the curvy hippy-comic style faces Jean-Michel had done in high school. Alongside one of these faces was the illegible phrase "@*?3@ SAMO© 4 U . . ."[13] and then again on a different wall with the phrase "LIFE IS CONFUSING AT THIS POINT– SAMO© . . ."[14]

It is not a coincidence that much of the graffiti was done in SoHo. SoHo (a Manhattan neighborhood south of Houston Street and north of Canal) was an old industrial area whose factories had been gradually converted into large live-in studios for artists in the late 1960s and 1970s. Experimental galleries followed the artists, moving into the ground floor showrooms of the industrial lofts upstairs. From the mid-1970s until the late 1990s the most important galleries showing and selling contemporary art were based in SoHo, which had become the center of the contemporary art world. The rise of SoHo as an art center was simultaneous with the rise of minimalism in modern art. Basquiat used the SAMO graffiti to critically comment on the gallery scene in SoHo, "ART KRITEEKS," and college art students:[15]

SAMO© . . . 4 THE SO CALLED AVANT GARDE
SAMO© . . . AS AN END TO THIS CRAP . . .
SOHO TOO! . . . THINK

SAMO© AS AN ALTERNATIVE 2 PLAYING ART WITH
THE 'RADICAL CHIC' SECT ON DADDY'$ FUNDS . . .[16]

Basquiat mocked the "bourgeois values" just as he had done earlier in his high school comic drawings. These were the same values he associated with his strict accountant father. At times they looked critically at consumer society as a whole:

MICROWAVE & VIDEO X-SISTANCE
"BIG-MAC" CERTIFICATE"
FOR X-MASS . . .
SAMO©[17]

SAMO© AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO JOE NORMAL
BOOSH-WAH-ZEE FANTISIES[18]

For Basquiat and Diaz, "SAMO© as an alternative . . ." to something or other was one of their favorite phrases, such as:

SAMO© AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO GOD,
STARTREK, AND RED DYE NO. 2[19]

Of course they were being ironic and knew it was not an alternative to anything. The graffiti was just "a tool for mocking bogusness," said Jean-Michel. Al added, "It makes people think, 'hey, maybe there's another way.'"[20] While some of the phrases might seem political, none of them were simple propaganda slogans. Some were outright surrealist, or looked like fragments of poetry.

(SAMO©) A PIN DROPS
LIKE A PUNGENT ODOR . . .

They purposely were not making a clear statement, but were designed to make people stop and think. Basquiat and Diaz boasted that they could do 30 tags some days.[21] The graffiti appearing on walls all over downtown was getting recognized because of the style of the handwriting and strange phrases, but only a few knew who did them. Asked if he did political graffiti, Basquiat said, "I don't know, it's pretty primal, whatever

I feel at the moment, sometimes it's political."[22] Some of the phrases were site-specific, especially the many about the avant-garde art scene in SoHo, but also those criticizing religion outside churches, and one outside the punk boutique Trash and Vaudeville on St. Mark's Place:

SAMO© AS AN END TO VINYL PUNKERY . . .[23]

Rather than any particular phrase, it was the sheer number of them that began to raise people's interest. Art critic Jeffrey Deitch called it "disjointed street poetry" and remembered that "back in the late seventies, you couldn't go anywhere interesting in Lower Manhattan without noticing that someone named SAMO had been there first."[24] Some of the later SAMO graffiti referred to the fact that it was everywhere, such as a multiple-choice work the size of a mural:

WHICH IS OMNIPRESENT?
A. LEE HARVEY OSWALD
B. COCA-COLA
C. MICKY MOUSE
D. SAMO© . . .[25]

or,

SAMO© . . . AS THE RESULT OF OVEREXPOSURE . . .[26]

In 1978, the *SoHo Weekly News* published a few photographs of the SAMO sayings that had been sprayed around SoHo, and made a plea for the anonymous artists to come forward for an interview, but neither Jean-Michel nor Al was ready to do so. The small piece only increased the talk around downtown about SAMO.

Later, when Basquiat was painting on canvas and done with graffiti he would look back on this as just "teenage stuff. We'd just drink Ballantine Ale all the time and write stuff and throw bottles . . . just teenage stuff."[27] But when this adolescent rebellion against the values Jean-Michel associated with his father was generalized to society as a whole (and the art world in particular), the work began to be noticed. Although done in SoHo, he said "SAMO wasn't supposed to be art,

really."[28] "SAMO was sophomoric. Same old shit," he explained later. "It was supposed to be a logo, like Pepsi."[29] But if it had a value to the duo at the time, it was more of a social statement than an artistic one.

"We became self-appointed critics, telling everyone what their problems were," laughed Diaz.[30] But Diaz retained his faith in the initial ideals behind SAMO. Using the tag "Bomb I," he had been a young and early member of the 1970s New York graffiti scene. "Oh, man, graffiti? Forget it," he said when those days were brought up, "I must have gone through a hundred different markers before I was 16. Then after that I hung it up."[31] But he returned to tagging with Jean-Michel because he recognized that SAMO was not typical graffiti. "The stuff you see on the subways now is inane. Scribbled." He explained, "SAMO was like a refresher course because there's some kind of statement being made. It's not just ego graffiti."[32]

1970s GRAFFITI

The late 1970s were the exciting heyday of New York City subway graffiti. Graffiti, the unofficial writing on other people's walls and other objects, goes back further than anyone knows. There are examples of ancient Roman graffiti scratched into walls that are now treasured in museums. Graffiti on walls has also been a traditional form of political expression. But a new style of graffiti, which became linked to hip-hop culture, arose in Philadelphia and especially New York around this time. In the late 1960s and early 70s gang members would often mark their territory with "tags" on the walls. The modern graffiti movement is often dated from 1971 when 17-year-old Taki began putting up his personal tag "Taki 123" (he lived on 123rd Street in uptown Manhattan) in black magic marker outside his own neighborhood. Since he worked as a messenger he was able to get his tag all around the city. At first only other people who wrote graffiti noticed. Then a *New York Times* article was written about Taki 123, which made him, and the phenomenon of tagging, famous.[33] Soon hundreds of young people began putting their name up around their neighborhoods and in the subways. The new availability of acrylic spray paint and permanent markers in the 1970s added to the graffiti explosion. As there were more and more tags going up, graffiti writers had to develop more sophisticated logos to be noticed, and

some started using colors and bolder shapes. Soon tags were going up in multicolored spray paint, and writers started to use bubble letters, block letters, painted shadows for the letters, backgrounds, and 3-D effects.

Super Kool 223 is thought to have created the first masterpiece in 1972, a large area of graffiti on the side of a subway car with a solid background behind the graphic lettering. Soon after that, a whole subway car was painted by Flint 707 in 1973, using 3-D lettering. As a subway car is 20 feet long and 12 feet high this was a major enterprise, using a whole "crew," or team of graffiti writers.

Writers would recognize each others' tags and styles, even if they did not know the person behind the tag. When writers were good enough and prolific enough to be seen all over, they could be called a "King" and add an image of a crown to their work. The occasional crown was one of the few motifs of traditional graffiti that Jean-Michel was to borrow for his own work.

Despite the early attempts of the Metropolitan Transit Authority to keep the writers away and clean the trains, the subways grew more and more colorful outside. Trains made of whole car masterpieces would drive by. The Golden Age of subway graffiti may have lasted from 1978 until 1982 when the anti-graffiti strategies really began to take effect. This exterior painting was still mostly tags, evolved from the simple marker tags that covered the inside of the subway cars, but they were huge and colorful and mixed with occasional social messages like Lee's piece "Stop the Bomb" in 1972.[34]

In February 1979, Fred Braithwaite, featured in the "Scenes" column of the *Village Voice* paper, stated: "I think it's time everyone realized graffiti is the purest form of New York art. What else has evolved from the streets?"[35]

Later to become a friend of Basquiat's, Braithwaite started as a teen in Brooklyn "wall-writing group" the Furious Five with Lee and others. He adopted his tag Fab 5 Freddy for the work he did on the number 5 subway line.

Fab 5 Freddy was also involved in the early rap scene. Graffiti began to be seen alongside break dancing, rap singing, and DJ scratching emerging out of the Bronx, in what was soon to be called "hip-hop" culture. The Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" was released in 1979, helping hip-hop explode into the urban consciousness in the early 1980s.

While many were fascinated by the graffiti writers, or just appreciated the added color, others saw it as a defacement of public property that made riders feel unsafe. New York City had established an anti-graffiti task force and an undercover graffiti police unit. Millions were spent on experimental solvents and train-yard security improvements. For years writers would put up graffiti faster than the city could take it down. In 1981 Mayor Ed Koch would announce a new resistance to graffiti with increased use of barbed wire, guard dogs, and advanced (and toxic) solvent cleaners. These measures, and a new policy of taking any train that had been hit by graffiti teams out of service so no one could see their work, combined to finally rid the trains of their illegal decoration. The 1982 train piece by "Seen" reflected the mood, with painted gravestones and the phrase "Graffiti died."[36] Graffiti did not die. Many new writers moved onto walls and other stationary spots. But they no longer had the outside of trains to serve as large mobile galleries carrying their work around the city.

In 1978 a Bronx storefront art space called Fashion Moda was formed; it would soon play a part in temporarily bringing subway-style graffiti, and with it Jean-Michel Basquiat, into contact with the art world.

Jean-Michel was clear that "my graffiti is separate from that graffiti."[37] While still in high school he did admit to writing some SAMO phrases inside the D train going between Manhattan and Brooklyn ("I covered it, ads and everything"), before he and Diaz graduated to walls.[38] His SAMO writing style was straightforward and focused on the words, not the letters. He had left bubble letters behind in high school comics and had no interest or talent for wild-style calligraphy. He still had respect for the subway taggers, and they were beginning to notice his graffiti, impressive for how it spread and its originality even if not for its skill in lettering. Despite the vast differences in style, the attention brought to graffiti by the press and the public at the time also helped the SAMO writings gain notice.

ART WORDS

SAMO, which started out as a high school prank, emerged at the right place at the right time in more ways than one. Basquiat's graffiti

attracted attention just as a minority of artists influenced by conceptual art were also experimenting with words and language.

Conceptual art was a movement that saw itself as beyond minimalism in that it got rid of the work of art entirely. An idea or a set of instructions in the form of written words replaced the visual object. In fact, when the SAMO graffiti first went up in SoHo, some mistakenly assumed it was the work of an older disillusioned (and white) conceptual artist, expressing his cynicism at a gallery system and economy that had failed to support his art.

In addition to the conceptualists a few new artists were also experimenting with words on the street. Jenny Holzer had been an abstract painter in art school. After moving to Manhattan in 1977, she began to produce her text-based "truisms." These sheets of photocopied paper were stuck on lampposts and walls in downtown Manhattan with short, often contradictory, statements. Had some of her statements (such as "ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SUPPRISE" or "MONEY CREATES TASTE") been spray-painted with a copyright signature, they could have been mistaken for the SAMO sayings that appeared in Manhattan in the same year.

Also in the late 1970s John Fekner, a more explicitly political artist, began his "word signs." Large painted words like "Urban Decay" and "*Falsas Promesas*" (Broken Promises) were stenciled on walls in marginal and derelict neighborhoods. His 1980 stencil "DECAY" on the wall of a crumbling building in the South Bronx gained national attention when it appeared in the background of a press photo of Ronald Reagan, who had gone for a quick photo opportunity in this blighted neighborhood during the presidential campaign. Holzer and Feckner were marginal in the art world, but by 1982 both were showing in New York galleries. So was Barbara Kruger, who was showing graphic black, white, and red photos with strips of text using such phrases as "Your comfort is my silence" (1981) and "You invest in the divinity of the masterpiece" (1982).

A few people aware of what was going on in the street may have connected these new strange phrase makers. But of course a young, anonymous graffiti writer like Jean-Michel would not have been considered alongside these artists. Before his own use of words would be looked at seriously in the art world he had to use all his downtown connections

to get noticed. He did not try to hook up with others experimenting with words at the edge of the art world. He set his sights at the top, aiming straight at Andy Warhol.

Warhol had bought one of his postcards, and Jean-Michel thought he might get more interested. "I even went to *Interview* magazine and bugged Andy Warhol," he remembered later.[39] A female friend of his remembers his drive a little differently. "Everyday he'd sit on Warhol's door hoping Andy would make him a star," she said. "I never saw such determination."[40]

But at this point Warhol would not let this street kid into the building (called the Factory) where he produced *Interview* magazine and made his art. Later, Warhol told a story of Jean-Michel coming to the Factory to borrow money to buy materials for more T-shirts. Warhol gave him $25 just to get rid of him.[41] "He's the kid who used the name 'Samo' when he used to sit on the sidewalk in Greenwich Village and paint T-Shirts, and I'd give him $10 here and there and send him up to Serendipity to try to sell the T-shirts there." Warhol wrote in his diary, "He was just one of those kids who drove me crazy."[42]

NOTES

1. Jean-Michel Basquiat, "Art from Subways to Soho," interview with Henry Geldzahler, *Interview* 13 (January, 1983): p. 46. Reprinted in Luca Marenzi, *Basquiat* (Milan: Charta, 1999), pp. lvii–lix.

2. Annette I. Minkalis, "The Memorable Jean-Michel," in Richard D. Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat in Word Only* (New York: Cheim & Reid, 2005), unpaginated.

3. Steve Hager, *Art after Midnight: The East Village Scene* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 43.

4. Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 108.

5. Steve Hager, *Adventures in the Counterculture: From Hip Hop to High Times* (New York: High Times Books, 2002), p. 174.

6. Gregory Beyer, "$12,000 Postcards by Some Guy Named Basquiat," *New York Times*, September 30, 2007. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/30/nyregion/thecity/30basq.html.

7. All-Seeing Eye, Jr. [Luc Sante], "Basquiat," December 30, 2007. http://ekotodi.blogspot.com/2007/12/basquiat.html.

8. Gregory Beyer, "$12,000 Postcards by Some Guy Named Basquiat," *New York Times*, September 30, 2007. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/30/nyregion/thecity/30basq.html.

9. Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* p. 118.

10. Philip Faflick, "The SAMO Graffiti . . .?" *Village Voice*, December 11, 1978, p. 41.

11. Photograph by Henry Flynt, *The SAMO© Graffiti*. http://www.henryflynt.org/overviews/samo.htm.

12. Photograph by Peter Moore, 1978–79, seen in the exhibition Street Art/Street Life, Bronx Museum of the Arts, 2009.

13. Flynt, *The SAMO© Graffiti*.

14. Done in white spray paint. Photograph by Stephanie Chernikowski, in Deitch Projects, Glenn O'Brien, Diego Cortez, et al., *Jean-Michel Basquiat 1981: The Studio of the Street* (New York: Deitch Projects; Milan: Charta, 2007), p. 133.

15. Part of SAMO graffiti, in photograph by Martha Cooper, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, pp. 134–35.

16. Last three phrases all seen in photographs by Henry Flynt, *The SAMO© Graffiti*.

17. Photograph by Martha Cooper, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, pp. 126–27.

18. Faflick, "The SAMO Graffiti," p. 41.

19. Faflick, "The SAMO Graffiti," p. 41.

20. Faflick, "The SAMO Graffiti," p. 41.

21. Faflick, "The SAMO Graffiti," p. 41.

22. Glenn O'Brien's *TV Party*, Manhattan Cable Television, 1979. See http://www.basquiatbiography.com/basquiat-chronology.

23. Flynt, *The SAMO© Graffiti*.

24. Jeffrey Deitch, "Jean-Michel Basquiat at Annina Nosei," *Flash Art* 16, no. 107, (May 1982), p. 49.

25. Done in black marker on a metal door. Photograph by Henry Flynt, *The SAMO© Graffiti*. http://www.henryflynt.org/overviews/artwork_images/samo/33.jpg. This photo shows an addition by another graffiti writer who knew SAMO's identity.

26. Spray-painted graffiti on wall of outdoor parking lot. Photograph by Henry Flynt, *The SAMO© Graffiti*.

27. Paul Tschinkel (producer), *Jean-Michel Basquiat: An Interview* (ART/New York No. 30A, 1998), videocassette. Distributed by Inner Tube Films.

28. Basquiat, "Art from Subways to Soho," p. 46.

29. Anthony Haden-Guest, *True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), p. 128.

30. Hager, *Art after Midnight*, p. 45.

31. Faflick, "The SAMO Graffiti," p. 41.

32. Faflick, "The SAMO Graffiti," p. 41.

33. "Taki 183 spawns pen pals," *New York Times*, July 21, 1971. http://www.ni9e.com/blog_images/taki_183.pdf.

34. "Lee" was Lee Quinones. Photo of the "Stop the Bomb" car in Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper, *Subway Art* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1995), p. 94. Other social comments included digs at the police for not going after "real crime," and Spin's 1982 "Dump Koch" whole-car piece reacting to the New York mayor's campaign against graffiti, Chalfant and Cooper, p. 94. Like the style, the social messages in subway graffiti were more obvious than the poetic phrases used by Basquiat.

35. Hager, *Art after Midnight*, p. 63.

36. See Sean's "R.I.P. Graffiti" piece in Chalfant and Cooper, *Subway Art*, p. 100.

37. Tschinkel, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*.

38. Faflick, "The SAMO Graffiti," p. 41.

39. Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?*, p. 118.

40. Michael Musto, *Downtown* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), p. 103.

41. Warhol told the story to Jeffrey Deitch, who told it in the eulogy at Jean-Michel's funeral. Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Jean Michel Basquiat: Mugrabi Collection* (Künzelsau, Germany: Swiridoff Verlag/Museum Würth, 2001), p. 35.

42. Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, ed., *The Andy Warhol Diaries* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), p. 462.

Chapter 3

GETTING KNOWN

Eventually Jean-Michel would connect with pop artist Andy Warhol, but not by sitting on his doorstep. His road to fame would still have to pass through graffiti and New York's music and nightclub scenes.

THE MUDD CLUB

The Mudd Club, newly opened in October 1978, would give Jean-Michel a starting point. Owner Steve Mass had turned an old loft building not far from SoHo into an alternative, low-tech "cabaret." The tone of the Mudd Club was set from the start by his two partners: punk figure Anya Philips, and independent art curator Diego Cortez, equally fascinated by punk culture, who had recently become disillusioned with the conventional art world.

It was a different kind of club, the opposite of the 1970s glitzy Studio 54. And unlike CBGB's and the other punk clubs, it was not just a music venue. People went there to mix with the other patrons, to be part of the scene and to be seen. It immediately became *the* place to hang out for an alternative list of figures in experimental music, bohemian fashion, and the arts. And it acted as a magnet for the downtown club

kids looking for the coolest new spot. Basquiat found a home there from the start. "I went there every night for two years. At that time I had no apartment, so I just used to go there to see what my prospects were."[1]

When he had nowhere to stay he would hang out all night upstairs in the "lounge" area, with its old sofas. If friends did not know where to find him, they could get in touch with him there; he said he used the club "like an answering service."[2]

As the club became more chic, those deemed not cool enough were left waiting outside. But Jean-Michel was always invited right in for free; he had the look they wanted to project.

On the tiny stage live acts ranged from punk to performance art, and on the cramped dance floor the DJs "might swing from funk to punk to junk."[3] The staff soon recognized Jean-Michel with his blond Mohawk, long trench coat or hand-painted T-shirt, and "bugged-out" robotic dance.[4] Other regulars agreed "he was a great dancer."[5]A friend remembers, "At that time all the downtown clubs were dominated by white kids and he was the only black among them, but he fit in naturally."[6]

Diego Cortez met Jean-Michel there "around 1979 when he had his Mohawk. That attracted me to him immediately—the fact he was black and had a Mohawk. I would see him in SoHo all the time. He was always asking me for money."[7] At the club Jean-Michel started asking Cortez if he could crash at his house, but Cortez always said no, as "Jean-Michel really seemed like if he moved in, he might live there for a long time."[8]

Cortez was one of the people who had contacts in both music and art at the Mudd Club and would later give Jean-Michel a key introduction to the art world. For now Jean-Michel was going around to all the clubs where interesting music was being played and trying to sell his postcards.

Around this time lots of people were looking to talk to "SAMO" about his graffiti. A reporter for the *Village Voice*, Philip Faflick, finally tracked down Jean-Michel and Al Diaz through friends in late 1978.

Although neither artist had responded to the earlier *SoHo Weekly News* article, they accepted the *Voice's* offer of $100 for an exclusive interview. "Later I heard the *SoHo Weekly News* was really pissed about it," said Al, "but we needed the money."[9] They took Faflick on a tour of their work. As they walked, they complained about "how people are being shafted in big ways" and about the "uptight middle-class

pseudos" acting like they had "price tags stapled to their heads."[10] But Faflick thought he saw a contradiction. Jean-Michel seemed unsure of whether it was a sellout to claim credit for street art. Friends had criticized him for going public. And both teenagers expressed interest in eventually having an art-related job, although they criticized that world in their graffiti. In fact, Faflick had uncovered a conflict between Al and Jean-Michel's ideas on what to do with SAMO. Faflick ended his article on this point, quoting one of the latest graffiti: "LIFE IS CONFUSING AT THIS POINT— . . . SAMO©."

Glenn O'Brien, who wrote on music for *Interview*, was researching another article on graffiti and also wanted to talk to Jean-Michel. O'Brien liked that the SAMO graffiti "wasn't just a tag. It had content," and enjoyed the interview with the rebellious, funny Jean-Michel. O'Brien also ran a low-budget late-night weekly talk show on Manhattan cable called *TV Party*, where he mostly invited his musical acquaintances on to perform. He thought Jean-Michel would be great on his TV show. "So he came on TV Party and I interviewed him for the first time on April 24, 1979. And then he just never left. He came back every week."[11]

When he was not on the air he often helped behind the scenes, running a camera, painting backdrops, or working in the control booth. Here he found another way to put out the strange phrases seen in his SAMO graffiti, his sweatshirts, and increasingly his drawings: "he really loved running the character generator in the control room. On the shows that have writing running across the screen, that's him improvising poetry on top of the live action."[12] This late-night public access cable show could not make him famous. But it got him even more noticed in the downtown subculture where he lived.

As in Jean-Michel's SAMO partnership, he started to involve others in his collages and postcards. He would talk about attacking the gallery system to anyone who was interested and saw his photocopied postcards as part of an alternative people's art. He linked up with a performer called John Sex who was studying printmaking at the School of Visual Arts and they did some work together. He also hooked up with Jennifer Stein, a young woman who helped in creating cards, and they stood outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art selling their things. She remembers how they used to yell aggressively at the passersby to support living art.

CANAL ZONE

Stein lived in a large building on Canal Street, and she told Jean-Michel about a special party being planned there. The host was Sam Peskett, an English artist who had bought a large loft and called it Canal Zone. In 1979 there was quite a buzz about graffiti artists, and Peskett was interested in cashing in by buying and selling graffiti works. To generate publicity Peskett planned to film a hip-hop party and live graffiti-painting session at the Canal Zone. He hired ex-musician Michael Holman to act as MC, and they got in touch with graffiti writers Lee and Fab 5 Freddy, who was on a mission to bring "the whole music, hip-hop, art, break dancing and urban cultural thing to the downtown table."[13] They painted huge murals on plastic tarps as background for the event.

Jean-Michel arrived wearing one of his hand-painted T-shirts and insisted on participating. He taped a 15-foot-long piece of photo paper to the wall and sprayed a huge multiple choice graffiti:

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING IS OMNIPRZNT?
Lee Harvey Oswald
Coca Cola Logo
General Melonry
SAMO© . . .

It immediately became clear that he was the elusive SAMO. The buzz started to go around the party that SAMO was there, and someone asked Fab 5 Freddy how he felt about it, expecting some kind of rivalry. But Fab 5 felt they were all part of the same graffiti brotherhood. In fact, they had been fans of each other's work, and they hit it off. Michael Holman was shooting the event on video and he briefly interviewed Jean-Michel and showed his graffiti. After the video, Holman and Basquiat connected, and according to Holman, Jean-Michel suggested out of the blue, "Let's start a band." Holman readily agreed.[14]

After the party Lee and Fab 5 got the use of the loft space to create more murals while Peskett traveled to Italy to try to sell their work. They allowed Jean-Michel in, too, and he worked on his collages for the baseball cards and postcards, and sometimes slept there. For a while the three of them worked in the loft space creating large graffiti-style backdrops

for Unique Clothing Warehouse. Lee would start with the impressive spray-painted imagery from his graffiti murals, and Jean-Michel would add to the visual interest with his phrases and strange markings on top.

While other graffiti writers were more interested in comic-style art, Fab 5 and Jean-Michel would visit modern-art museums together. They looked up to Warhol, but also appreciated Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, painters who influenced Pop Art by reintroducing everyday objects and images into abstract painting. A year later Fab 5 Freddy would paint an entire subway car with Campbell's soup cans, in a tribute to Warhol's famous paintings.

Jean-Michel was also hanging out with Michael Holman, looking to put their band together. By May, Basquiat, with Holman on drums, joined up with bass player Wayne Clifford (who called himself Wayne Wayne) and Basquiat's high school friend Danny Rosen on trumpet. The band rehearsed at most two times a week, but the members were a tightly knit group of friends who hung out together. They went out to the clubs at night where they became known as the "baby crowd" because of their young age. "They were gorgeous, extremely stylish, and danced fantastically."[15]

GRAY

At first they called their band Channel 9, then Test Pattern, and finally settled on Gray, from the textbook *Gray's Anatomy* Jean-Michel had been given in the hospital as a kid. Other friends joined the band at times, Nick Taylor playing guitar and Shannon Dawson (another high school friend) or Vincent Gallo (later an actor and filmmaker) on synthesizer. Holman's first rule about being a member of Gray was "you couldn't be a musician."[16]

"It was a noise band," said Jean-Michel. "I played a guitar with a file, and a synthesizer. I was inspired by [experimental composer] John Cage at the time—music that isn't really music. We were trying to be incomplete, abrasive, oddly beautiful."[17] That could describe a lot of his work. Although he was the youngest, Jean-Michel's ideas were the driving force of the band. He wrote the collage poetry when their songs had lyrics and chanted them on stage. Holman also described Basquiat's "badly played but beautifully abstract clarinet."[18]

With both Rosen's trumpet and Basquiat's clarinet on stage, they had the look of a jazz combo but not the sound. The band had the spirit of improvisation from jazz and the attitude of punk, mixed with industrial noise that sounded like a factory had come alive to play by itself.

In line with his approach to art, Jean-Michel wanted to create more challenging music that made one think. Sometimes on stage he would lie on his back and drag a metal file across the loosened metal strings of the guitar to create a harsh, raw sound. When the band thought the drumming was too conventional, Holman made noises by dropping metal ball bearings on the drum or pulling masking tape off the drum head, with a microphone set up close.

Their experimental music found a following in the avant-garde audience of a few downtown clubs. A fan remembered that they played often, "usually at the most obscure and unattended clubs in town. There always seemed to be about fifteen people in the crowd."[19]

Jean-Michel also did all the posters for the band. One of the early public performances was in December 1979 at A's, a loft on Broome Street sometimes used as an art and music performance space. Arleen Schloss, the owner, also let Jean-Michel stay there at times and use it as a studio for his "MAN MADE" clothing. A hand-drawn poster for that gig is one of the few of Jean-Michel's works bigger than a postcard to survive from before 1980.[20] It is done in his recognizable style, with strange arrows and notations added underneath. Some of the words are crossed out, and there is a dotted line of ink splashed through the middle of the page. A photocopied microcassette finishes off the look, suggesting some kind of sound, but not conventional music.

Gray played for slightly larger audiences when they opened for better-known No Wave band DNA, at punk club CBGB's and the experimental Squat Theater in 1980.[21]

Arto Lindsay, who invented a jarring, scratchy guitar sound playing for DNA and the Lounge Lizards, put Gray in context: "There was definitely a kind of a raised-earth, scorched-earth feeling to what was going on then. There was a sense on people's part . . . that the way to achieve success was to go as far as you could, think beyond the next person, do something really extreme." Popular music of the 1970s was boring and miserable in the eyes of this crowd, so they created bands that wanted to start over from scratch, and "drew from the avant-garde" in a variety of arts.[22]

Glenn O'Brien was used to seeing new bands, good and bad, for his job writing the music column for *Interview*. In his view, Gray was never at a professional level, but each member had a good ear. To Basquiat, knowing what kind of art was interesting and new was what mattered, not technique. O'Brien explained that for Jean-Michel the "Picasso-Parker-Miles transition" was all connected and he adopted the idea.[23] In other words, Jean-Michel saw that the way Picasso changed painting with Cubism was similar to how the innovative African American musicians Charlie Parker and Miles Davis transformed jazz. He was sure an innovative approach could again be applied to both modern painting and modern music.

Being on stage also appealed to Jean-Michel's wish to be famous, but like his selling on the street it did not bring in any real money. He was surviving from odd jobs and occasionally deejaying in clubs. He often stayed with band members, including Wayne Clifford and his roommate. Being in a band also introduced him to other people in the scene. In 1979 he often stayed with John Lurie, a talented saxophonist with the Lounge Lizards. They painted together and drew on shopping bags, because they could not afford to buy art supplies. They also crashed gallery openings for the free food and wine.

ALEXIS ADLER

Around this time Basquiat started dating college student Alexis Adler, a friend of John Lurie's. Alexis frequented the clubs at night and was intrigued by Basquiat. Neither had a place of their own, but they would sometimes stay with friends of Alexis's.

For a while they stayed at the apartment of a mutual friend, Felice Ratster, on the Lower East Side. Basquiat was often working on his postcards or painting clothing on the floor of the apartment, and he also drew incessantly, although he could never afford proper materials. He brought in things from the street. "Basquiat painted on anything he could get his hands on: refrigerators, laboratory coats, cardboard boxes, and doors," said Mary Ann Monforton, another friend with whom Jean-Michel stayed occasionally.[24] Some of the things they painted on were found in the apartment. Eventually Ratster threw Jean-Michel out for drawing all over her things.

Finally Alexis got her own small apartment in the East Village, between Avenues A and B, then called Alphabet City. The neighborhood, long since gentrified, was known for its poverty and heroin dealers. Basquiat moved in with her and stayed for the last few months of 1979. This was his first permanent address away from his parents. It was quite a relief for him not to be constantly on the lookout for a place to stay. He had a little room in the back of the railroad apartment filled with papers where he put his little drawings, strange symbols, and scraps of his "poetry." Some of these words and images found their way onto his "MAN MADE" clothing. Alexis was interested in art, and studied art history, but it was her chemistry textbooks that most seemed to interest Jean-Michel. Without understanding the formulas he copied out many of the technical symbols straight into his work.

Sometimes he would go out to the clubs wearing his own painted clothing with Alexis or the whole "baby crowd," or they would come see him when he was deejaying. But often he was out on his own, selling his works on the street, or doing his graffiti, which he increasingly did without Diaz. His writings appeared downtown and up at the 27th Street building of the School of Visual Arts.

Jean-Michel's dancing in the clubs, his crashing art openings and parties, his graffiti, and his general tendency to do what he wanted to do helped make him a well-known person on the scene. He made many friends downtown, but his actions could also rub people the wrong way. Just like the cream pie in the face of his principal, sometimes his fun pranks went a little too far.

One night in 1979 Jean-Michel hooked up with some people who were going to a party at the modern dancer Molissa Fenley's loft after a performance she had choreographed. She remembers:

> Well SAMO came, and when I wasn't looking, he had made graffiti on my wall and had signed it. I was furious! I threw him out. I threw him down the stairs and I threw Coke bottles after him. First of all, it wasn't my loft, and I screamed at him, "How dare you defile this place?" He said, "I'm just having a good time. It was just a joke." I said, "Well, take your jokes elsewhere!" He was just a weird guy. People would say, "Oh, no! There's SAMO!" If you weren't careful, he'd come up to you and graffiti your head or

something. You had to really be on the lookout for Jean-Michel Basquiat![25]

AT THE SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS

Jean-Michel also made a point of hanging around the School of Visual Arts (SVA) on 23rd Street. He and Al Diaz would leave SAMO graffiti ("SAMO© AS AN END TO PLAYING ART," etc.) around the building, and Jean-Michel would often try to sneak inside. He would either leave SAMO graffiti in the building or he would hang out in the cafeteria with the art students, despite the disparaging remarks he made about them in his tagging. A few of the students he met there were to make a name for themselves later. The first two he befriended were John Sex and Kenny Scharf. Sex (born John McLaughlin) was moving from visual arts to performance. He used the SVA print studio for his artwork as well as posters and announcements for downtown bands and his own performances. Sex was out as a gay man and known as a flamboyant performer. He shared certain interests and attitudes with Jean-Michel. "We weren't punks, but we had a very punk attitude. We were into outrage. We used to make postcards together," Sex reminisced.[26] Jean-Michel also remembered, "I did some postcards with John Sex. He has a really great mind. Still does."[27]

Basquiat also met Kenny Scharf at the SVA cafeteria. Scharf was impressed when "Jean-Michel showed me a color Xerox of John and Jackie Kennedy with their faces shattered." In 1979 Scharf and Jean-Michel would sometimes do wall graffiti at night. "I would do Jetson and Flintstone heads and have them speaking in some foreign tongue,"[28] said Scharf, while Jean-Michel would "write his SAMO thing."[29] Jean-Michel would often stay over on Scharf's sofa.

KEITH HARING

The third SVA student to become a member of this team was Keith Haring. Haring became famous worldwide for his own artwork of simple figures originating as subway graffiti. But he had not even started on this kind of work when he first met Basquiat. Haring arrived in New York from Pennsylvania in 1978 as a scholarship student. He had always been interested in abstract drawing and in artists like the Abstract

Expressionist Mark Tobey, whose painting looks most like calligraphy. "Almost immediately upon my arrival in New York in 1978, I had begun to be interested, intrigued, and fascinated by the graffiti I was seeing in the streets and in the subways."[30] He appreciated the abstract calligraphy found in wild-style tags and admired the quality of line. As he continued at SVA and began learning about art theory and conceptual art he started moving away from his abstract art. He, John Sex, and several other SVA students also started hanging out at Club 57, a new informal space in the basement of a church at 57 St. Mark's Place in the East Village. He would put on absurd little avant-garde performances there, for instance, reading aloud with his head inside a cardboard TV. Unlike that of John Sex, Haring's talent was in drawing, not performance. But he was struggling with how to make his art more accessible to the masses.

After being in New York for over a year Haring started to notice a new kind of graffiti: signed by SAMO. He began to follow the work, which was all over his downtown neighborhood and around the SVA. It was the first time he saw what he called "literary graffiti, one that wasn't done just for the sake of writing a name or for making a formal mark. These were little poems, little statements—they were non sequiturs—and they were conceptual statements—and they were on the street. For me, it was condensed poetry which would stop you in your tracks and make you think."[31] He asked around, and heard that the person who did the SAMO work was a high school student named Basquiat.

At SVA Haring developed an interest in the "cut-up" technique of experimental writer William Burroughs, who took scissors to his typewritten pages, and rewrote the mixed-up text. For Haring the philosophy behind this "somehow tied together all sorts of things that I was seeing—the way SAMO was using language on the streets, the way Jenny Holzer was using language—and the whole performance aspect of language."[32] At the time this applied more to the poems he read at Club 57, but it was to find its way to his art.

One day, just as Haring was going into the SVA building and getting out his student ID, a young African American kid came up to him and asked if he could let him into the school, past the security guard. Keith agreed and then went on to class. When he came out an hour later he saw "fresh SAMO poems and tags. . . . I put two and two together and

realized that the person I had walked through was Basquiat."[33] The two became friends.

Later, in 1980, Haring produced a series of fake headlines made by cutting up and rearranging the huge bold headlines from the *New York Post* tabloid, often adding a picture. He would photocopy them by the hundreds and paste them on lampposts and newsstands at night. It was both puzzling and funny to come across what looked like front pages reading "Reagan's Death Cops Hunt Pope," "Pope Killed for Freed Hostage," or "Reagan Killed by Hero Cop." Although they were more humorous and more sharply targeted, these street works were definitely influenced by the earlier SAMO graffiti.

In May of 1979, Kenny Scharf had his first solo exhibition, not in a gallery but in the trendy New York store Fiorucci. It featured his retro/futuristic cartoony paintings of "Estelle, woman of the future."

Although Jean-Michel had quit Unique, fed up with low pay working for someone else, he was still interested in selling his painted shirts to a boutique. He had an appointment with Maripol, Fiorucci's art director, about getting a concession painting shirts in a glass booth at the store. He also planned to make a painting to show her, and perhaps get a show like Scharf's. But earlier that day Jean-Michel had taken psychedelic mushrooms with Julie Wilson, an ex-girlfriend from high school, and he was in a strange mood. John Sex, who was with him, suggested that, since Jean-Michel had paid $11.95 for art supplies, he should paint "$11.95" on the canvas. "So he painted that and then he wrote some other stuff. We were standing on the street corner and I said, 'you know what you should do now? You should throw it under that truck.' He flung it into the street like a Frisbee. I fell on the ground laughing."[34] After letting cars run over it on St. Mark's Place he picked the still wet canvas off the street, now with tire marks across it. When Jean-Michel and Wilson left for the afternoon appointment uptown, "we got on the train at rush hour with this painting that had this thick wet glop on it. It was wall to wall people and Jean-Michel was holding it up in the air, and it was getting on everyone's clothes."[35] They got off at 59th Street and went into Fiorucci's. As Jean-Michel waited for his appointment, still high, he leaned the painting against the wall, getting paint on the rug. The two sat there watching all the people milling by in their expensive outfits. Finally, a woman in a fur coat brushed against

the wet painting, taking half the paint away with her. Marisol, horrified, asked the still dazed Jean-Michel to leave. Once outside he threw the painting in the trash and said, "I don't need them anyway."[36]

SAMO IS DEAD

With his band mates downtown, and his new artistic friends at SVA, Jean-Michel found he had less and less time for Al Diaz. Sometime after the *Village Voice* article, the duo had a falling out over their approach to the SAMO work and the art world. Diaz was still committed to the SAMO concept as a collective one and had no interest in the art world. He wanted to remain anonymous while Jean-Michel was not above soaking up the attention being SAMO gave him.

Although Jean-Michel admitted that he worked in the streets "because I wanted to make a name for myself" he meant a street name, like other taggers. It "wasn't supposed to be art,"[37] he said, and there was "no ambition" in it.[38] In a later interview he still maintained that "I was more interested in attacking the gallery circuit at that time, I didn't think about making paintings, I just thought about making fun of the ones that were in there."[39]

Despite his claim that there was no ambition, it is striking to see how he targeted the places he wrote: around the SoHo galleries where he was later to show and even up at the SVA. Some thought this was "sort of advertising for himself."[40] Others, like Fab 5 Freddy, saw the work as a pointed political intervention: "Jean would write this shit on key walls in the SoHo area. That was the audience he was targeting. He put the whole downtown scene under his attack."[41]

"SAMO© . . . 4 THE SO?CALLED AVANT?GARDE" was a much repeated phrase of Jean-Michel's. There were others, too, criticizing SoHo, including "SAMO© AS AN END 2 CONFINING ART TERMS . . ." At the same time he seemed to take this criticism seriously, as in "SAMO© . . . ANTI-ART! #XXXX." He also repeated the phrase "SAMO© AS A NEO ART FORM," once in the wet cement of a sidewalk.

Perhaps Glenn O'Brien got the balance right when he said that Basquiat "was deliberately painting in the SoHo area. He was making fun of the art scene, and at the same time he wanted to be recognized as an artist."[42]

In the end SAMO was both a tool to attack "bogusness" in society and a tool, for Jean-Michel, to attract attention. There is nothing more helpful to becoming the next big thing in the art world than attacking the previous art world, as long as one does it in a suitably different and interesting way.

At one point Al Diaz concluded that "Jean-Michel saw SAMO as a vehicle, the graffiti was an advertisement for himself. . . . All of a sudden he just started taking it over."[43] In any case, with his new friends Jean-Michel now felt as if he had moved on. "SAMO I did with a high school friend, I just didn't want to keep the name," he said. "I wrote SAMO IS DEAD all over the place. And I started painting."[44]

He actually had another step to go before becoming a painter, but by late 1979 he had covered downtown (and some of his old graffiti) in the phrase "SAMO© IS DEAD," killing off the partnership forever.

EULOGY

When Keith Haring saw the "SAMO© IS DEAD" graffiti, he talked to Jean-Michel, and friends organized a mock wake for SAMO at Club 57. Haring read a eulogy, while others in the audience wondered where Basquiat would go next. Jean-Michel must have enjoyed the attention that night, but he was also becoming increasingly fed up with the Club 57 atmosphere, which he called "silly" and "pseudo-art bullshit."[45] He resented the fake bohemianism of the art-school students training for art-related jobs when they graduated. Jean-Michel was still without a real home and no clear plans for the future.

In art school Haring moved from what everyone recognized as art to the popular graffiti cartoons, which eventually made him famous. Basquiat would have to go in the other direction, making the difficult move from graffiti to what would be recognized as art.

Haring would not start his famous chalk drawings in the subway until later in 1980. After he met Jean-Michel, he left his abstract drawing style behind to experiment with simple outlined figures, almost signs, of people, dogs, and the occasional flying saucer in strange combinations. He then joined Basquiat and Scharf on graffiti runs, stopping here and there for someone to spray or draw while the other two acted as lookouts. Scharf was doing his futuristic cartoons, Haring

his little creatures, and Jean-Michel testing out a new style. Like Haring, Basquiat had a repertoire of signs. Simple faces (he called them "just little masks") and childlike cars moved from his drawings on paper to the walls of New York.[46] He also experimented with more mysterious phrases, such as "THE ORIGIN OF COTTON©." They no longer had the "SAMO©" tag but still used the copyright symbol and were often given crowns, as if after the death of SAMO he was now a king. Under a crown symbol Basquiat wrote:

TAR
TAR
TAR (COAL)
MCVXLIII[47]

One acquaintance noted that after SAMO, "he was still writing on walls, but as a poet rather than a tagger."[48]

Although Jean-Michel stopped hanging out with Scharf and his crowd, he still remained close friends with Haring for many years as their art evolved together. The three of them would soon move from the streets to the galleries one after the other. But the other two artists' work looked just like what they had painted on walls. Jean-Michel had to come up with a completely different style.

PATRICIA FIELD'S

Jean-Michel was still hand-painting clothing under his "MAN MADE" label, a phrase he also started using as a new tag. Andy Warhol's suggestion that he get Serendipity to pick up his T-shirts had not worked out, and the attempt at Fiorucci had ended in disaster. Patricia Field's, a smaller and more selective Eighth Street boutique, took him on. In November of 1979, Patricia Field even let him use her window to display his work. His painted clothing hung there surrounded by an environment of painted materials found in the street. Clothing boxes, spray-painted foam rubber, a painted window frame, and an old typewriter decorated in collage were all gone over with crowns, poetic words, and the new "MAN MADE" trademark. Miraculously, his aesthetic vision and quality of line held it all together. Haring

came by to see the window and wrote his own little upper-case poem about "LOOKING AT PAINTINGS/HANGING ON A RACK."[49] A woman who had met Jean-Michel in the club scene and thought of him as "a user" had to admit the quality of this work. "He did a Pat Field window that was neat and disciplined. I didn't know he was capable of it. It was beautiful, not slapdash."[50]

INVITATION TO AN EXHIBITION

In early 1980 Kenny Scharf put up an exhibition of his own work at Club 57, called Celebrating the Space Age. At the opening he met an artist, John Ahearn, who was helping organize a large artist-run alternative exhibition in an abandoned building in Times Square. They planned to mix artists outside the mainstream galleries with graffiti painters and even music and performance. Ahearn thought Scharf's work, and the crazy mood of the Club 57, would fit into this idea and invited him to participate in the Times Square Show. Scharf immediately invited Haring and Basquiat to join in. This would be the first chance for Jean-Michel to show his work alongside that of established artists.

NOTES

1. Jean-Michel Basquiat, "Art from Subways to Soho," interview with Henry Geldzahler, *Interview* 13 (January, 1983): p. 46. Reprinted in Luca Marenzi, *Basquiat* (Milan: Charta 1999), pp. lvii–lix.

2. Geldzahler, "Art from Subways to Soho," p. 46.

3. Tim Blanks, "Mudd Quake," *New York Times Magazine* (February 25, 2001). http://partners.nytimes.com/library/magazine/specials/20010225mag-muddquake.html.

4. Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 47.

5. Deitch Projects, Glenn O'Brien, Diego Cortez, et al., *Jean-Michel Basquiat 1981: The Studio of the Street* (New York: Deitch Projects; Milan: Charta, 2007), p. 14.

6. Taka Kawachi, ed., *King for a Decade* (Kyoto: Kirinsha Press, 1997), p. 12.

7. Steve Hager, *Art After Midnight: The East Village Scene* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 98.

8. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 14.

9. Hager, *Art after Midnight*, p. 45.

10. Philip Faflick, "The SAMO Graffiti . . . Boosh-Wah or CIA?" *Village Voice*, December 11, 1978, p. 41.

11. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 14.

12. Glenn O'Brien, "The TV Party Story," undated, *TV Party* Web site. http://www.tvparty.tv/.

13. Fred Braithwaite, "Rapping with Fab 5 Freddy," in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 118.

14. This account of the party and painting in the Canal Zone was pieced together from the following sources:

Fred Braithwaite, in Deitch Projects et al., *Basquiat 1981*, pp. 118–19; Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 51; Michael Holman, in Kawachi, *King for a Decade*, p. 11; Michael Holman, "Michael Holman Speaks Music," in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 104; Sam Peskett, Pioneering Art Movements and Public Awareness: 1978. http://www.stanpeskett.com/archive/html/hip.html; Sam Peskett and Michael Holman, Transcript of the Canal Zone Video shot at the Canal Zone, 533 Canal Street, New York, New York, April 29, 1979. http://www.stanpeskett.com/archive/html/script.html; and Ingrid Sischy, "Jean-Michel Basquiat as told by Fred Braithwaite a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy," *Interview* (October 1992). http://www.smartwentcrazy.com/basquiat/text/fab5.htm.

15. Edit DeAk, quoted in Franklin Sirmans, "Chronology," in Richard Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (New York: Abrams), p. 235.

16. Michael Holman, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 104.

17. Cathleen McGuigan, "New Art New Money: The Marketing of American Artist." *New York Times Magazine*, February 10, 1985, p. 26.

18. Michael Holman, quoted in Robert Farris Thompson, "Royalty, Heroism and the Streets," in Marshall, *Basquiat*, p. 39.

19. *All-Seeing Eye, Jr.* [Luc Sante], "Basquiat" Entry on Pinakothek blog, Sunday, December 30, 2007. http://ekotodi.blogspot.com/2007/12/basquiat.html.

20. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Test Pattern* (1979), Color photocopy on paper, 8½ × 11 (illustrated in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 57). Test Pattern was billed as Basquiat, Holman, Dawson, and Wayne.

21. See Chronology of concerts at Squat Theatre. http://squattheatre.com/concerts1980.html (accessed August 2009). Gray is described here as Basquiat, Holman, Gallo, and Taylor.

22. Arto Lindsay, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 140.

23. Glenn O'Brien in Kawachi, *King for a Decade*, p. 65.

24. Mary Ann Monforton, quoted in Franklin Sirmans, "Chronology," p. 235.

25. John Gruen, *Keith Haring: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991), p. 54.

26. Steve Hager, *Adventures in the Counterculture: From Hip Hop to High Times* (New York: High Times Books, 2002), p. 175.

27. Hager, *Adventures*, p. 172.

28. Anthony Haden-Guest, *True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), p. 124.

29. Hager, *Adventures*, p. 45.

30. Gruen, *Keith Haring*, p. 44.

31. Gruen, *Keith Haring*, p. 52.

32. Gruen, *Keith Haring*, p. 55.

33. Gruen, *Keith Haring*, p. 53.

34. John Sex, quoted in Hager, *Adventures*, p. 175.

35. Julie Wilson, quoted in Hoban, *Basquiat*, p. 53.

36. Hoban, *Basquiat*, p. 53. See also John Sex in Hager, *Adventures*, p. 175; Gruen, *Keith Haring*, p. 54; and Keith Haring in *Keith Haring Journals* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 65.

37. Geldzahler, "Art from Subways to Soho," p. 46.

38. Jean-Michel Basquiat, interview with Mark Miller, in Paul Tschinkel (producer), *Jean-Michel Basquiat: An Interview*, ART/New York No. 30A, 1998, videocassette. Distributed by Inner Tube Films.

39. Jean-Michel Basquiat, interview with Becky Johnstone, in Tamra Davis (director), *A Conversation with Basquiat* (21 mins.) USA, 2006. Distributed by Arthouse Films.

40. Glenn O'Brien, in Deitch Projects et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 19.

41. Ingrid Sischy, "Jean-Michel Basquiat as told by Fred Braithwaite a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy," *Interview* (October 1992), pp. 119–23.

42. Kawachi, *King for a Decade*, p. 57.

43. Franklin Sirmans, "Chronology," in Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, p. 236.

44. Haden-Guest, *True Colors*, p. 128.

45. Hager, *Art after Midnight*, p. 172.

46. Tschinkel, *Basquiat: An Interview*.

47. Photograph by Martha Cooper, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, pp. 128–29.

48. All-Seeing Eye, Jr., "Basquiat."

49. Keith Haring, *Keith Haring Journals* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 64.

50. Michael Musto, *Downtown* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), p. 103.

Chapter 4

BECOMING A PAINTER

THE TIMES SQUARE SHOW

Times Square in 1980 was not the place it is today. It was unsafe and sleazy, and many of the theaters had closed down to be replaced by porno movie theaters. It certainly was not where anyone would think of going to view art. While only a few stops on the subway, culturally it was a world apart from the traditional midtown galleries and museums, and even from the SoHo galleries. Yet two alternative art organizations were planning to have their next event right in the middle of Times Square. Artist Keith Haring described "this sort of abandoned building on Seventh Avenue and 41st St. which used to be a massage parlor. They rented it for very little money and invited all these artists to do installations and hang their works there."[1]

A few years earlier a group of like-minded downtown artists dissatisfied with the commercial galleries came together to form Colab (Collaborative Projects, Inc.). In January 1980 Colab broke into an unused city-owned space on the Lower East Side to put on the Real Estate Show, showing works highlighting homelessness and criticizing gentrification in the area. These radical artists were now planning their biggest show yet, in sleazy Times Square.

To help with the Times Square Show, Colab teamed up with Fashion Moda, a nonprofit gallery and community arts space in the South Bronx. Fashion Moda also supported community murals by local graffiti artists; their storefront was covered in a spray-paint mural by Crash. They would bring these graffiti elements to Times Square while Colab would bring the political and punk artists from downtown. It was an explosive mix.

Jean-Michel was not involved with either Fashion Moda or Colab but got invited through his downtown connections in the School for Visual Arts and Club 57. At the Times Square Show Jean-Michel hooked up again with Fab 5 Freddy, who had come down through his Bronx graffiti connections. Fab 5 described the group as "a sort of a posse—Keith [Haring] and me and Jean-Michel and Kenny Scharf—and also this kid Futura who was this cool graffiti artist."[2]

It was a mix of artists on the fringes of the art world, and some completely outside of it. There was a higher percentage of black and Latino artists than in SoHo group shows, and half the artists involved were women, which was unheard of in establishment art shows in those days. Rather than having a conventional curator, who would pick which pieces would fit together in the exhibition, the organizers just invited artists to pick a space in the building and asked them to "do a piece that pertains to the Times Square area."[3]

"We all had pieces in the show," said Haring. "Jean-Michel Basquiat caused a scandal, because one of his pieces was the show's outside signboard—and on it he had printed in very big letters, FREE SEX. The Colab people took it down, because they thought it would get them into trouble."[4]

All in all some 100 artists took over the four-story building, filling the hallways and cramped rooms with art. This was not the kind of show to hang paintings in frames; in fact, most works were not even on conventional stretched canvas. Kenny Scharf had been decorating household appliances; here he turned the large air-conditioning unit into a New Wave computer with his wild colors and a string of fake pearls. Some artists made multiple photocopies to wallpaper the rooms, or painted on cut out paper shapes fixed directly to the wall. An artist named Christy Rupp pasted her small but startling posters of running rats across the baseboards, as she had done around the streets

of the Lower East Side. In one room a punching bag hung in front of a wall where visitors could chalk up their comments. The show with its crowded, scruffy, and clashing installation was like an echo of the busy Times Square environment.

Jean-Michel and his friends took over a corner room on the second floor called the "fashion lounge," where two windowed walls looked out onto Seventh Avenue and 41st Street. Jean-Michel did unusual abstract murals on each of the remaining walls. The first was made with broad sweeping strokes of black, white, and shades of deep red. Jean-Michel added energetic black squiggles of spray paint, including zigzags that looked like an electrocardiogram chart. Some of the red, Abstract Expressionist–style paint had splashed down the wall to the floor. A spray-painted row of black zigzag mountains and valleys had been crossed by a horizontal line through the middle, turning them into a row of A's. This was the only allusion to the sprayed lettering SAMO was previously known for.

The painting on the second wall was narrower (about three feet) but went from floor to ceiling. Here a gray background was almost completely covered by black, white, and red vertical strokes done with a paint brush. It was strange that one of the few works in the Times Square Show with visual references to the Abstract Expressionists was done on a wall by a young graffiti artist. Although this was a vertical abstraction, it also looked like the gray canyon created between two tall, shadowed buildings in a New York cityscape.

The show opened in June 1980. Along with the visual art there were theatrical performances, an avant-garde fashion show in Jean-Michel's space, and a constant sound track from the Mudd Club's DJ. A store was built in the entrance selling prints and cheap objects made by the artists. Outside his "fashion lounge," Jean-Michel and Fab 5 added real graffiti: "Fab 5 in town" in black marker on a gallery wall, and SAMO sayings in chalk on the fourth-floor stairway.

The show was a surprising public and critical success. Major art journals that did not usually cover this kind of art thought they had to write about it. It was as if many in the art world were waiting for something new and thought this might help them find it. Some called it "visual punk."[5] Some modern-art dealers and gallery owners treated it as an experimental laboratory, where many things would be failures, but it

was still a good idea to keep an eye on it in case the next big thing might emerge.

Critic and art consultant Jeffery Deitch said, "I went to the *Times Square Show* practically every day."[6] He reported that hordes of people came out of the 42nd Street subway to check out the building. Other commentators noticed what they called the unusual mixture of downtown hipsters and Harlem youngsters with local Times Square slimesters milling around the entrance.[7]

In Deitch's opinion one of the strongest rooms was the one Jean-Michel had painted; his wall painting held together the other works there. His review of the Times Square Show in *Art in America* briefly singled out Jean-Michels's work. "A patch of wall painted by SAMO, the omnipresent graffiti sloganeer, was a knockout combination of de Kooning and subway spray paint scribbles."[8] Willem de Kooning was a master of Abstract Expressionist paint handling. When Deitch was at the show he noticed that, unlike in SoHo, there was very little abstract art there, and he thought SAMO'S painting "one of the best of these abstract works."[9] Deitch had asked about the work and was told that SAMO was Jean-Michel Basquiat. Deitch looked for him, but no one could find Jean-Michel at the opening.

The novelty of the anonymous graffiti name mixing his style with gallery art certainly appealed to the journalistic reviewers. In the first review to hit the streets, the *Village Voice* called the show "the first radical art show of the '80s" because of the connection between high art and the street. The *Voice* reviewer noted, "Samo, the graffitist, seems perfectly at home amid the post structural scribbling on these walls."[10] Feminist critic Lucy Lippard gave the show a critical review in the prestigious *Artforum* but picked out a few high points, including "SAMO's critical graffiti."[11]

The Times Square Show was only up for a month, but the positive criticism meant its influence would last longer. It "marked the emergence of a whole new generation of New York Artists" who could no longer be ignored.[12] Keith Haring agreed it was a turning point "because it was the first time that every kind of underground art could be seen in one place—and that included graffiti art. It was the first time that the art world acknowledged that the underground existed."[13]

Jean-Michel did not sell anything or meet any art dealers at the show. The brief lines in the press did not even mention his real name. But it was the hint of recognition he was looking for. Moreover, the show's exuberant art gave him new ideas. Even at the Times Square Show he had painted on the walls, as if intimidated to show his drawings or paintings as works of art. Now he started thinking maybe he should take his painting on objects and his drawing more seriously. And with the art world looking for something different, perhaps others were ready to do the same.

KEITH HARING ENTERS THE SUBWAYS

Perhaps influenced by the Times Square Show, Keith Haring decided to put up a show in Club 57 where he would show work by himself, Jean-Michel, and other people he knew. Everyone was to bring one work each to this "invitational." He asked Jean-Michel to bring a piece, but Jean-Michel showed up at the opening not carrying anything. "I asked him if he was going to participate or not," said Haring, "so, he reached into his pants pocket and fished out a completely crumpled-up drawing, which he proceeded to put up on the wall!"[14]

Keith and Jean-Michel were seeing a lot of each other at this time. Like Diego Cortez, Haring saw something intense in Jean-Michel's work that he did not see in the galleries. "From the moment I saw Jean-Michel's drawings and the things he did in the streets, I knew he was a great artist. The early drawings are really simple, yet aggressive and intense. A lot of them had scrawling language at the bottom, and there was something hauntingly real about them. Somehow, the messier Jean-Michel's things were, the better they looked."[15]

Perhaps the simple outlines of Jean-Michel's heads and cars influenced the way Haring moved from abstraction. It is possible the chalk wall at the Times Square Show also helped Haring make his realization. Certainly the experience of doing outdoor graffiti with Jean-Michel kept him alert to ways he could translate his work to the street, without imitating the style of the subway taggers.

In December of 1980 Haring had his revelation and started the white chalk drawings of crawling babies, barking dogs, and other figures in

the subways. These creatures became recognizable characters throughout the city and brought him wide recognition.

NEW YORK BEAT

Around this time, Fiorucci designer Maripol and her filmmaker husband, Edo Bertoglio, were planning a low-budget movie on the New York underground scene. Glenn O'Brien was the main writer, and he insisted Basquiat play the lead role. Jean-Michel jumped at the chance, especially when he heard that he would be paid.

Shooting began in December 1980. However, Jean-Michel kept complaining about the 6:00 A.M. start, especially when he was often out all night at the Mudd Club. He was very hard to track down when they needed him. O'Brien remembers, "He was always crashing in somebody else's house. So we let him live in the production office for three or four months."[16]

With money coming in from the film, and a regular place to sleep at night, Jean-Michel bought some canvases and paints and turned a corner of the production office into a small studio. These paintings were not the large abstract works of Times Square. They were closer to the simple figures and phrases of his post-SAMO graffiti, but with smaller letters and messier pictures. A few of the simple but energetic depictions of faces, cars, and car crashes he produced there were used in the film itself.

Once Jean-Michel was on board, O'Brien ended up writing the part to suit him. O'Brien summed up the plot of the movie: "Penniless, Jean-Michel was kicked out of his apartment, then tried to sell his paintings for daily income. He showed up at clubs and tried to pick up girls to go to her apartment to have someplace to sleep. Basically, it was based on his real life. . . ."[17] The character wears Jean-Michel's long brown overcoat and plays the clarinet in an avant-garde band. The paintings seen in the apartment scene were painted by Jean-Michel and may be his first work on a traditional canvas.

In the movie Jean-Michel's character carries around a large white canvas to sell, *Untitled,* from December 1980. This is one of Jean-Michel's several untitled paintings of car crashes from 1980 and 1981. Across the white surface is a red line representing a street,

below a head-on collision between a car and a milk truck. The cars are drawn in a hurried childlike manner in black, accented with small areas of painted color. On the upper right are a crossed square representing a window and various letters forming the name Aaron. Under the red line is a line of text he had also written on walls: "PAY FOR SOUP—BUILD A FORT—SET THAT ON FIRE." After the painting appeared in the movie, Jean-Michel finished the composition with a few splashes of color and some black spray paint.

The film takes Jean-Michel's character in and out of studios and clubs in his travels. Performances by DNA, James White and the Blacks, the Plastics, Kid Creole and the Coconuts, and other bands are showcased. Music from Jean-Michel's band, Gray, is heard in the soundtrack, though the band is not seen.

Since Jean-Michel's main claim to fame was still SAMO, the main "other dimension" of the movie was his graffiti. Jean-Michel was filmed as he wandered around the empty early morning streets of the Lower East Side in his long wool coat, adding his work to the decaying walls. It was not SAMO graffiti; he did not use the name, and the writing was even more poetic and mysterious. At points in the movie one sees Jean-Michel quickly spraying a large head onto a wall, or a strange phrase in capital letters. Some, like "BRAILLE TEETH" or "LIKE AN IGNORANT EASTER SUIT," seemed pure nonsense. "THE ORIGIN OF COTTON" against a long desolate wall seemed to hint at slavery in the South. "PLUSH SAFE—HE THINK" was more threatening. They all had a surreal edge, designed not to make a clear statement, but to make one think.

In another scene Jean-Michel sprays a large mural on a desolate corner with the strange poem, used repeatedly in his work:

THE WHOLE LIVERY LINE
BOW LIKE THIS WITH
THE BIG MONEY ALL
CRUSHED INTO THESE FEET

The line "PAY FOR SOUP—BUILD A FORT—SET THAT ON FIRE" summed up Jean-Michel's attitude toward life and art while homeless and without a regular job. For someone on the streets, the

first day-to-day priority is to get food ("pay for soup"). For $3, which he could get through panhandling, borrowing from friends, or selling his postcards, he could buy himself dinner. The next priority is finding shelter ("build a fort"), which Jean-Michel did by meeting people who could put him up. The production office at *New York Beat* was now his "fort." But Jean-Michel often acted in ways that would get him kicked out of his friends' apartments, metaphorically setting his fort on fire. The young man did not trust art produced in "BOOZ-WAH" comfort, thinking it was safe and plush. He always had to move on. Even when he had income and his own place to live, he continued a pattern of building his own fort and setting it on fire.

The crew did not enjoy filming outdoors in the cold weather, but it helped them show the difficulties of being without a home in New York. As Jean-Michel's character walked around he passed homeless people on the streets, and the abandoned buildings and vacant lots of the Lower East Side were as much a feature of the movie as the downtown bands. At one point in the movie Jean-Michel's character says to himself: "The Lower East Side. Looked like a war zone. Like we'd dropped the bomb on ourselves."

Filming for *New York Beat* stopped over Christmas of 1980. Jean-Michel celebrated his 20th birthday, still with no permanent place to live, staying with friends and at the production office. The crew finished shooting in January.

January 1981 was also when Republican Ronald Reagan became president. He would be president for two terms, covering the same period as Basquiat's career as a painter. The 1980s have also been called "the Reagan decade," known as a period of overall economic growth combined with growing inequality. But in the early 1980s New Yorkers saw rising unemployment, not economic growth.

People were still leaving the inner cities faster than they could be replaced. This was due to disappearing industrial jobs, and the fear of crime and urban decay that followed. The middle class would start moving back to the city with the rise in professional jobs later in the decade, but in 1981 New York City's population was the lowest it had been since the Great Depression.

New York Beat conveyed the vast gulf between Manhattan's rich and the forgotten corners of the city, and the marginal existence

of the artistic underground who tried to survive in between these worlds.

Jean-Michel could not rely on being in the movie to bring him any more money or fame. When shooting stopped in January, Maripol and her partners found funding for postproduction had dried up, and they could not finish editing. Only years after Jean-Michel's death did they go back, reedit the footage, and release the movie as *Downtown '81* in 2000.

SUZANNE MALLOUK

As if life imitated art (or in this case as if the movie was rewritten to match real events) Jean-Michel did find a happy ending to the filming. Deborah Harry, the singer for the band Blondie, was cast as a magical fairy who gives Jean-Michel's character a suitcase full of money at the end of the story. In real life she bought one of Basquiat's paintings for $100 or $200. This was not a lot for art but a huge amount for Jean-Michel at this time.

When Jean-Michel got this money, there was one thing he had been wanting to do. A while ago he had noticed a beautiful young woman bartending at a local bar called Nightbirds, and for weeks he would go in just to look at her. She was striking with a mysterious complexion, full lips, and dark green eyes. She wore her hair extremely short, giving her an androgynous look. Jean-Michel also was fascinated by her conversations, her feminist dismissal of high heels, and the way she made up false stories about herself so the customers would not get to know her. But he never sat at the bar to talk to her, since he did not have the money to order drinks and knew she needed tips. Today he had the money.

The bartender's name was Suzanne Mallouk. She had moved to New York in 1980 to be a poet after reading a book by New York poet and critic René Ricard. She was working in a bar trying to make ends meet and pay the rent on her tiny Lower East Side apartment.

Mallouk was pleased when the good looking young black man with the long overcoat she had also noticed finally came up to talk to her. He came up to the bar looking happy, ordered a drink, and told her he had sold his first painting to Deborah Harry of Blondie

for $200. He asked if he could take her out to dinner. That sounded like a good offer, and after her shift they went out for Chinese food. He left a big tip. Soon they were falling in love, but she continued to put off his advances for a while.

Jean-Michel learned from Mallouk that her mother was English and her father Palestinian. She thought she understood how Jean-Michel felt because, like him, her parents came from different backgrounds. Like him, too, her father believed in strict discipline and corporal punishment. She had also left home as a teenager and come to New York as soon as she could earn the fare. Jean-Michel took her to Maripol's loft where she saw his drawing *Gringo Pilot* on the wall and found it one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen.

When shooting stopped on *New York Beat* Jean-Michel was once again without a place to crash, and without a job. When he asked Mallouk if he could stay in her little one bedroom apartment on East First Street, she could hardly say no. Mallouk was touched that his only possessions were a few clothes and a toy truck he carried his art supplies in. He took over the living room with his work, and she loved the direct way in which he drew.

Women found Jean-Michel attractive, and he had had several brief relationships in the past, but this was the first time he was really in love. However, his crashing in her little apartment did cause difficulties. Within a few weeks she told him she was tired of paying the rent, bills, and food for both of them, and that he had to go get a job. Jean-Michel argued that he was an artist. "But I'm an artist too," she answered angrily. "You have to help. You can't just be an artist."[18]

They fought over this. Sometimes she put him out and he would have to go hang out at the Mudd Club. At times he even found other women there to spend the night with, but he always came back when things calmed down.

Jean-Michel did try to get work and for a while helped his friend the electrician. But he did not last long. He came home upset one day when a rich client humiliated him and he quit on the spot. He promised Mallouk that he would make it up to her "when I become famous."[19] She began to admire him for his unwillingness to compromise. Their relationship lasted on and off for a few more years,

through which they both moved several times, sometimes living together and sometimes not.

FOUND OBJECTS

Jean-Michel was extremely productive and did many drawings while staying with Mallouk. He still could not afford canvases, so instead he found discarded objects on the street to paint on. Mallouk's East Village neighborhood was beginning to change. It was not unusual to find windows and wooden fixtures left out by new tenants renovating their old tenement apartments. Many of his early paintings are on these old windows, images painted on the glass, and the wooden frames used as a painted picture frame. This created a natural grid composition, helping to structure the work. He also worked on found lumber, doors, and other objects and was fond of spray-painting quick shapes on foam rubber from the street. One of the artists Jean-Michel admired was Robert Rauschenberg, who also used objects found on New York streets when he built and painted his "combines."

One day Jean-Michel was out doing graffiti and he scribbled a row of heads in black over a drawing of a baseball and the phrase "FAMOUS NEGRO ATHLETES." The heads were generic, not portraits, but seemed to express anger. Glenn O'Brien saw it on the street and liked it so much Jean-Michel did a version on paper for him. It was the first of what would be many works devoted to African American sports figures. It was in part an expression of black pride in the achievements of people like the baseball player Hank Aaron or the boxers whom Jean-Michel had watched on TV with his papa. It was also a criticism of a racist attitude that black people could excel only in sports or music.

Jean-Michel also continued his old habits by painting on things in Mallouk's apartment, including the refrigerator. When Mallouk first moved to New York she was a cigarette girl at the Ritz nightclub. She kept her red wooden cigarette box when she left the job and one day Jean-Michel found it and used it for a painting. In his typical style of the time he painted a face, a crown, and the word AARON in the various parts of the box. Mallouk was very angry at this. Later, when she was no longer living with him and needed money for rent, she sold the box to dealer Annina Nosei for a $1,000. She also sold the painted

refrigerator for $5,000.[20] For now, though, the two of them were living hand to mouth and could only dream of getting that kind of money.

Jean-Michel had been making a little money from occasional deejaying and gigs with his band. Gray's last regular gig was at the start of 1981, at the Mudd Club. "It was going to be our last gig," remembered Michael Holman, "the band has already been together for like a year and a half, which was like a lifetime in those days."[21] The rest of the band was working in the day to prepare a set on the small Mudd Club stage for the performance that night. With Basquiat absent, Holman had great ideas for a stage design that was as avant-garde as the rest of the band. He had rented scaffolding materials and built a multilevel platform on the stage where the various band members could climb and play to the audience at different levels. When Jean-Michel appeared late at 1:30 in the afternoon, the scaffolding was already constructed. He took one look and walked out again. The band members were worried. Had he been offended by something? When would he be back? But he came back in five minutes carrying a box he found on the street and added it to the set. He spent the entire performance later that night playing portable synthesizer and chanting his lyrics, from inside the box. According to Holman, the audience was "blown away."[22]

Afterward, while they were breaking down the set, Jean-Michel came over to Michael, and in a sweet, humble way, said, "I'm out of the band now." Michael suspected the main reason Jean-Michel left was because he was going to be part of a big new art show being planned by Diego Cortez.

Cortez started to visit Jean-Michel at Mallouk's apartment to look at what he was producing. He also remembered the canvases he had done at the *New York Beat* office. Cortez began giving Jean-Michel a little money to buy proper canvases again. Cortez's experience as a curator and his feel for the punk aesthetic told him there was great promise in the young man's work.

NOTES

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3. Julie Ault, *Alternative Art, New York, 1965–1985* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 49.

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5. Richard Goldstein, "The First Radical Art Show of the 80s," *Village Voice,* June 16, 1980, p. 32.

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12. Edward Lucie-Smith, *Lives of the Great 20th Century Artists* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999), p. 343.

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Chapter 5

NEW YORK/NEW WAVE

The Times Square Show of 1980 gave Jean-Michel a moment of recognition that quickly faded. Diego Cortez was now organizing another alternative show that would strongly highlight his work. It was to be held at P.S. 1, an alternative space in the New York borough of Queens.

Cortez wanted to put together an exhibition focusing on "New Wave" culture partly inspired by punk rock. This mix of graffiti and punk-associated art had been part of the anarchic Times Square Show, but Cortez thought he had a clearer idea about curating what he called New York/New Wave. And now he had an ace up his sleeve: the undiscovered new work of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

This was the first serious attempt to examine the 1970s crossover between music and visual arts, another reason Basquiat, fresh from his band Gray, was included. Cortez said one function of the show "was to document the rock scene," which was already disappearing. In this show much of the art was photography, and much of those photos were snapshots of punk clubs or hip celebrities.[1]

Also exhibited was artwork by several New Wave musicians. Many of the visual artists there were associated with Club 57. John Sex and Kenny Scharf both had pieces. Keith Haring exhibited a roll of paper on

the floor filled with his abstract line drawing, and some new drawings on the walls of his people, dogs, and flying saucers.

Cortez was eager to include graffiti art. He had large metal sheets installed in the hallway for graffiti writers to use. Futura 2000, Rammellzee, Fab 5 Freddy, and Daze all put up pieces. Lee Quinones sprayed a giant portrait of singer Debbie Harry (who also appeared in several photos). Lee had grown extremely skilled in using spray paint the way commercial artists use airbrushes, but the portrait looked more like celebrity-inspired new Pop Art than the illegal tagging that made graffiti art exciting at first. Cortez characterized the whole show as "neo-Pop."

Jean-Michel had one large spray-paint-and-crayon-on-metal graffiti work in the corridor with the graffiti artists, signed as SAMO. But his paintings and drawings, on their own wall in another room, were signed with his real name. "Essentially it was Jean-Michel Basquiat meets SAMO," said Cortez.[2] He had let Jean-Michel show 15 pieces in the show. "He was the only one I thought was so fantastic he had to have paintings on canvas."[3] For those looking for painting, Basquiat became the star of the show.

The wall given to Jean-Michel was covered with drawings on paper, paintings on canvas, spray paint on foam rubber, works on wood, and other materials. Jean-Michel had by now developed his own iconography; his simple images of crowns, heads, airplanes, tepees, cars, and car crashes populated several works, along with his familiar lettering. Most of the works were untitled. In one grayish work (*Untitled,* 1980–81) of acrylic and spray paint on raw canvas, the wall painting of the Times Square Show had settled into a more recognizable cityscape, formed from childlike outlines and windows painted over the scribbles and drips. Another car, painted white on black, included an ominous phrase also used in the *New York Beat* movie, "PLUSH SAFE—HE THINK." Cortez had saved six pieces on regular writing paper of Jean-Michel's constant drawing and pinned them to the wall. In one (*Airplanes*) deceptively childlike pictures of planes and scribbled colored patches filled a sophisticated grid composition; another contained a blackface portrait labeled "Al Jolson." The portrait was one of many faces in the show, drawn in a simple frontal view, like those in his graffiti "Famous Negro Athletes."

In another large painting (*Aaron 1,* 1981), a severe head painted in acrylic and oil stick stares out at the viewer, dominating a surface filled

with smaller and seemingly unrelated doodles and letters. The smaller figures, done in crayon, include approximations of the word "Aaron," several smaller faces, cars, and another of Basquiat's ubiquitous car crashes.

In these works Basquiat was not trying to fit into any school of art. There were no hints of celebrities or New Wave music. It was the speed of the drawing and the simplicity of his depictions that fit in with the do-it-yourself attitude of punk. This was art based on the street: work he had done while living on the street, paintings of cars on the street, and along with the new canvases, work painted on objects he had found on the street. It was Jean-Michel's attempt to create a new kind of painting out of the elements of his life. Although influenced by modern artists, in many ways he was starting over from scratch, from the drawings of small children.

The New York/New Wave Show opened at P.S. 1 in February 1981, with over 100 artists and over 1,000 works. The opening was packed, which was unheard of for an alternative space outside of Manhattan. There were lines to enter, and even to leave. The artists and their friends mixed with musicians and figures from the conventional art world. Peter Schjeldahl, a critic with the *Village Voice*, was intrigued by Jean-Michel's paintings. They reminded him of the French painter Jean Dubuffet, who borrowed his *art brut* style from the untrained work of children, graffiti, and madmen. When the critic asked Jean-Michel about Dubuffet, he coolly acted as thought he had never heard of the artist, although he would probably have seen Dubuffet's work at the Museum of Modern Art. For a large part of the opening Jean-Michel and Mallouk hid giggling under a table, away from the art-world questions.

When the opening party was finally over Jean-Michel continued celebrating with others from the show, traveling around New York in a limousine. Eventually, probably drunk on success and champagne, Jean-Michel asked to swing by his old house in Brooklyn. His father remembered, "The following morning at around six Jean-Michel came home for the first time in two years. . . . The first thing he said to me was, 'Papa, I have made it.'"[4]

The reviews about the exhibition and the idea of New Wave art were mostly negative. The new painter Julian Schnabel's large canvases with

recognizable images and references to art history were now the talk of the town, and some critics expected more of this "Neo-Expressionism" that was taking hold in SoHo. They dismissed Cortez's show as unserious and, in the words of the *SoHo News* critic, "a celebration of celebrity" aimed at a market for the "quasi-chic."[5] But as with the Times Square Show there were several positive comments about Jean-Michel's work, and this time they knew his name.

The *Village Voice* critic also found problems with the exhibition. He was quite impressed by the controversial photographer Robert Mapplethorpe but called the other photographers "nightlife shutterbugs" of little or no interest. He thought most of the painters were fashionable at best. There were a few painters he found talented, including Jean-Michel. He wrote perceptive comments on Jean-Michel's work. Still, he thought of the artist as a graffiti painter and was not at all sure whether he could fulfill the potential seen in the work:

> The most impressive individual in the show after Mapplethorpe is Jean-Michel Basquiat, a 20-year old Haitian-Puerto-Rican New Yorker and formerly the aphoristic graffitist known as "SAMO." I would not have suspected from SAMO's generally grotty defacements of my neighborhood the graphic and painterly talents revealed here, in dashing works on surfaces including canvas, scrap lumber, sheet metal, and foam rubber. Basquiat displays a skittish repertoire of cartoony faces and cars, nonsense writing . . . and an almost automatic abstract elegance. What he will make of it all remains to be seen. I would be sad, but not terribly surprised if he never painted again.[6]

Like the *Village Voice*, *Artforum* was negative about the show in general, but praised Mapplethorpe and "Jean Michel 'Samo' Basquiat's violently active drawings with their repetitive *brut* scribbles . . . primary expressionist splatters, and skittish renderings of cars and faces. . . ."[7]

As in the Times Square Show, Jean-Michel's work may not have had the press mentions it did if his SAMO graffiti were not already so well known. But seeing his painting on canvas made the critics think he definitely had something. None were ready to call him the next

big thing, but they were on the lookout to see "if he would give up painting" or progress further.

ATTRACTING THE DEALERS

A newly popular Italian painter named Sandro Chia was also impressed by the unknown Basquiat's unusual paintings. Chia was one of what the Americans called "the three C's" (Francesco Clemente, Sandro Chia, and Enzo Cucchi), Italian painters who created large canvases with human figures. They were, along with Julian Schnabel in the United States, part of an emerging "Neo-Expressionist" movement. Chia went to Cortez and offered to buy one of the larger Basquiats on display for $1,000, but Cortez refused. Soon afterward, Cortez sold it to a collector from Texas for $2,500.

Although he did not get his painting, Chia told others about Basquiat's work, including his Italian dealer Emilio Mazzoli, and Annina Nosei, a woman originally from Rome who now ran a gallery in SoHo. They would soon both be very important connections for Basquiat. Cortez was right that the Italians would pick up on his kind of art before the American art world. However, there was also growing interest in New York. "By the end of the show, people were trying to find Jean-Michel to buy pictures," said Alana Heiss of P.S. 1. "Things had gone a bit bananas already."[8]

Besides the Italians, important figures at the show were Bruno Bischofberger and Henry Geldzahler. Bischofberger was a Swiss dealer who represented Andy Warhol in Europe, but as Jean-Michel remembers, "Bischofberger saw the show at P.S. 1 and he didn't like it."[9] He eventually changed his mind about Jean-Michel's work. Henry Geldzahler was the cultural affairs commissioner for New York City who a few years earlier had dismissed Jean-Michel as "too young" when Jean-Michel sold Andy Warhol his postcard. He loved the show and thought Jean-Michel's work had matured.

After the New York/New Wave show Cortez began to act as Jean-Michel's agent and brought art collectors to see his work. Jean-Michel was not keeping track of his work at all, so Mallouk started to list everything Cortez took, and whether they received money for it. Soon, Geldzahler bought his first Basquiat. It was a part of a door Jean-Michel

had found on the street, covered with torn posters and scribbling, which reminded Geldzahler of Rauschenberg's great 1950s combine paintings. "I decided to overpay. I offered $2,000 for it. I knew he was authentic and I wanted to say, 'Welcome to the real world.'"[10]

Looking back at all this activity, Jean-Michel saw the show as a turning point. "I couldn't even buy the necessary materials to finish a canvas . . . until the day I decided to participate in the exhibition '*New York/New Wave*,' organized by Diego Cortez. From then on things started to change."[11] Mallouk agreed. For her as well, "After the 'New York/New Wave' show at P.S. 1 everything changed" and Jean-Michel started to earn his keep. But she added that Jean-Michel was just getting bits of money here and there for his work at the time. "It took a while for painting sales to happen in '81."[12] In the meantime, Jean-Michel was still hanging at the Mudd Club, which was also to catch onto the idea of New Wave art.

CLUB SHOWS

With the Mudd Club attracting a more mainstream clientele, owner Steve Mass began raiding Club 57 and hiring key members of that crowd, just to acquire a bit of their alternative artistic reputation. His most important move was to hire Keith Haring, who convinced him to turn the unused fourth floor of the Mudd into a gallery to put on little shows like those at Club 57.

Just as New York/New Wave was closing, Haring opened the "Lower Manhattan Drawing Show" at the Mudd Club. Basquiat submitted one recent drawing for the show, consisting of a rough crossed circle in black, below the phrase "Flats Fix." *Flats Fix* (1981) was a simple work at first sight, but the black brush strokes on white paper had a formal presence that tied it to the modernist tradition, and it made a statement to those who could read it.

Formally, it was an abstract symbol and a nonsense phrase. But those growing up in immigrant New York neighborhoods would recognize a version of the sign that hung outside small shops offering to fix flat tires. Many signs still use the phrase "Flat Fix" rather that the more conventional "Flats Fixed." The circle was a crude sign for the tire that often hung outside.

Jean-Michel's father commented that the work of 1981 drew on his childhood experience, "There was *Flats Fix,* the FLATS FIX signs on Fourth Avenue in Brooklyn. It is one of the things he remembered well and extracted multiple meanings from. He always used simple symbolism to explain complex situations."[13] Fab 5 Freddy also remembered how in certain neighborhoods "signs would always read, 'flats fix,' but you'd look at it and ask yourself how come it doesn't say 'flats fixed'? That's the ghetto for you. Signs so perfectly wrong they become right."[14]

There were precedents in modern art. In the 1950s Rauschenberg had used real tires in a few of his combine works. More to the point, Jasper Johns had applied the painterly strokes of the Abstract Expressionists to canvases in the image of an everyday flat object, like a target or a map. And of course in the 1960s Andy Warhol had started painting the flat images of advertising and product design as art. But while Johns and Warhol used images of mass American culture, Jean-Michel chose a handmade sign from the small shops of poor neighborhoods, using an immigrant's English.

In April, after the Lower Manhattan Drawing Show, Haring brought graffiti painters Fab 5 Freddy and Futura 2000 to the Mudd to curate a show they called Beyond Words. "The point of the show was to make people realize that graffiti went beyond words—that it wasn't just tags—that graffiti artists were also trying to develop as painters," explained Fab 5.[15] Although Jean-Michel had now moved past being a graffiti artist, he entered a SAMO-era "copyrighted" text on paper in the show. Co-curator Futura was excited by the potential for this crossover. "When Keith created the Beyond Words graffiti show at the Mudd Club," he said, "people in the art world realized the genius, naiveté, simplicity and simple truth of graffiti art. It wasn't about traditional ideas—it was fresh spirit—something people hadn't seen before."[16]

The two worlds did not always combine so smoothly. Haring was surprised that the show turned into not just an exhibition of graffiti "but a graffiti convention! I mean graffiti artists came from all over the city." They hung around the club, tagging all the walls. They were also doing graffiti on the way to and from the club and soon the club started receiving complaints. Owner Steve Mass got scared of gang conflicts coming to the club. He painted over the hallways, and was on the point

of firing Haring, when Haring realized he could quit. "I didn't know it then, but working at the Mudd Club would be the last job where I would ever have to work for someone else."[17] Haring had only sold one drawing for little money after the New York/New Wave show, but as he started to show in other spaces, little by little his drawings began to sell to collectors who visited his home.

In the spring of 1981 Diego Cortez brought Jeffrey Deitch to see Jean-Michel in Mallouk's apartment. The first thing Deitch saw was the old refrigerator that Basquiat had completely covered with his drawing: images, words, and symbols were layered on top of each other over time. "It was one of the most astounding art objects I had ever seen," says Deitch. There was no easel or drawing table in the apartment. Drawings on sheets and scraps of paper were all over the floor. It was hard to walk through the apartment, and, in fact, many of the drawings bore the marks of Basquiat's shoes. Deitch picked out five drawings on 8½-by-11-inch paper, showed them to Cortez, and paid $250 in cash for them. Jean kept on working during the visit, as if they were interrupting him, and Cortez had to remind him to sign the drawings.[18]

Cortez had stored away quite a little collection of Jean-Michel's, including many paintings and about a hundred drawings he had picked up from the artist. Bischofberger bought a few, but when he would not give Basquiat a show, Cortez turned to his European rival, the Italian gallery owner Mazzoli. Mazzoli was ready to listen after Chia's recommendation. When he saw the work at Cortez's apartment he was fascinated by an ex-graffiti writer's paintings. He thought he could sell the work to his regular clients at his Italian gallery. He gave Cortez $10,000 for the lot and agreed to fly Basquiat and Cortez to Italy to paint some more for his gallery show.[19]

Now that Jean-Michel felt he had really become successful he wanted to spend some time with his father again. Gérard remembers that "in 1981 around early summer, I was at my office and Jean-Michel called me. He was going to Modena, Italy. He wanted me to drop everything I was doing to go with him." Gérard told him, "Jean-Michel, it doesn't work that way. I have an office to run. I mean, I can't just go tonight," and he replied, "Papa, I would love for you to come with me." Gérard told him he just could not make it, but perhaps another

time. "You see," Gérard explained later, "Jean-Michel lived in the moment."[20]

"SAMO" IN ITALY

Cortez and Jean-Michel hung out in Italy for a week preparing for the show. Mazzoli gave Jean-Michel all the canvas and painting materials he could use, and a space to produce bigger canvases. "Jean-Michel did quite a bit of work in that week," remembered Cortez.[21]

The exhibition at Emilio Mazzoli Gallery in Modena ran from May 23 to June 20 of 1981 and was called Paintings by SAMO in order to cash in on the interest in collectable paintings by a real American graffiti artist. Among the works Mazzoli had brought to Modena was an untitled 1981 composition with three heads and a yellow crown shown at New York/New Wave. It was now signed "SAMO, NY 1981" on the back, over a year after he had dropped the SAMO name in New York.

The earlier work shared the spare look of his drawings, graphic marks against a mostly lighter background. The works painted in Modena were larger and combined images with the large brushy paint strokes he had used on the wall at the Times Square Show. He crowded together many of his images onto the larger canvases, on top of or surrounded by the freer brushstrokes. He described the work in Modena as "[m]ostly skelly-courts and strike zones," and explained that a skelly court was "a street game, with a grid."[22] The use of the court added a ready-made grid to the blank canvas, the same way painting on windows with lots of small windowpanes had earlier. The baseball, hopscotch, and skelly courts also provided a pattern of lines he could paint that was half abstract pattern and half representational. This was similar to his use of a flats fix sign, or Jasper Johns's use of targets and flags as a ready made pattern to fill in. Jean-Michel still mixed the conventional paint with touches of spray paint and wrote words in English and Spanish on some of the works. These additions emphasized the flatness of the painting, making it more of a surface on which to put information than a picture of a scene.

Not all the work shown in Modena was skelly courts and words. His work *Red Man* was painted in Italy and also signed "SAMO 81."

Red Man is a large, almost square canvas of "mixed media," which in this case means conventional acrylic paints with spray paint and oil stick. The unusual use of spray paint still gave many of these canvases a reminder of his graffiti background. Oil stick is a specialist medium that came to be important to Jean-Michel. Acting almost like crayons, oil sticks allowed him to draw with color, instead of painting. But because they are much bigger than crayons, he was able to make thick lines across a large canvas, in effect scaling up the scribbling and outlining techniques he had used on paper to a large canvas. In *Red Man*, he mixed these techniques with large brush strokes of acrylic paint, covering the canvas in lush tans and grays. Over this are several of his cars and other simple outlined images, drawn in oil stick, along with a colorful crown. What was unique in this work, and would be seen increasingly as he started to paint bigger, was a large outlined human figure on the left. There is very little detail in the stiffly posed figure, and it is painted at a strange angle with its feet uneven and not connected to the ground. At first it might look as though it is floating in the air. But the heavy red spray-painted outline suggests another interpretation. The figure makes more sense if seen as the outline of a body sprayed on the ground, as police do after fatal accidents. In this way the body does relate to the smaller figures, which include another head-on car crash, an ambulance, and a long dark car that looks like a hearse.

Even without knowing Jean-Michel's childhood history, his obsession with the car crash is obvious. It brings in themes of the city street, speed and violence, and sometimes death. Basquiat sometimes stood his work against the walls to paint them and sometimes laid them on the floor in the manner of Jackson Pollock. In real life, both skelly courts and the police outline of a victim after an accident are drawn on the ground. Their appearance on the canvases gives the viewer a strange feeling as the picture goes back and forth between looking like a vertical painting looking out on the world and a horizontal painting of things drawn on the ground.

At the exhibition, all of his works sold. "It was fun because it was the first time," Jean-Michel said after he returned from Italy, "but financially it was pretty stupid."[23] Jean-Michel was naïve about the economics of the gallery system. Usually a contract is drawn up and the artist gives

work to the gallery to be sold on his behalf (with a careful record of each work transferred). The gallery then fixes a price and gives a fixed percentage (often half the price) to the artist for everything it sells. Jean-Michel had no idea exactly how many of his works Mazzoli had and no idea how much they sold for. He felt ripped off by Mazzoli: "he really got a bulk deal." After painting the large works for the dealer, Jean-Michel was given the equivalent of thousands of dollars. This was such a vast amount for Jean-Michel at the time that he did not stop to ask any other questions.

Jean-Michel had never had a bank account. Fab 5 Freddy remembers how he and Jean-Michel had always been poor, sneaking onto the subway, pooling change for a dollar bag of marijuana or beer. Then one day after Jean-Michel came back from Italy he met Fred on First Avenue in the East Village. After Fred's usual "Yo, what's up?" Jean-Michel told how his trip to Italy had been amazing "and I made some money, look!" At this Jean-Michel reached into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of 20s, 50s, and $100 bills, all crumpled up. Fred was naturally amazed.

Jean-Michel told him he wanted to give a "sit-down dinner" for his friends now that he was back. He had no idea of what the chic places were; almost all restaurants had been out of reach for him. He picked John's old style family Italian restaurant on East 12th Street in the Village. Besides Fred and Suzanne Mallouk, the dinner included Diego Cortez, Glenn O'Brien, Keith Haring, graffiti painter Futura, and musicians John Lurie, Arto Lindsay, Wayne Wayne, and a few other close friends. Fred thought it an impressive and elegant act. "There was a strange tension at that dinner and everyone there was sort of amazed and dazed, realizing Jean was about to do big things."[24]

NOTES

1. Steve Hager, *Adventures in the Counterculture: From Hip Hop to High Times* (New York: High Times Books, 2002), p. 209.

2. Deitch Projects, Glenn O'Brien, Diego Cortez, et al., *Jean-Michel Basquiat 1981* (New York: Deitch Projects, 2007), p. 19.

3. Hager, *Adventures*, p. 209.

4. Gérard Basquiat, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 90. In this interview Gérard said that the visit happened after the

New York/New Wave show. He said the same thing in an interview with Franklin Sirmans in 1992 (in Richard Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat* [New York: Whitney Museum, 1992], p. 238). However, Hoban's biography dates the scene to October 1981, after the opening of his first group show at Annina Nosei's gallery (Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* [New York, Penguin Books, 2004], p. 86).

5. John Perreault, "Low Tide," *SoHo News,* February 25, 1981, p. 49.

6. Peter Schjeldahl, "New Wave No Fun," *Village Voice,* March 4, 1981, p. 69.

7. Richard Flood, "Skied and Grounded in Queens: 'New York/New Wave' at P.S. 1," *Artforum* (Summer 1981), p. 84.

8. Anthony Haden-Guest, *True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), p. 128.

9. Jean-Michel Basquiat, interview with Becky Johnstone, in Tamra Davis (director), *A Conversation with Basquiat* (21 mins.) United States, 2006. Distributed by Arthouse Films.

10. Cathleen McGuigan, "New Art, New Money—The Marketing of an American Artist," *New York Times Magazine* (February 10, 1985), p. 32.

11. Jean-Michel Basquiat, in Démosthènes Davvetas, "Jean-Michel Basquiat, Graffitiste," *Libération* [Paris], June 17, 1986, p. 39. Reprinted in Luca Marenzi, *Basquiat* (Milan: Chiarta, 1999), p. 62.

12. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981,* p. 99.

13. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981,* p. 90.

14. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981,* p. 121.

15. John Gruen, *Keith Haring: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991), p. 66.

16. Gruen, *Keith Haring,* p. 74.

17. Gruen, *Keith Haring,* p. 74.

18. McGuigan, "New Art, New Money," p. 28. McGuigan tells the story of the visit nicely in her article, but says it happened in 1980. However, Jean-Michel had not moved in with Mallouk at that time, and Jeffrey Deitch says that it was "in the spring of 1981" that he made the visit. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981,* pp. 16, 19.

19. McGuigan, "New Art, New Money," p. 32. Various people involved remember the sale as being for about $10,000 or $20,000.

20. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 91.
21. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 19.
22. Interview with Henry Geldzahler, "Art from Subways to Soho: Jean-Michel Basquiat," *Interview* (January 1983), p. 46.
23. Interview with Henry Geldzahler, p. 46.
24. Fab 5 Freddy, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 120.

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Chapter 6

ART STAR OR GALLERY MASCOT?

The Italian show had brought Basquiat some money, and the few alternative group shows had only started to get him recognition as an artist. "No one was really sure what was going to happen to Basquiat in 1981," said a participant in both the downtown art and the hip-hop worlds. "Was he a teenage prodigy or a novelty folk act? Would a black artist be accepted by the upper-class elite?"[1]

The first thing to do would be to get a New York gallery to take on Jean-Michel. This would happen quicker than either Jean-Michel or Diego Cortez thought.

ANNINA NOSEI

"I became aware of Jean-Michel in the show 'New York/New Wave' at P.S. 1 in Queens," said Soho gallery owner Annina Nosei. "I saw some small paintings . . . that I liked a lot."[2] She also had Chia's recommendation in her ears. In the fall of 1981 they met up. "He was very disorderly and very fertile in the drawings and his work reminded me of Cy Twombly. It had a quality you don't find on the walls of the street—a quality of poetry and a universal message of the sign. It was a bit immature, but very beautiful."[3]

Twombly was an established artist of Rauschenberg's generation. He took the loose handmade marks of the Abstract Expressionists and made them look like children's scribbles or bathroom graffiti. Often he scratched mythic words into the surface of his abstract paintings. He also mixed crayon and oil stick with painting, the way Basquiat did. Although their approach to art was different, many critics would compare Basquiat to Twombly. It was not just influence. Basquiat had evolved his style from his own childhood drawings, but Twombly's work gave him permission to take it seriously. It also helped art work figures like Nosei appreciate what Basquiat was doing.[4]

Nosei was eager to represent Basquiat and he agreed. Only a few years earlier Jean-Michel and Al Diaz were writing anti–art world graffiti on the streets of SoHo, and now Basquiat was represented by a SoHo gallery. He did not have a show scheduled, but he had an official dealer to promote his work, and a few thousand dollars for expenses.

Jean-Michel needed the money; his private life was a mess. After a fight with girlfriend Suzanne Mallouk, she had sublet her apartment, leaving much of his work behind, and moved in with a friend. Jean-Michel was again homeless and was often being run out of cheap residential hotels. "When I started working with him I had to call a hotel to give a deposit for him to sleep there," remembered Nosei.[5] Jean-Michel soon moved back together with Mallouk, for a while, in a friend's East Village apartment.

Naturally, now that he had been taken on by a gallery, Jean-Michel wanted to have his work shown. He thought he could fit some paintings into a group show called Public Address scheduled for November. This show was to pull together several artists who addressed social and political issues. Jenny Holzer was to be included in the show, along with Barbra Kruger and others. At first Nosei thought Jean-Michel's work was too "lyrical, personal and intense" to fit into this exhibit. She changed her mind after Basquiat insisted to her that his "purpose was to address sociopolitical issues, and that's why his work, in his opinion, was perfect for my show."[6]

This was something many who knew him well had always realized. His father explained: "Jean-Michel was very bright, very social and very

politically oriented. He didn't have to politicize through a microphone. The works possess messages and speak for themselves."[7]

When people heard that Nosei was dealing work by Basquiat, many of his old friends came to the gallery with drawings he had given them, or paintings on cabinet or refrigerator doors to sell. Basquiat was upset that things he had given to friends as a gesture would be sold as soon as they were worth money. Downtown writer Steven Hager said that at this point Basquiat "visited a few people just to paint over every mark he'd left behind."[8] Nosei and Cortez even got into a court battle over the large store of early work Cortez still held.

THE ARTIST IN THE BASEMENT

Jean-Michel needed a place to do all the new work for Public Address. Nosei had the large basement of her gallery turned into a studio for him to work. It also had advantages for her: when he finished with his paintings they would be right in the gallery for her to sell. It was a rather unusual situation, which was later to attract a lot of criticism, but Basquiat thought it a fine opportunity, at first. "It was a place to work, which I had never had before. I took it, not seeing the drawbacks until later."[9]

The drawbacks were partly a matter of perception. Rumors started that Nosei had to keep the young man under constant supervision to make sure he produced. When Fab 5 Freddy came to visit Jean-Michel in his new studio he saw the situation at once, and told him: "A black kid painting in the basement. It's not good, man."[10]

"Who ever heard of an artist working in the basement of a gallery?" asked Diego Cortez, still angry with Nosei for taking Basquiat away from him. "People refer to it as the dungeon period."[11] The drawbacks would become more apparent to Jean-Michel later. For now he had paints, canvases, and a place to work, money to live on and a place to live, and he was getting on with Mallouk.

The gallery opened each day at 10 o'clock. At first Jean-Michel would come in around 10:30 saying, "Sorry I'm late," even though he did not actually work for the gallery. He soon got used to the situation of it being his studio and would often arrive to paint in the afternoon,

after stopping at chic SoHo Dean and DeLuca market for a takeout lunch.

Jean-Michel was so happy with his new professional studio, he wanted his father to come and see it. "I got a call from him in the middle of the night once, and he told me, 'Papa, tomorrow morning I would like for you to met Annina Nosei.'" His father took Jean-Michel's two sisters along. Jean-Michel gave his sister Jeanine one of his paintings, which impressed everyone as a very generous act.[12] Gérard thought of Annina as a needed "mother figure" for Jean-Michel and was proud of his son the artist. "I hear stories that Jean-Michel was locked in like a slave," said Gérard. "That's not true at all. He was an artist working deftly in his studio."[13]

In the basement studio Jean-Michel was painting on several works at a time, with canvases leaned next to each other against the paint-stained walls. He was looking forward to the upcoming group show.

PUBLIC ADDRESS

Public Address was not so much a show with a message as one about making messages, and each artist addressed it differently. Basquiat was given the entire back room of the gallery for his work, with six paintings that showed how he had developed since the work in Italy. He was now creating much more figurative work, including paintings of an Orthodox Jew, a Native American, and a policeman.

At first, his large paintings of human figures looked closer to the Neo-Expressionists showing elsewhere than to the rest of this show. The large *Untitled* (head) shown there (still one of Basquiat's most famous works) seemed an intense and expressionistic painting, communicating more personal feelings than political ideology. Unlike his previous outlined faces, this head is in a three-quarter view, and Basquiat painted both its outside and inside. The workings of the jaw are exposed, as are the teeth, clenched in anger, but there are no lips (causing it to be incorrectly called an untitled skull). One pink eye droops down in what may be sadness; its companion is the staring red eye of a madman. These disjointed features and the crisscrossed lines like stitches across the face give it the appearance of a Frankenstein creature. The layering of bright colors, grids, and crosshatchings in

the top of the head suggest inner compartments of a conflicted mind. The sure use of a few bright colors with solid black, overlapping spaces and bold lines help make this a powerful painting.

Besides the head, most of the paintings were full figures. *Tobacco versus Red Chief* (1981) shows a Native American chief standing and holding cigars. The hand full of cigars is a traditional pose for a "Cigar Store Indian," a wooden statue of a Native American traditionally placed as an advertisement outside tobacco shops. The Native Americans introduced tobacco (smoked in pipes) to the Europeans, and European tobacco stores adopted this convention soon afterward. In the painting, the figure, however, is placed not in front of a store, but in the plains with tepees in the background.

Everything in the scene is recognizable but not realistic. The painting is full of clever visual puns. The same repeated scratches indicate both grass on the ground and feathers in the chief's headdress. A few lines create signs of tepees while a crisscrossed line around the border looks like barbed wire boxing in the Indian. In Richard Marshall's catalogue on the artist, he called tepees Basquiat's symbol for "subjugated peoples."[14] The cigars and the barbed wire help make the point that the progress of settling America meant wiping out Native Americans, or boxing them into reservations. The painting also shows how America created stereotypes out of a proud people.

Basquiat painted the chief's face black. Since the early Europeans had never seen a Native American, many of the first "wooden Indians" were made with the facial features of black slaves. Perhaps Basquiat was referring to this tradition but also reminding viewers that growing tobacco in American Southern plantations both helped displace the indigenous people and enslave the black African.

IRONY OF NEGRO POLICEMAN

Jean-Michel painted *Irony of the Negro Policeman* on a thick wooden panel. The squared-off blocky shape of the policeman with a gaping mouth and a crudely painted head is looking out dumbly through wide unfocused eyes. Near the foot, Basquiat wrote "PAW (LEFT)" by scratching through the white paint to the red below. Labeling the foot "paw" turns the figure almost animal-like, but extra marks also suggests

the word "pawn," as if the black policeman was only a pawn in the white man's game. Near the head, gray letters scratched into the white spell out the words "IRONY OF NEGRO PLCEMN."

In his SAMO days, Jean-Michel had put up the graffiti "SAMO© . . . AS AN END TO THE * POLICE . . ." The train bomber graffiti writers also used to poke fun at the police and transit cops who were always on their tail. This painting seems to be in the same vein, but here Basquiat is going further. It comments on the role of the police in reinforcing racism and on the ambiguous role of black people in the police force. Also, by implying that African Americans can be co-opted by the system, Basquiat could be commenting on his role as an artist in the galleries he had criticized as SAMO.[15]

An *Untitled* painting of the same size shows another black man in uniform. He is holding a broom next to a trash can labeled "ashes." The man seems to be a sanitation worker or cleaner, but he holds his broom like an African warrior posing with his spear. On his cap Jean-Michel has painted one of his crowns, which also appears on the ash can. This working man is depicted with a grave dignity so unlike the animal-like policeman.

After seeing his work, Nosei was convinced that, not only did he have a sense of social purpose, but the work of this period had a strong "revolutionary aspect."[16]

Everyone who looked at the paintings was struck by their power. One person who was especially affected by Basquiat's work was Black Haitian-American artist Lorraine O'Grady. "When I saw Jean-Michel's pieces in Annina Nosei's 1981 group show, I was stunned." O'Grady was known in the art world for her performances that addressed the black immigrant experience. She thought it was easier for her to grasp Basquiat's work because of their shared heritage—a Caribbean American family where bourgeois behaviors were "viciously enforced" by an unbending father. She recognized the arrogance and honesty of the first generation immigrant's rebellion.[17]

Immediately after the show O'Grady called the black-run gallery, Just Above Midtown. But the gallery owner was not about to drop everything to see an unknown 21-year-old painter, and the black artists she knew just grumbled that such a young man could be shown in SoHo, when some of them had been working in obscurity for 30 years

waiting for a break. While Basquiat's work still dealt with social issues of the oppressed, in some ways, just being in a SoHo gallery had started to put him on the other side of New York's racial and class divide.

RENÉ RICARD

One night René Ricard, the very poet Mallouk had been enthralled by, happened to see *Gringo Pilot* tacked to the wall of Marisol's loft. He became fascinated by the mix of words and images, the sense of line, the apparently naïve drawing, and the sophisticated underlying grid structure. Ricard wrote art criticism as well as poetry; he was often credited as having launched the career of painter Julian Schnabel. In the morning Ricard called his friend at *Artforum* and said he had found the artist he would write his next piece about, as soon as he could find out who it was.

It did not take long for him to find out the artist was Jean-Michel Basquiat. Ricard remembered seeing Basquiat's *Flats Fix* at the Mudd Club but had not fully appreciated it until now. Ricard made an appointment to talk to Jean-Michel about his work, in preparation for the big article.

At the end of the year Ricard published "The Radiant Child," one of the most important articles on Basquiat.[18] The article illustrated three of Basquiat's drawings, one painting, and a "SAMO is dead" graffiti. It discussed him in the context of both graffiti and the alternative exhibitions. It also placed Basquiat's touch right in the tradition of modern painting. "If Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet had a baby and gave it up for adoption," wrote Ricard, "it would be Jean-Michel." Ricard liked the way Basquiat brought elements "off the street" to create his "abandoned cityscape." The poet also praised how Basquiat used text without overstating the case, "Using one or two words he reveals a political acuity, gets the viewer going in the direction he wants."[19]

By this time Basquiat's paintings were selling for $5,000 to $10,000 a piece, and he was creating them very quickly. After the article he was feeling rich. He could not keep track of his money, and he became used to always being able to get cash to spend. He became known for giving large bills to homeless people on the street, which he called paying his taxes. At times he was generous with his friends, but at other

times he became upset at them freeloading off of him. Nosei banned several of his graffiti painter friends from the basement studio because she thought some were taking drawings Jean-Michel had lying around and then selling them back to her later.

Basquiat had always enjoyed hanging out in the clubs, but it had been difficult without money. Now he could buy others drinks, and was surrounded friends, old and new. Nosei remembers that "the money affected him because of drugs. He could afford to buy drugs."[20] He started to use cocaine regularly, which was readily available around town.

In the past Mallouk had been upset with Jean-Michel for freeloading while she paid the rent. Now he was bringing in money, just like he promised he would someday, but things got worse. She became increasingly upset over his seeing other women, hanging out all night or even disappearing for days at a time. The drugs (which she also started using) did not help. She decided to leave and go stay with her sister who was living in Paris. But rather than enjoy the romance of Paris, she spent much of her time feeling down and wandering through the greenery of the Père-Lachaise Cemetery.

With an advance from Nosei, Jean-Michel took a December break from his New York life, visiting his friend Lisa Stroud in the Puerto Rican island of Culebra. René Ricard also came to visit them there. Jean-Michel later brought back a new painting called *Culebra,* based on a Puerto Rican fisherman, and left piles of drawings behind. He spent most of his time working and reworking an unfinished canvas he had brought with him. The finished painting, *Arroz con Pollo,* shows a tall skeletal figure taking a whole chicken from a smoking fire and serving it on a plate to a fleshy and ghostly white woman, naked and exposed with a fork in her hand. Hidden beneath the painting is a "horrible caricature" of Ricard as a white missionary, with a head in the spot the chicken is now.[21]

THEMES IN THE STUDIO

Back in New York, Jean-Michel buried himself in work in the basement of Nosei's gallery. The basement was large with a skylight and two windows in back. Nosei bought him some art books to look through and get ideas, including works on Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock.

"He used to paint many canvases at once," she recalled.[22] His friends often came to hang out while he painted. John Lurie described how "I'd visit his studio, and there would be great paintings that he was working on. Four hours later I'd go back and he had painted all over all of them."[23]

Sometimes Basquiat would paint on a canvas laid out on the floor, others lined up leaning against the walls. He often left footprints on the canvases on the floor and incorporated the marks into the painting. He also started experimenting with commercial gold paint as if commenting on the new wealth his work represented.

Basquiat had also found a way to incorporate his old interest in collage and color xerox, pasting old drawings onto the canvas, or having the drawings photocopied in huge numbers by his gallery assistant. Several untitled works, and *Peso Neto* of December 1981, show a mix of this collage and his earlier skelly court and faces. The result is reminiscent of a city wall covered in graffiti and posters.

Nosei was impressed that, even at 20, Basquiat was "filled with ideas" and had adopted a style of working: "every now and then he would fix upon a theme, and literally work that idea from every conceivable angle." Nosei thought much of his best work was done at her gallery. "He turned out painting after painting with incredible speed, working the themes of the Caribbean and Afro American culture."[24] He also painted many self-portraits in 1982.

"Collectors were fighting to have this painting or that painting," Nosei reminisced. "It was an incredible phenomenon."[25] But what was good for her business was a drawback for his studio. "She used to bring collectors there," said Basquiat, "so it wasn't very private."[26] In fact, he often felt on display.

OBNOXIOUS LIBERALS

There is nothing a modern-art collector likes better than the privileged visit to an artist's studio. Nosei often encouraged collectors to buy whatever they liked. Basquiat complained that "she sold paintings that weren't finished . . . despite my protests."[27] Eventually all this put Jean-Michel on edge. He expressed his response to this situation in two large works from 1982: *Obnoxious Liberals* and *Slave Auction*.

Obnoxious Liberals shows three figures, each in their own third of the canvas. On the left is a bald black figure with both his arms in the air chained to two classical pillars. A box above his head labels him Samson, the biblical character who was enslaved after losing his prodigious strength by having his hair cut off. As a child, Jean-Michel would sit at the table alongside his mother who used to draw scenes out of the Bible, "like Samson breaking the temple down."[28] Here, Basquiat has painted Samson still enslaved, and by making the figure black had also tied it to the American enslavement of Africans. But the scene is more complex than that. On the right side is a short figure in a Texan hat and pink shirt decorated with dollar signs, obviously a 20th-century figure and an enemy of the enslaved black man on the left. The figure in the middle painted in outline on pure red, with his arms raised in a black top hat, is more of a puzzle. Above him is painted the title "Obnoxious Liberals" and below, centered in the canvas, the phrase "not for sale."

In Basquiat's *Slave Auction* the same thin boxy figure in a black top hat is seen, but here he is obviously white. These figures in top hats were commonly portrayed in the early prints of the slavery era, especially in the anti-slavery art, and depicted wealthy slave traders. Prints of slave auctions often showed auctioneers with an arm raised along with buyers on the side.[29]

The auctioneer in Basquiat's modern *Slave Auction* unlocks the mystery of the similar figure in *Obnoxious Liberals*, who is in fact facilitating the sale. Basquiat is using the dynamic of the slave auction as an allegory for the art market and his position in the basement producing work. The white figure with the dollar signs looks just like an art buyer picking out work in the studio. Mallouk confirmed this interpretation: "Jean-Michel paints *Obnoxious Liberals* because he says he is sick of liberal white art collectors."[30]

She claimed Basquiat was so angered by the constant studio visits that one day he "refuse[d] to sell his paintings and wr[ote] 'NOT FOR SALE' on some of them."[31] The bold words written in the center of the canvas are one more protest against the transaction that the painting itself depicts.

His presence in the basement was noticed outside as well, and along with his graffiti past, entered the mythology of Jean-Michel Basquiat. To Basquiat's annoyance, reviewers would mention it, and

in an interview one year later he was asked to talk about the story of him "being locked in a basement and ordered to paint." He answered angrily: "That has a nasty edge to it. I was never locked anywhere. . . . If I were white, they would just call it an 'artist-in-residence,' rather than saying all that stuff."[32]

ONE-PERSON SHOW

In January of 1982, Basquiat moved into a new loft on Crosby Street. Nosei had found it and arranged to pay the rent out of money he was owed. Mallouk, back from Paris, had no place to stay. Jean-Michel bumped into her, told her he was rich now with a big loft in SoHo, and asked her to please move in with him. He was furious when she turned him down, but she later called up to say yes. At first, they were happy and Jean-Michel was attentive. He left the loft every day for his studio and came back with fancy food for her. He was hard at work on his first one-person show, scheduled for March.

His show, Jean-Michel Basquiat, was at Annina Nosei from March 6 to April 1, 1982. The gallery was filled with his paintings on canvas, including *Arroz con Pollo* (1981), *Peso Neto* (1981), *Per Capita* (1981), *Self-Portrait* (1982), and a series of eight word-based drawings on paper.

His father Gérard came with wife Nora, and Jean-Michel was nervous having his father there. But Gérard was very impressed seeing the work on canvas on the clean white walls of a SoHo gallery. "The family was very proud of it, very proud of him becoming an artist, which is what he wanted to be for his entire life. Becoming a bona fide artist was truly quite a feat."[33]

The opening was about half SoHo art types and half old friends and the Mudd Club crowd, surprised at his plush situation. Jean-Michel had been up for two days straight helping prepare the show and attended the opening wearing a designer suit with paint-splattered pants, which he was soon to become known for.

The eight framed works on beautiful off-white paper reused some of his post-SAMO graffiti. "Aaron©" and "famous negro athletes" were both given crowns. "Pay for soup/Build a fort/Set that on fire" was written in poetic form accompanied by just a blob of spray paint, as if to

remind the viewer of its graffiti origins. The *Artforum* review picked out these "evocative and precise" text drawings,[34] and *Art in America* called the "visual pseudo-haikus" the "strongest presences in the show."[35] The final drawing was simple, just "MILK©" centered on the page. René Ricard gushed of this work: "The political implications are intense with a comic nightmare of greed: the patent on milk! This is about as refined as poetry gets."[36]

PER CAPITA

While the drawings looked back, the paintings took the viewer in a new direction. The most important in the show was probably *Per Capita*. It was certainly the largest at over 6 feet high and 12½ feet long. The painting is dominated by a solid black figure, identified as a boxer by his Everlast shorts, standing rooted on his heavy feet holding a torch in one hand, with a halo above his head.

The long canvas is filled with atmospheric layers of brushed paint. On top of these Abstract Expressionist areas are lines and words done in black oil stick. The grid of another street game is drawn to the right of the boxer, and the phrase "PER CAPITA" ("per person"). "E PLURIBUS" is spelled out above the boxers head (from *E pluribus Unum*, the Latin phrase on U.S. coins meaning "out of many, one"), and the per capita income of several states listed on the left, highlighting economic inequality in the United States.

Formally, the black words and the game court work to flatten the surface, as they did in *Red Man*. But here the human figure is not drawn on the ground, but defiantly standing up. The victorious boxer looks even more a symbol of black pride against that background. The visual flip between horizontal and vertical is here used to great effect.

Critics differ on whether the boxer's torch refers to the Statue of Liberty, or to Olympic boxer Muhammad Ali, and whether "E pluribus" is a positive statement about the United States, or an ironic comment on an unfulfilled promise. In any case, the combination of elements creates a masterpiece of affecting abstract paint, dynamic structure, and suggestive political allegory.

The show was a success and received great reviews. But to Basquiat's annoyance critics still mentioned graffiti and the controversy of the

basement studio. One article called Nosei's basement "something of a hothouse for forced growth."[37] In the trendy *Flash Art* magazine, Jeffrey Deitch summed up this hype: "Basquiat is likened to the wild boy raised by wolves, corralled into Annina's basement and given nice clean canvases to work on instead of walls. A child of the streets gawked at by the intelligentsia." But Deitch knew this was a myth: "Basquiat is hardly a primitive. He's more like a rock star."[38]

Despite all that, the critics loved the work, praising the "deftness of paint handling,"[39] his "psychosymbolic iconography,"[40] "innate subtlety of line,"[41] and sophisticated treatment of the surface. Jeanne Silverthorn's review in *Artforum* recognized Basquiat's disillusionment with the world as it is and described the paintings in political terms. She concluded that Basquiat's "poems show a head at work here, and the paintings show a hand," but that he needed to work to "put them together so that one doesn't contradict the other." If he did not, she warned, success might not be good for him.[42]

Jean-Michel may not have heeded the warning. The show sold out and he felt flushed with success. This had a downside, as well. With the success, and increasing amounts of money coming in for his paintings, came increasing pressure to produce more canvases. It seemed like everything he painted could be sold. And there was no one in his personal life or at Nosei's gallery to tell him to slow down and be more selective about his work, which is how artists usually develop and go forward.

BACK TO ITALY

Jean-Michel had produced so many paintings that as soon as the Annina Nosei show closed another show opened at the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles, filled with new paintings Nosei had shipped out. Nosei has also reached an agreement for another visit to Modena. Emilio Mazzoli had done well out of Basquiat's first "SAMO" exhibition, so he and Nosei planned to do it again on a bigger scale.

Just before Basquiat's departure for Italy, he had a huge fight with Mallouk after being out all night. She refused to go and, after missing his plane, he left without her. Eventually things calmed down and she joined him there.

In Italy, Mazzoli gave Basquiat several large canvases and paint supplies, and rented a huge warehouse outside of Modena where the artist could work on large paintings. Without any preparation, Basquiat produced some large work, including one of his well-known paintings, *Profit I*, a punning reference to a previous painting *Prophet I*, and to the financial profit he knew Mazzoli would gain from his work. Jean-Michel was in no mood to be pushed around by his dealers again.

"They set it up for me so I'd have to make eight paintings in a week, for the show the next week," explained Basquiat in an interview later. It was as if the rumors of his forced production at Annina Nosei had come true. "It was like a factory, a sick factory . . . I hated it."[43] The experience made him angry at both Mazzoli and Nosei, and the exhibition was cancelled.

Mazzoli still paid Basquiat, in cash, for all the work he did. Because Basquiat did not have a bank account, he and Mallouk hid the money on themselves to get through customs. At the Rome airport, suspicious customs officers searched them, and when Mallouk took off her boots, the money just fell out. They seemed too young to have this much money legitimately. Jean-Michel, with his dreadlocks, was suspected of being a drug dealer. Eventually, not having found any drugs, Basquiat was able to convince them the money he had was from the sale of his art. They had to wire $100,000 to a Swiss bank account before they could leave for home.

. . . BUILD A FORT, SET THAT ON FIRE

That summer, after returning from Italy, Nosei found Jean-Michel with drugs in the basement studio. He had been using cocaine with friends there, and now she discovered him with heroin. Jean-Michel pleaded with her not to tell his father. The pressure to produce and the experience in Modena may have pushed Basquiat to increase his existing intake of drugs. But the cocaine-induced paranoia would have made these pressures even worse. "He was not in a good state," Nosei said.[44]

Still angry about his horrible time in Italy, Basquiat soon had had enough with Nosei's basement.

While Nosei was away, Basquiat started to slash a painting of the prophets with a knife. Previously he had painted over images he did not like, but now claimed, "it has the ghosts. . . . There were ghosts that were coming through."[45] Altogether he slashed about 10 canvases lined up in the studio. In a fit, he also jumped on and crushed some, and poured white paint on them. He then stormed out of the studio and soon left the gallery for good.

His time with Nosei was another example of his ambiguous relationship with authority figures: another of the forts Jean-Michel built and eventually had to set on fire. He explained the move from her gallery by saying, "I wanted to be a star, not a gallery mascot."[46]

NOTES

1. Steve Hager, *Adventures in the Counterculture: From Hip Hop to High Times* (New York: High Times Books, 2002), p. 209.
2. Annina Nosei, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Jean-Michel Basquiat 1981* (New York: Deitch Projects; Milan: Charta, 2007), p. 85.
3. Hager, *Adventures*, p. 210.
4. Suzanne Mallouk remembers that "Jean said that Twombly taught him that he could scratch things out on the canvas." Jennifer Clement, *The Widow Basquiat* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2001), p. 40.
5. Hager, *Adventures*, p. 210.
6. Annina Nosei, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 85.
7. Gérard Basquiat, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 94.
8. Hager, *Adventures*, p. 211.
9. Anthony Haden-Guest, *True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), p. 128.
10. Haden-Guest, *True Colors*, p. 129.
11. Hagar, *Adventures*, p. 209.
12. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 86.
13. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 91.
14. Richard Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), p. 18.
15. This point is also made by Louis Armand, "Jean-Michel Basquiat©: Identity and the Art of (Dis)Empowerment," *Litteraria Pragensia* (November 21, 2001). http://www.geocities.com/louis_armand/basquiat.html.

16. Annina Nosei, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 86.

17. Lorraine O'Grady, "A Day at the Races: Basquiat and the Black Art World," *Artforum* (April 1993), pp. 10–12. http://lorraineogrady.com/sites/default/files/wr203_basquiatfull.pdf.

18. René Ricard, "The Radiant Child," *Artforum* (December 1981), pp. 35–43. http://www.smartwentcrazy.com/basquiat/text/jmb_radiantchild.htm.

19. Ricard, "The Radiant Child," p. 43.

20. Annina Noisei, in Hager, *Adventures*, pp. 210–11.

21. Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 93. Henry Geldzahler, "Art: From Subways to SoHo, Jean-Michel Basquiat," *Interview* 13 (January 1983), p. 46.

22. Taka Kawachi, ed., *King for a Decade: Jean-Michel Basquiat* (Kyoto: Korinsha Press, 1997), p. 46.

23. John Lurie, in Kawachi, *King for a Decade*, p. 40.

24. Kawachi, *King for a Decade*, p. 46.

25. Hagar, *Adventures*, p. 210.

26. Haden-Guest, *True Colors*, p. 128.

27. Jean-Michel Basquiat, interview with Isabelle Graw, *Wolkenkratzer Art Journal* [Frankfurt] 1 (January/February 1987). Reprinted in Luca Marenzi, *Basquiat* (Milan: Charta, 1999), p. 67.

28. Jean-Michel Basquiat, interview with Becky Johnstone, in Tamra Davis (director), *A Conversation with Basquiat* (21 mins.) USA, 2006. Distributed by Arthouse Films.

29. A figure in a top hat with arms in the air in the act of auctioning off a female slave, surrounded by other white top-hatted figures bidding to buy slaves, is seen in an 1856 print from the *Illustrated London News*. Such scenes also include William Cowper's "Bargaining for Slaves," a plate from his 1826 *The Negro's Complaint: A Poem. To Which Is Added, Pity for Poor Africans* (a children's book with colored woodcuts).

Related images can be seen in the 1839 *Anti-Slavery Almanac*, and in "Joshua, Commanding the Sun to Stand Still," a comment on John C. Calhoun's last speech on the Compromise of 1850, published 1913.

30. Jennifer Clement, *The Widow Basquiat* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2001), p. 80.

31. Clement, *The Widow Basquiat*, p. 80.

32. Jean-Michel Basquiat, interview with Mark Miller, in Paul Tschinkel (producer), *Jean-Michel Basquiat: An Interview,* ART/New York No. 30A, 1998, videocassette. Distributed by Inner Tube Films.

33. Gérard Basquiat, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981,* p. 94.

34. Jeanne Silverthorne, "Jean Michel Basquiat, Annina Nosei Gallery," *Artforum* (Summer 1982), p. 82.

35. Lisa Liebmann, "Jean-Michel Basquiat at Annina Nosei," *Art in America* 70, no. 9 (October 1982), p. 130.

36. René Ricard, "World Crown: Bodhisattva with Clenched Mudra," in Richard Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), p. 47.

37. Suzi Gablik, "Report from New York: The Graffiti Question," *Art in America* 70, no. 9 (October 1982), p. 36.

38. Jeffrey Deitch, "Jean Michel Basquiat at Annina Nosei," *Flash Art* 16, no. 107 (May 1982), pp. 49–50.

39. Silverthorne, "Annina Nosei Gallery," p. 82.

40. Suzi Gablik, "The Graffiti Question," p. 36.

41. Liebmann, "Basquiat at Annina Nosei," p. 130.

42. Silverthorne, "Annina Nosei Gallery," p. 83.

43. Cathleen McGuigan, "New Art, New Money: The Marketing of American Artist," *New York Times Magazine* (February 10, 1985), p. 32.

44. Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981,* p. 88.

45. Basquiat quoted by Annina Nosei, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981,* p. 88.

46. McGuigan, "New Art, New Money," p. 32.

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Chapter 7

FUN

When Basquiat left Annina Nosei's gallery in 1982, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's rap tune "The Message" was an influential platinum hit. The hard-hitting rap lyrics of "The Message," portraying a desperate urban reality, showed the social consciousness of hip-hop. It also suggested that art could deliver a message to a large audience. In a way, Basquiat's collage technique mirrored the way records are sampled and reused in hip-hop.

"The Message" was responding to a real situation. In 1982 unemployment peaked at over 10 percent. This would lessen as the economy grew by just over 4 percent a year from 1982 till 1988. Even this growth was unequal; by 1983 the richest 1 percent of Americans had over a third of the wealth. Many of the rich were concentrated around Los Angeles and New York. Catering to these people, the art market grew even faster than the economy, with rising prices in the auction houses for established work and more galleries in New York showing new artists.

The demand for Jean-Michel's paintings was part of this phenomenon. Like the successful hip-hop artists of today, increasing sales pulled Jean-Michel away from the communities his antiestablishment art was rooted in. But unlike them, he had no real peers in the same position.

He had always been interested in fame, but even as he left the graffiti world behind he still felt like an outsider.

After leaving Nosei's basement studio Basquiat spent a lot of time holed up in his Crosby Street loft. "I had some money; I made the best paintings ever," he said looking back on this period. But he also admitted: "I was completely reclusive, worked a lot, took a lot of drugs. I was awful to people."[1]

The positive review of his Nosei show in *Artforum* had suggested he integrate the "hand" seen in his paintings with the "mind" seen in his little word poems. In the Crosby Street studio he began to do this in a great way. He developed a more hectic painting style, pulling in words and images from all over, creating many dense, satisfying compositions.

CROSBY STREET PAINTING

In the summer of 1982 Basquiat hired a new studio assistant, Stephen Torton, to help make stretchers and prepare canvases for painting. Instead of sending Torton for conventional materials, Basquiat told him to use some thin wooden molding he had around the studio with some heavy-duty canvas, carpet tacks, and twine.[2]

Torton took a back-to-basics approach, resulting in the now famous stretchers with exposed wood crossed at the corners and lashed together with twine. This created a primitive, handmade look and created a ready-made frame. This style enabled Basquiat to use the responsive canvas surface he had gotten used to at Annina Nosei's but still have the funky look of his earlier work on windows and junk from the street. Indeed, many of the canvas stretchers Torton would go on to make were from material he had found on the street.

One of the first stretchers created by Torton is seen in Basquiat's *Jawbone of an Ass* (1982), a large lopsided rectangle. Basquiat pasted on pages of cartoony figures and lists of names from the time of the American Civil War and the ancient Punic Wars (copied from a guidebook on Roman history). Formally, the letters structure the surface into an irregular marked grid. They do not communicate historical information as much as connote the idea of cramming for a test and the irrelevance of such a method of learning history. A row of improvised, impossible

Roman numerals underline this idea. Partly hidden by a crown is a painted list of numbers. Basquiat put these down, totaling what he owed, including Torton's $500 weekly salary.[3]

While Basquiat's drawings were often copied from books, the painted words on his canvases often came from conversations, music, or whatever he heard while painting. When a critic was surprised at the randomness of the references, Basquiat mentioned Robert Rauschenberg and the older Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp as precedents.[4] Duchamp pioneered the idea of the "readymade," an everyday object put in the gallery context and displayed as art. Rauschenberg had used foreign objects in his combines for their color and shape, but memories of their former uses added resonance to the compositions.

One of Basquiat's contributions to modern art was the way he used painting to create his own random foreign objects. He was fascinated by William Burroughs's cut-up technique in writing and connected it to the Dadaist's use of chance in art. Some of Basquiat's canvases from this time were more successful than others in creating balanced and united compositions out of these disparate elements.

Basquiat was finishing paintings as fast as his assistant could make new frames. The production was almost industrial, but the results unique. Basquiat was teeming with ideas. "He was always nine projects ahead," said Torton.[5] There were usually about 30 paintings hanging out at the studio, and Basquiat was often working on 6 or 7 at once, adding new elements till he thought they were done. "I usually put a lot down, and then I take a lot away. And then I put some more down, and I take some more away," said Basquiat. "It's like a constant editing process, usually."[6]

WORDS UNDER ERASURE

Basquiat's painting was unique in its use of words; viewing his paintings often means both seeing and reading. He explained this in different ways. In the modern environment people are constantly surrounded by words. He often used them visually, like brushstrokes. The words came from signs, products, and books, but also from television and conversations. Sometimes when painting Basquiat would hear words and just throw them down. Often they did serve to communicate information,

and he would pick out the words he liked and copy them over and over again. The references added another dimension underneath the visual composition.

He often repeated a phrase several times and often crossed out some of the phrases with a simple line that left the words underneath still visible. Critics thought this called attention to the limits of language and also left a visual record of his painting process.

In Basquiat's hands the technique functioned in different ways at different times, often for purely formal reasons. He explained in 1983 that the words "stick out a little bit too much" and the line through them "sort of blends it in to the rest of the painting."[7] Similarly, in 1987 he said it was "to move them into the background a bit."[8] In between these dates he said the opposite: "I cross out words so you will see them more—the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them."[9] However, when an interviewer asked why he had written the word "PLUTO" twice and crossed one out, he just replied, "Oh, because it wasn't as good a version of Pluto as this one."[10]

THREE STREET KIDS

Basquiat's spontaneous adaptation of Burroughs's cut-up technique, sometimes reacting to events in his daily life, can be seen in the story of two paintings from this time. In 1982 the painting Basquiat did of a girlfriend lying down like Olympia in the Edouard Manet painting was cut in half and reframed to form two paintings: one of her head and the other a detail of the black maid from *Olympia*. It was a reaction to his girlfriend but also commented on the removal of black people from Western art.

After Basquiat spent a day out with Torton and Danny Rosen (his old high school friend and Gray band member), he painted a piece to be called *Three Street Kids*, including portraits of the three of them. This too was cut up, one half becoming *Portrait of Danny Rosen*. The other half was attached to a third panel and reworked to become *In Italian*, finished in 1983. Anatomical and other images and labels (in three languages) were painted into a field in vivid greens and pinks. According to Torton, the words "crown of thorns" above the still visible image of his face were added by Basquiat after an argument between them over a woman. At the bottom of the painting several small student

canvases are attached, like the predella paintings in Italian altarpieces. A 1982 photo shows Basquiat patiently painting on one. The others are covered with marker graffiti by graffitist A1 in Basquiat's studio (see photo in photo essay following page 116).

TRIPS TO THE MUSEUM

For a time, Basquiat's studio became a sort of open house to the young graffiti painters he knew. He sometimes called A1, Phase II, Toxic, and others "our kids." He would feed them, give them small jobs around the studio to earn money, and get Torton to make small, conventional canvases for them to practice their art on. For a time he and Fab 5 Freddy used to organize trips to art museums, as his mother had done with him. He said they had an obligation to themselves as artists to learn something about art. They used to go regularly to the Metropolitan, where they could see masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance, African tribal artwork, or a Jackson Pollock drip painting. One "museum day," Basquiat brought an image of a Roman belt buckle back from the Met, which appears in *Notary* (1983).

Other times Basquiat got tired of the constant interruptions and cut off his phone. When people came by the loft he would send his assistant to the window to tell him who was there. If Basquiat gave Torton the thumbs down, the often disbelieving visitor would be told that Basquiat was not in.

Basquiat was spending huge amounts of money on food, art supplies, and also on various drugs. At times he would paint for several days straight, without sleep. Or he would come back from the Mudd Club in the early hours and start painting, under the influence of cocaine. The cocaine use could result in paranoid episodes, and in crashes, after which he would decide to stop. And then, he would start up again. Suzanne Mallouk said that she started smoking heroin to help come down from the cocaine highs. Basquiat also used that drug and could draw quietly on it, patiently copying words and images onto paper for hours. For now at least, it did not seem to interfere with his work, and the cash kept coming in.

Many New York galleries were still clamoring to represent Basquiat, but he was suspicious and felt he did not need them now. Paintings were

done in batches and sent off to Gagosian in Los Angeles, Bischofberger in Zurich (who now handled his European sales), and a few one-off shows in New York. Many of these sold out. Bischofberger also handled Andy Warhol and was instrumental in finally bringing Basquiat into closer contact with his idol.

TWO HEADS

Although Andy Warhol was still the world's biggest art celebrity, many critics already thought he would never again match his best work, the Pop Art of the 1960s. Bischofberger was interested in promoting his younger artists, but also in keeping Andy in the public eye. He had an agreement with Warhol that he could bring selected younger artists to the Factory, where Warhol would make a photo silkscreen portrait of them. In return, they would give one of their works to Warhol. When Bischofberger suggested Basquiat, Warhol was not sure at first. He still remembered the young teen who sold postcards and T-shirts, and was "too forward" in asking for money.[11]

On October 4, 1982, when Warhol and Basquiat met for an appointment, Jean-Michel offered to return the $40 he had borrowed from Warhol in bits and pieces while still on the street. An embarrassed Warhol told him to keep it.

Warhol used a Polaroid camera to take instant pictures of Basquiat that he could later turn into a photo-silkscreen portrait. Instead of staying for lunch, Jean-Michel left, taking a Polaroid of him and Warhol together. Two hours later, Torton knocked at the door with a still-wet painting from Basquiat of him and Warhol.

Basquiat, anxious to outdo Warhol, had finished off the work in a flash and Torton had rushed the five-foot-square wet painting from Crosby Street to the Union Square Factory, where he presented it to Warhol in his exercise room. The painting was titled *Dos Cabezas* (Two Heads), and painted in two halves: a boyish grinning Basquiat on the right with dreads sticking up and a pale Warhol on the left in a typical pensive pose with his hand rubbing on his chin. Everyone at the Factory was impressed, including Andy who said, "I'm really jealous—he is faster than me."[12]

Soon Warhol started on his portrait of Basquiat. The exchange of portraits was the beginning of a friendship between the artists of different generations.

LOVE INTERESTS

While Basquiat's friendship with Warhol was developing, his relationship with Mallouk continued to deteriorate. The intensity of the arguments is expressed in Basquiat's 1982 *Self-Portrait with Suzanne*, the two figures standing in a ground covered by sharp angles and letters, their bodies tentatively reaching for each other, while the angry heads spout speech balloons of more scribbled nonsense letters.

They were seeing each other, on and off, but things came to a head eventually and Mallouk could not take the emotional difficulties of living with him. Back in her apartment, filled with Jean-Michel's work, she could no longer bear these reminders of him. She threw out some paintings and, in a sort of ritual to get him out of her mind, gathered up more and took it outside his loft. After soaking it with lighter fluid, she created a bonfire of his burning art in the middle of the narrow street below his window. Basquiat went down to talk to her, but he did not stop the fire. He knew why she needed to do it.

Basquiat now had a new woman in his life. Torton remembered him coming back to the studio one day and saying, "You will never guess who I slept with." It turned out to be the soon-to-be pop star Madonna. The news was not exciting to Torton who did not know who she was, but Basquiat seemed "excited because he identified her as an up-and-coming person."[13]

Madonna had moved to New York in 1977, singing and working as a dancer while trying to break through in the music business. When they met in the downtown clubs in the fall of 1982 she was a part of the scene, though her first single had not yet been released.

Madonna was without a permanent place to stay and soon moved into his Crosby Street loft. That November Madonna's first single, "Everybody," hit the streets, and soon hit the charts.

The attractive dreadlocked Jean-Michel was just her type, but she was also enthralled with his seemingly natural talent and would sometimes just sit and watch him paint. Most of Madonna's relationships

had been with people who could help her in the music business, but this was different. "He was one of the few people I was truly envious of," and she thought the feeling was mutual. "He used to say he was jealous of me because music is more accessible and it reached more people. He loathed the idea that art was appreciated by an elite group."[14]

Madonna felt "like the luckiest girl in the world" when out at a dinner party with Basquiat, Keith Haring, and Andy Warhol.[15] However, their lifestyles were completely different. She got up early, ate health foods, and avoided drugs. When Basquiat disappeared, "she would go nuts," but he was sometimes hiding while on a binge because he knew she would disapprove.[16]

Their differences would soon strain the relationship, but they both felt equal measures of attraction and envy, and enjoyed being with someone who could be called their creative equal. Both their careers were heading sky high. And as Madonna's first single was rising in the charts, Basquiat was having a new New York show, not in SoHo, but in a more accessible and less elite gallery known for showing graffiti.

FUN GALLERY

With SoHo lofts becoming less and less affordable, more young artists began living on the Lower East Side, especially in what is known as the East Village. Underground actress Patti Astor had an idea to open a different sort of gallery in the low-rent storefronts of the East Village. Her gallery started by showing graffiti taggers but soon branched out. Her third show was Kenny Scharf, who dubbed the nameless gallery "Fun." For a short period there were many East Village galleries catering to their own style.

Basquiat and Nosei had turned down an approach from Fun while he was at her gallery. But at the urging of Diego Cortez, Torton, and others, Basquiat finally agreed to do one show at the gallery where Fab 5 Freddy and Futura 2000 had shown their stuff. "I did that show as a favor to the Fun Gallery," he said.[17] Mallouk remembers he did it "to demonstrate his solidarity with the graffiti artists," but also because it was a hip show that helped his art career.[18]

Jean-Michel worked hard creating new work and was up all night with Torton installing the show in the decrepit storefront. Works

were hung on walls of rough old brick quickly painted over, or new Sheetrock put up for the show that had not even been painted. This just added to the East Village look and matched the paintings on their unusual supports.

The show opened on November 4, with crowds filling the gallery and East 10th Street outside. Mallouk and Madonna were both there, as was Cortez, who loved the show and noticed how much Basquiat was enjoying himself. "He was on cloud nine that night."[19] Celebrities Paul Simon and Andy Warhol also liked the work. Bruno Bischofberger arrived in a limousine, and despite initial misgivings about Fun, thought the show the best he had seen from Basquiat. "The work was very rough, not easy, but likable," he said. "It was subtle and not too chic. The opening was great, too. It drew young blacks and Puerto Ricans, along with limousines from uptown."[20]

The show was a potent mix of the new expressive figurative painting he developed at Nosei, with the funkier, handmade energy seen in the alternative shows and his early painting on found objects. A strange object on the cement floor looked more like a part of an obscure religious ritual than a painting or sculpture. Titled *Head of a Fryer,* it was a canvas-covered milk crate on a wooden step stool, coated with acrylic paint and covered on all sides with words, a crown, and a skelly court in oil stick. Most of the paintings were on the new primitive stretchers, of which there were now many types. Several paintings of boxers were done by Basquiat on boxy canvases, stretched over thick wooden pallets found in the street. Basquiat told Torton to use just a few staples when fixing the canvas, leaving a unique loose edge. The work creates a tension between the huge heavy frame and his simple drawings made on top. One white-on-black painting showed a skull-like cartoon head grinning under the crown symbol. It was labeled in slanting capitals "SUGAR RAY ROBINSON," the great boxing champion also known for his flamboyant lifestyle and escapades at Harlem's Cotton Club. In the middle of another thick painting Basquiat fixed a recognizable drawing of boxer Joe Louis sitting solidly in the corner of the ring in front of the cartoony images of his trainer, manager, and others. Joe Louis was a hero for the African American community when he won the World Heavyweight crown in 1937, and a hero for America when he beat the German Max Schmeling, the pride of the Nazis, the next year. But

Louis ended an amazing 12-year reign as heavyweight champion owing over a million dollars in back taxes, suffering from drug addiction, mental breakdown, and financial ruin. Basquiat added a thorny halo, not a crown, above the black boxer, and painted around the drawing was the title "ST. JOE LOUIS SURROUNDED BY SNAKES." It was a tribute to the boxer but also by analogy a jibe at the art world and its "snakes," dealers, gallery owners, collectors, and critics.

If boxers had been Basquiat's symbol of victorious black men, and a metaphor for how talented black people were exploited by the establishment, he now added another example that he was to come back to throughout his career: jazz musicians. The triptych (three-part canvas) *Charles the First* referred to one of Basquiat's heroes, Charlie Parker, the great jazz saxophone player and innovator of bebop. Parker had become addicted to heroin and died before his time, troubled by drugs, drink, and depression. The painting was filled with energetic scrawls, and each mark, whether a drawing, a letter, or a cross-out, was solid and self-assured. It was abstract but full of references. The crowns were a tribute to Parker, and phrases like "haloes fifty nine cent" and "most young kings get their head cut off" (the word "young" crossed out) were a reminder of how short-lived Parker's greatness was. There are none of Basquiat's usual copyright symbols, but in the middle panel the word "copyright" literally spells out the way the record companies were able to keep making money from Parker's music, for which he was paid little at the time. A cross and "Pree 1951–1953" referred to Parker's daughter, who died as a small child. Parker blamed himself for not being able to afford better medical care and that contributed to his own mental instability.

The analogy between jazz musicians and Basquiat's position in the art world was more immediate than he thought. Basquiat later complained how unprofessional the show was and how he never got paid.

Despite the finances, the show was another great boost for his career, and the reviews were glowing. Many now think it was his best show in his lifetime. Twin reviews in *Flash Art* were raves. "Jean-Michel's show at the Fun Gallery was his best show yet. He was at home; the hanging was perfect, the paintings more authentic than ever," wrote one reviewer.[21] Another one found that "gut emotions lie behind the phrases and images, not the desire to make neo-expressionist commodities."[22]

1982

After the Fun show, Geldzahler interviewed Basquiat for Warhol's *Interview* magazine. Basquiat was also photographed by James Van Der Zee, the great black photographer famous for his pictures of figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Afterward, Basquiat painted *VNDRZ,* the photographer's portrait.

The year 1982 was a great one for the painter. In 1982 Basquiat had become a professional artist—making a living from the sale of his paintings. It was already a significant income. He had six solo shows that year: Annina Nosei, Fun, Gagosian in Los Angeles, and three in Europe. Also in 1982, he became the youngest artist ever, at 21, to show at the German Documenta (a huge once-every-five-years exhibition of recent art). At least 200 of his paintings are dated 1982. In that year he was mentioned in at least 15 American newspapers and art magazines, and the attention kept growing.

LOS ANGELES

In December, Basquiat flew to Los Angeles to prepare for his upcoming show. He brought his friends from the graffiti world, Rammellzee and Toxic, with him. While there he produced the rap record *Beat-Bop,* featuring Rammelzee's unique nasal "slanguage," and designed the white- on-black cover.

Basquiat worked in an enormous studio in Venice, California, rented by dealer Larry Gagosian, who also provided a new assistant named John Seed. Seed arrived to find Basquiat had made himself at home; the floor was cluttered with art-history books, cassette tapes, and lots of drawings, some already walked on. There were also oil sticks, paintbrushes, rollers, and other art supplies lying around, as well as wads of cash and bags of marijuana.[23] Basquiat painted on many identical canvases there but missed the more unusual shapes. Without reproducing what Torton had done, Basquiat and Seed came up with some ideas. Seed built several large triptychs on thick supports, prepared with a black ground. One became *Horn Players* (1983), portraying the black bebop musicians Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Like the triptych *King Charles I* (1982), this work is covered by references to their lives, music, and the music industry.

While Basquiat was in Los Angeles, Madonna flew in to visit for the Christmas holidays. They spent Christmas Day together at Gagosian's beach house. But all the time they were in LA they never saw the sea together because he hardly woke up till the sun went down. By the time they returned to New York, the relationship was ending. She asked Steve Torton: "How can you stand him? He's so depressing."[24] Madonna's brother blamed Basquiat's drug use and the fact that Madonna could not stand how it made him act.

The two had some deeply emotional moments at the end of their short relationship, which left Basquiat upset, angry, and crying for days. "When I broke up with him he demanded I give back the paintings," said Madonna. He took back all the work he had given her except one small painting that still sits on a little marble ledge in the guest bathroom of Madonna's New York apartment.[25]

Basquiat returned to Los Angeles for his Gagosian show in March of 1983. The opening was filled with people, and the huge gallery with its polished arched ceiling was quite a contrast to the cramped and funky Fun Gallery. According to Seed, the social pressure was too much for Basquiat "and he showed up very late and very stoned, listening to a Walkman."[26]

Horn Players and a few other new triptychs stood on one long wall, opposite a row of seven square paintings of the same size, including *Hollywood Africans* (with portraits of Basquiat, Rammellzee, and Toxic). It looked like a hypermarket for paintings. While Basquiat's stays in Los Angeles were more enjoyable than the Italy trip, once again he felt pressured to produce and regretted the gallery selling paintings he did not want released.[27]

TOUSSAINT L'OVERTURE VERSUS SAVONAROLA

Back in New York Basquiat started working on several long multipanel works. Torton would attach the separate canvases with piano hinges so they could fold up and fit into the elevator. Each canvas could be created separately, and sometimes they were then mixed up and put together in another order, in a conscious version of William Burroughs's cut-up technique. They were stored in the loft folded up; when a dealer

or collector came over Basquiat or his assistant could grab one end and run across the loft, the painting unfolding like an accordion.

One of these was an immense 1983 work composed of seven panels hinged together, almost 20 feet long, titled *Toussaint L'Overture versus Savonarola* (Basquiat seems to have misspelled L'Ouverture). On the right is L'Ouverture, the freed slave and general in Haiti's victorious revolution, looking like Picasso's *Man with a Sword*. An abstract panel is covered with cotton cloth, and two panels have silly faces derived from comic books. One of them is Savonarola, identified by his name crossed out and written again, and his dates, 1452–1498. Savonarola was a Dominican friar in Renaissance Italy who preached against vanity and vice and led a short-lived political takeover of Florence. One of the final three panels was never touched by Basquiat. In another way of incorporating chance effects, Basquiat yelled "Stop!" as Torton was adding a brown background for him. The half-brown canvas with the brushy division was included as is. If the mix of existing canvases is one form of the cut-up, the collage surface of the final two panels on the left is another, made from photocopies of Basquiat's earlier drawings, including a drawing labeled "Malcom X versus Al Jolson."

Critics have interpreted the painting in different ways. One suggested that "Basquiat might have seen himself as L'Ouverture, and the thought of burning an unfavorable critic or two at the stake might have appealed to him."[28] Yet another thought that the "versus" should not be seen as a battle of opposites but like the competition of peers in rap contests.[29] A third stated that it might be the laws of chance that put these two canvases together into a collage-like painting.[30] However, the title suggests a connection, and Basquiat had used "versus" before as a sign for a fundamental opposition.

The *Malcom X versus Al Jolson* drawing gives a clue, as did his previous use of *Tobacco versus Red Chief*, as to what Basquiat means. In each pairing, there is a leader of oppressed people on one side: a Native American chief placed in a reservation; the revolutionary fighter against racism, Malcolm X; and General Toussaint. On the other side are various symbols of oppression. Al Jolson was a white entertainer whose act in blackface is now considered a racist caricature. Tobacco plantations supplanted Native American land and used black slaves. As for Savonarola, he would have been seen in the context of the Moral Majority in 1983.

This 1980s right-wing movement of Christian fundamentalism would have suggested parallels to Savonarola's religious takeover of politics, book burning, and preaching against secular art. Basquiat was creating art, not a message board. But he did throw his political beliefs into the mix, and often used historical figures to refer to contemporary conflicts.

BLACK AND WHITE

Lorraine O'Grady, the Haitian American artist who had been impressed by Basquiat earlier, wanted to introduce him to the black art world when she curated her Black and White Show at the Kenkeleba Gallery in the spring of 1983. The show was to feature black-and-white work by black-and-white artists. She wanted it to star Basquiat. She went to visit him in the Crosby Street loft and saw the new work covered with words. "I'm not making paintings," he told her, "I'm making tablets." He promised vaguely to send a work to the show.

After seeing how he used sources, she gave him her copy of Burchard Brentjes's *African Rock Art*, which provided images for his later painting. But O'Grady said she could also feel "cocaine paranoia" in the loft and knew he would not lend her the paintings. "I knew the art world was about to eat him up and before it did, I hoped to connect him to black artists who, picked up in the '60s and then dropped, could give him perspective on its mores in a way his graffiti friends could not."[31]

THE DEATH OF MICHAEL STEWART

Michael Stewart, a thin and gentle black man with dreadlocked hair, was an aspiring model and artist and occasionally dabbled in graffiti. He was also going out with Suzanne Mallouk, who was making her emotional break from Jean-Michel.

Stewart was caught by the police writing graffiti in the subway station. Quickly subdued, he was booked at the Union Square station for resisting arrest and unlawful possession of marijuana, and transferred to Bellevue Hospital where he arrived unconscious. He never regained consciousness.

Mallouk went with his family to see him in the hospital. He had cuts and bruises on his body, and doctors told them he was brain dead and hemorrhaged in a way that suggested strangulation or an illegal

choke hold. Stewart died on September 28, 1983, after two weeks in a coma.

Mallouk remembered how upset and "vulnerable" Jean-Michel felt after the death. When he first heard of the beating he spent the night drawing black skulls.[32] There was palpable anger all over New York on the night of Stewart's death. Keith Haring, upset at Stewart's death, told Warhol that he himself had been caught many times doing graffiti but was let go by the cops because he was white. Warhol noted that the dreadlocked Stewart "looked like Jean-Michel."[33]

Basquiat painted a scene on Haring's graffiti-covered wall referring to the death of Stewart. In it, two blue-uniformed and pink-faced cops swing large nightsticks at a simple figure drawn in a black silhouette. Above it he wrote the word "¿defacement©?"

Mallouk went around to all the galleries that sold work by graffiti artists and got them to donate money for the family's investigation into the death. Haring put up much of the money. They helped organize a benefit night at the Danceteria nightclub, where Madonna performed her hits "Everybody" and "Borderline." But when Mallouk tried to get Basquiat involved, he just kept saying, "It could have been me! It could have been me!"[34]

Four sleepless nights later Basquiat decided to join Andy Warhol who was about to leave for Europe. Basquiat's life was in turmoil. In short order he had left his first gallery, broken up with two girlfriends, and now was dealing with the violent death of someone he knew.

In Europe he confided in Warhol that he was depressed and wanted to kill himself. But Warhol just laughed and told him to get some sleep. Basquiat did not know what he should be doing. He initially responded to Stewart's death in his art but felt too vulnerable to follow Mallouk and Haring into activity. He was not tied into O'Grady's black artist's community, or any other network that could provide support. Warhol's facade of indifference was an alternative example of how to act. When Basquiat chose to follow Warhol to Europe, he was also choosing Warhol's way of dealing with things, if unconsciously.

But even while Warhol acted like there was a glass wall around him, he still kept an eye out. He just never let on what he really thought. Basquiat had a deeper sense of injustice, and cared too much to be that

removed all the time. Increasingly, when Jean-Michel wanted to block out the world, he turned to drugs.

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Jean-Michel Basquiat's enigmatic graffiti writing of 1980–81 was captured in the film Downtown 81, *directed by Edo Bertoglio. (Copyright © Zeitgeist. Courtesy of Photofest.)*

Basquiat with Diego Cortez at the New York/New Wave exhibition at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, New York, 1981. Cortez's alternative exhibition gave Basquiat the exposure that introduced him to the SoHo art world. (Courtesy of Photofest.)

Basquiat (with his hair in dreads) in his Crosby Street studio with Fred Braithwaite (Fab 5 Freddy, left), his father Gerard Basquiat, and Gerard's wife Nora Fitzpatrick (on right). In the background is Basquiat's 1982 triptych, Quality Meets for the Public. *(Photograph, Stephen Torton, 1982.)*

Basquiat in his Crosby Street loft, 1982, painting a canvas incorporating a portrait of Stephen Torton that would later be known as In Italian *(1983). (Photo by Stephen Torton, 1982.)*

Basquiat painting outdoors. Starting with the head, without preparatory sketches, Basquiat created this work with a combination of paintbrushes, squeezing paint straight from the tube, spreading it with his hands and adding the white lines with oil stick. (Photo by UrbanImage.tv/Lee Jaffe.)

Basquiat finishing the above painting, Saint Moritz, 1983. (Photo by Urban Image.tv/Lee Jaffe.)

Basquiat with his friend, artist Keith Haring (right) at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. (Photo courtesy of Photofest.)

Basquiat and Andy Warhol stand in front of one of their many collaborative paintings. (Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol, 1985. Photo by Tseng Kwong Chi © 1985 Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc. New York. www.tsengkwongchi.com)

Chapter 8

REACHING A PEAK

Every other year, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York attempts to sum up the state of American art at the time. Its Biennial exhibitions only accept paintings done in the last two years. To be included in it is a sign that one is taken seriously not just by the commercial gallery owners, but by the museum curators who make history. The Whitney Biennial of 1983 introduced an entire new generation of painters, and at the age of 22, Basquiat was one of the youngest artists ever to be included. With him were new artists like Jenny Holzer and Keith Haring, along with many older and more established artists. Hanging in this context was another sign Basquiat had hit the big time. The same month he had his second show at the Gagosian gallery in Los Angeles.

The Whitney had chosen Basquiat's *Untitled* (Head) from 1981, and a three-panel painting with faces and anatomical drawings called *Dutch Settlers*. Andy Warhol was impressed by the excitement of the exhibition, which reminded him of how it was in the 1960s, and wrote in his diary, "These kids are selling everything—Jean Michel Basquiat's show sold out in Los Angeles."[1]

In an interview for *Art News* published in 1983, Basquiat joked, "Maybe I'm selling my soul to the devil or something," referring to his sudden rise from graffiti artist to star of the art world.[2]

After this show, Basquiat started to think about being represented by a top New York gallery and of moving into a nicer living and studio space. Warhol owned just the place for him, a former coach house on Great Jones Street, which was newly vacant. Warhol rented the loft building to Basquiat for $4,000 a month, which Basquiat figured he could afford. The space included a large second-floor studio with room for painting and storing finished works, a kitchen on the side, an upstairs sleeping area, and additional space on the ground floor.

In August of 1983, Basquiat moved from Crosby Street and bought some nice designer furnishings. Basquiat's friend Shenge Ka Pharoah was now acting as his assistant and moved into the space downstairs. Shenge was a thin artist who spoke with a noticeable Barbados accent and wore a long beard, dreadlocks, and often African-style clothing. They talked about their shared interests in African traditions and art of the African Diasporas.

GRIOTS

In the winter of 1983–84, Basquiat again left New York for warmer weather. The assistant in his Los Angeles studio had put together several large surfaces made out of horizontal wooden planks, like a piece of solid fence turned on end. In 1984 works like *Gold Griot* and *Flexible*, Basquiat covered these surfaces with powerful figures based on West African "griots," perhaps reflecting his discussions with Shenge. The griot (pronounced "GREE-oh") is a West African storyteller: not just an entertainer but an important and respected figure who keeps a family's history and a community's traditions alive through storytelling. Both *Gold Griot* and *Flexible* show a large black figure centered against a solid color background. Both figures are covered with oil-stick lines outlining elliptical eyes and decorating the face, and drawing an X-ray-like view of the interior of the body. In *Flexible* the lungs and esophagus are drawn on the torso, the face is grimacing, and the two arms are fused above the head, completing a shape that frames the figure and suggests a closed flow of energy. In *Gold Griot*, the wooden slats are

transformed by a rich gold paint; the rectangular black body is filled with a white grid-like rib cage; and the grinning face is full of colorful lines and decorations based on African masks. Sports figures and jazz musicians had served as metaphors for the position of a black artist in Basquiat's earlier work. He was now extending his references back to Africa and comparing his work to the griot tradition. Drawings, like one of the *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta,* where he labels a black man holding a guitar both a "griot" and a "bluesman," help tie those traditions together.

Two more of these dark figures with decorated heads and visible internal organs show up in the 1984 masterpiece *Grillo.* The word "grillo," Spanish for cricket, is pronounced "GREE-oh," and is used by Basquiat as a pun on the earlier griot painting. The 17-foot-long wooden structure, reminiscent of Rauschenberg's combines, has parts that jut out over a foot from the wall and are covered with beautiful abstract painting. One griot figure wears a halo and another one of Basquiat's three-pointed crowns. Behind them is a busy collage of Basquiat's word drawings, which explicitly connect Africa to African American traditions from "Ogun" (a Yoruba war god) and Nsibi drawings to "British West Indies," and "Well You Needn't" (a bebop tune). Two long boards are covered with jutting nails, repeating the practice seen in Nkisi power figures, African sculptures of the Kongo peoples.[3] Next to one board a tall New York City building is drawn and covered with a spray-paint gesture that connects the traditional African practices to urban graffiti.

In the 1984 griot paintings Basquiat had moved from his more specific social and political references, and busier canvases, to a new spiritual content and simpler presentation. But his work still jumped between styles, including the more random-seeming approach to content without a clear message.

Awash with money from sales of his paintings, Basquiat flew from Los Angeles to Hawaii, where he rented a ranch in a remote part of the island of Maui. After setting up a studio there with materials sent from Los Angeles, he paid for his family—Gérard, Nora, and younger sister Jeanine—to fly out, along with several friends. Paige Powell, advertising director of Warhol's *Interview* magazine who Basquiat had started dating, also flew out to see him there. He returned to

New York in March but came back to the Hawaii ranch several times after that.

JOINING MARY BOONE

"There was a period of about a year and a half, when it was impossible to wake up in the morning and not hear about Jean-Michel Basquiat," remarked top SoHo gallery owner Mary Boone.[4] Bruno Bischofberger was trying to get Basquiat into Boone's gallery. Basquiat "was very unsure of this prospect, though he considered it a good move," said Paige Powell; he didn't like "becoming an artist for another dealer."[5] Boone was initially worried the artist might be a passing fad, but was finally convinced his work held up next to other contemporary masters.

In March of 1984, they agreed. "I wanted to be in a gallery with older artists," Basquiat explained.[6] He was thrilled to be in the same gallery that showed the big new names Julian Schnabel and David Salle and might have thought it would finally keep reviewers from associating him with graffiti painters.

Boone was famous as a trendy gallery owner getting almost as much publicity as her artists at the time. For some, that showed she was good at her job, getting publicity and selling the work she represented. For others, she was a symbol that hype was taking over the art world.

The entire art world was buzzing. This was due partly to the hyped Neo-Expressionist painters after years of abstraction and intellectual art. But it was due even more to a booming economy, creating a large audience who could afford to buy modern art. The boom in the stock market, followed by insurance and real estate, brought about a new phenomenon: the yuppies of the 1980s, with lots of money to spend.

The sale of Julian Schnabel's *Notre Dame* in 1983 for $93,500 marked the beginning of the rapid expansion of the art market after a recession. This was a remarkable amount at the time for a young living artist, but it was only to go up from there as investors got in on the bandwagon of rising prices. In the spring of 1984, Basquiat's *Untitled* (Head) sold for $19,000 at auction; not nearly as much as the Schnabel, but considerably more than the $4,000 it had sold for at Nosei's gallery a few years earlier.

Basquiat was experiencing the difficulties of living with fame. He said that the idea of an artist working quietly in his studio was impossible these days, with people ringing his doorbell every 15 seconds, and even writing about him on page six of the *New York Post* when he went out to dinner.[7] He complained about it to Andy Warhol, the expert on the subject, who wrote in his diaries: "Jean Michel's finding out how you have to be a business, how it all stops being just fun, and then you wonder, What is art? Does it really come out of you or is it a product? It's complicated."[8]

In May of 1984, only two months after Basquiat joined Mary Boone's gallery, she gave him his first show. The paintings in this show were on conventional canvases, none of the handmade stretchers of the Fun show, or the painting on slats of wood he did in Los Angeles. Many of them were on the same 60-inch-square canvas, and most without the complex layering and the painted words seen in earlier work. Mary Boone wanted a tidy presentation of a few carefully selected works, but Basquiat pushed for including as many works as he could, so some of the square paintings were hung in rows one over the other.

One of the more humorous paintings in the show was *Brown Spots*, a portrait of Warhol as a banana, hung on a wall by itself. *Trumpet*, crowded by other paintings, nonetheless conveyed the energy of his jazz paintings. The trumpet player had a head similar to his griot paintings, with a black crown on top and repeated EEEE's expressing the syncopated noise of the instrument.

All eyes were on Basquiat's first show at Boone. The show sold out, but the reviews were mixed, some thinking this work was becoming self-conscious and tame. The smaller square canvases looked too much like conventional commodities. "These new paintings are too charming, they lack the nitty-gritty hip-hop and the jagged power that his last New York show at the Fun Gallery emanated," stated the review in *Flash Art*.[9] Annina Nosei thought the work in this show missed some of Basquiat's earlier political content: "The show that he did with Mary Boone was not as interesting for me. I didn't clearly see themes in the work."[10]

The show was given a mostly positive review by *New York Times* critic Vivian Raynor.[11] She started by noting Basquiat's Haitian heritage, his start as SAMO, and his almost overnight success. She found

"remarkable" for someone with no formal training "the educated quality of Basquiat's line and the stateliness of his compositions." She admitted that "the artist appears to know his mainstream modernism well." However, she then linked his background to what might be "voodoo" in the paintings and a strong sense of "Africanness." This was a sensitive area for Jean-Michel. At times he did refer to Africa in his work, and, like Picasso, could be influenced by tribal art. But he was born in Brooklyn and did not want to be seen as a "primitive" painter.

Just as sensitive to him were the suggestions he was artistically indebted to Warhol. *Flash Art* called the work "fresh out of the Factory," meaning overly influenced by Warhol. Raynor's review mentioned *Brown Spots* (and a Warhol portrait of Basquiat in another show) as "a symptom of too much too soon." Raynor's positive but ambivalent attitude was strengthened by her conclusion. "Right now, Basquiat is a very promising painter, who has a chance of becoming a very good one, as long as he can withstand the forces that would make of him an art-world mascot."[12] That was just the word Basquiat was trying to get away from.

For this show Boone was charging from $10,000 to $25,000 a painting, a good investment for her clients. If Basquiat kept producing good work, she would raise prices over time. The pricing bothered Jean-Michel, when Schnabel and David Salle were selling for more, but he accepted the reasoning. "David Salle's been at it longer, I know," he said to the *New York Times Magazine*, "I should be patient, right?"[13]

Jean-Michel's reputation looked like it would continue to rise. The same month as his first show at Mary Boone, he was included in "An Inaugural Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture," a monumental group show at the reopening of the Museum of Modern Art, where he used to visit as a child. Then in August he had his first one-person retrospective at a museum, extremely unusual for a 23-year-old artist. Jean-Michel Basquiat: Paintings 1981–1984 opened at an Edinburgh, Scotland, museum called the Fruitmarket, traveled to the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London, and then to Rotterdam.

COVER BOY

Boone was famous for her promotion of her artists, and toward the end of the year she was talking to the *New York Times Magazine* about

a story on new artists that would feature Basquiat on the cover. In September, the art reporter, Cathleen McGuigan, took Basquiat and Warhol out for dinner to question them for the interview. Even Warhol was impressed that Basquiat would be on the cover. Jean-Michel was often suspicious of interviewers but opened up to her, even discussing issues in his life she would not use in the article. Warhol joked that the "right woman can get anything out of him."[14]

McGuigan was also coming over to the studio with a photographer to follow up on the interview, get a good shot, and watch him paint. Jean-Michel acted a bit casual about the article, "Oh, *The New York Times Magazine*, da da da da," but he knew what it meant.[15] The Neo-Expressionist Julian Schnabel had just been on the front page of the *New York Times* arts section, but even he did not get the color magazine.[16] Jean-Michel had always wanted to be famous, and this could introduce him to a whole new audience. Positive publicity might also counteract some of the negative reviews of his last show.

When McGuigan and the photographer, Lizzie Himmel, arrived, they looked around the studio. It was cluttered with canvases and other art materials as well as stylish furniture. Spread around were the objects he used as inspiration in his work, including art books, history books, African sculpture and masks, and pages of his own drawings.

A rack held finished paintings, and there were others leaning against the wall, different from the smaller works at his last Mary Boone show. They could see *Flexible*, brought back from LA, and an unfinished painting with the words "To Repel Ghosts" written on it.

Against one wall was a large multipaneled work of patches of color, meandering lines and a dark, threatening figure in profile against a surface of horizontal wooden boards painted a silvery gray. The green from a long vegetable form painted on the left also splattered the hard studio floor underneath.

Jean-Michel's look for the interview (barefoot, in an Armani suit with paint splattered at the bottom) gave the impression he was more concerned with his art than material things. But it also showed off that he could afford to buy new expensive suits anytime he wanted.

As part of the preparation for the article, McGuigan was to watch Basquiat paint. He stood in front of one canvas, larger than he was. She could see that it was not a fresh canvas but something that had

been painted over in white. Jean-Michel said it was a painting he never finished, and now he was starting over. Basquiat liked the buildup of textures and the ghost of an earlier version showing through. He squirted brown paint onto the canvas directly from the tube and nonchalantly began dragging it across the surface. As McGuigan sat in the studio and watched his brush push the paint across the canvas, a brown face began to emerge. "The black person is the protagonist in most of my paintings," he told her. "I realized that I didn't see many paintings with black people in them."[17]

McGuigan asked him about the presence of words in his paintings. "There are about 30 words around you all the time, like 'thread' or 'EXIT,'" he explained.[18] It made sense: Basquiat painted from what was around him, and where he was living you were more likely to see words on signs, advertisements, or newspapers than to see a tree. If the words or images in Basquiat's art did not always seem to go together, it was because it was a more accurate reflection of the information overload in modern society. But Basquiat also used letters in his paintings as visual marks to balance or add energy to the composition, "like brushstrokes," he told McGuigan.[19]

Basquiat seemed pleased with this recent work, less busy than that at Fun. "I think I'm more economical now, every line means something," he said. "People think I'm burning out, but I'm not," Jean-Michel confided in the interview. "Some days I can't get an idea, and I think, man, I'm just washed up, but it's just a mood."[20]

Jean-Michel was in a confident mood when the photographer asked to shoot him in his studio. For the picture that ended up on the cover, Jean-Michel chose as a backdrop the large multipaneled work on boards he had done earlier. He sat in a leisurely pose and stuck his leg out with his bare foot on an overturned chair. Jean-Michel posed as if he owned the world. In his hand were a paint tube and brush, the way a rich businessman might pose with a cigar. The large dark painted figure on the right balanced Basquiat on the left with his dark suit and hair. The bright red in the painting even matched the red of the chairs. The color photograph seemed to turn him into one of the strange figures he painted.[21]

The article finally came out in the Sunday *Magazine* of February 10, 1985. Jean-Michel bought a pile of copies as soon as it hit the newsstands

on Saturday night. He took a bunch with him and, along with Warhol, went to Brooklyn to have dinner with his father. Jean-Michel hoped this sign of his newly documented success would win his father's admiration. He was also proud that Warhol was now his friend and would come out to Brooklyn to meet his family. Indeed, his father also remembers with pride that "Andy ate." His father had invited family and friends along for the celebration. He remembers a "lovely moment" when after dinner Jean-Michel stood and signed copies of the magazine with his picture on the cover for the dinner guests.[22]

Later, when Basquiat had time to read through the article on his own, he was happy to find the author said he "possesses a bold sense of color and composition." She noticed that "in his best paintings, unlike many of his contemporaries, he maintains a fine balance between seemingly contradictory forces: control and spontaneity, menace and wit, urban imagery and primitivism." The article went on for 14 pages, and among advertisements for Chanel and Boca Raton Hotel were more photographs of him, painters David Salle, Sandro Chia, Keith Haring, and Kenny Scharf, along with Annina Nosei.

McGuigan was writing not just about him, but about the hyped-up art market of the 1980s and how it created a new trend of famous art stars, using him as the main example. The editors at the *New York Times* had spread a prominent quote across the bottom of the article in large bold type, and it was not about his work. It read: "Just a few years ago, the demand for contemporary art began to climb; prices have soared. As a result of the current frenzied market, 'hot' artists may easily become overnight sensations."

Basquiat became upset because the article claimed he never could have come so far so quickly in any other era, despite his talent. He felt it devalued his success and implied the galleries had made him. "As though I didn't do it myself," he complained bitterly.[23]

FLASH OF THE SPIRIT

One of the books Jean-Michel had displayed prominently in his studio during the *New York Times* interview was Yale professor Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*, which had just been published in 1983.[24] It traced the evolution of

certain figures and images from their African origin to Afro-Caribbean and African American arts and culture. It was certainly an influence on Basquiat's griot paintings and other work to come. In November of 1984, Fab 5 Freddy had met Thompson doing research on hip-hop and said he knew a young painter who would like to meet him.

In December, Basquiat commissioned Thompson to write the catalogue essay for his second show at Mary Boone, scheduled for March of 1985. He obviously wanted to be discussed in the "Afro-Atlantic" tradition that Thompson wrote about. Thompson visited Basquiat several times to prepare for the essay and was impressed by the young artist at work in his studio.

When Thompson came to Basquiat's loft, reggae music was playing in the background and canvases were everywhere. Basquiat had a staff of assistants, one stretching canvas and another hammering together slats of thick wood into more homemade supports. On the walls were "painting after painting, collage after collage in various states of completion."[25]

Thompson watched Basquiat paint the image of a tribal mask he had in his studio into a new painting called *Wicker*. He also noticed how Basquiat painted an image of an elephant and one of a camera, sharing space but not interacting. This overlapping of independent images was also seen in David Salle's paintings of the time, labeled postmodern. However, it reminded Thompson of the way carved images overlay each other over time in traditional African rock art. Examples of this were illustrated in the book Haitian artist Lorraine O'Grady had given Basquiat a few years back.

In a small catalogue for Basquiat's second show, Thompson discussed Basquiat's work in terms of a "Creole" tradition, or mixing of different cultures. He made many analogies to African American music, speaking of Basquiat's "blues typography," and comparing his earlier *Charles the First* to hip-hop production and sampling. Thompson excitedly wrote that his art "leads modern painting to a new intensity. He transforms paint into incantation. . . . He chants paint. He chants body. He chants them in splendid repetitions."[26]

As if to conform to the character sketched in the essay, at the opening Basquiat wore a new hat from a stylish New York boutique that looked like a nest of straw over his long black dreadlocks. It was a spectacular Mary Boone opening, the gallery packed with people spilling out into

the street. There were plans for pre- and post-gallery "champagne at Odeon, drinks at Area and a privately catered dinner by Mr. Chow at the Great Jones St. loft."[27]

Boone thought she knew best how to pace an artist's career and edit their work for exhibition. Basquiat was angry that anyone would contradict an artist's wishes and again had wanted to hang more paintings. This show ended as a compromise, with 12 paintings, all done in 1984. The larger paintings in the front room benefited from room to breathe. *Gold Griot* was given pride of place, alone on a small wall. Boone had wanted to show this work ever since she saw it in his LA studio. Also painted on the fence-like surfaces he had used in Los Angeles were *Flexible*, and *Water Worshiper,* featuring a slave ship symbolizing the Africa-America connection. But most works were on canvas, including portraits *Big Joy* and *MP,* and the finished *Wicker.*

Basquiat, who seemed to seek out his father's approval at all his moments of triumph, invited him to the opening. Gérard came, happily, working the crowd and getting to know the art world. Unusually, this time Jean-Michel's mother, Matilde, came too. There was a roped off area of the gallery for special visitors where Jean-Michel had her sit. Mallouk turned up too, dressed to impress with a hat the size of an umbrella. Surprised, after not seeing her for several months, Basquiat soon showed her to the back room as well. Mallouk said Matilde was obviously heavily drugged on the medications used to counteract her mental illness. She just stared out at the crowd in the opening, occasionally opening and closing her mouth without saying anything.

After the gallery closed and the dinner was over, the partying continued at Basquiat's loft with more expensive champagne and bowls of caviar. The loft was filled with celebrities and hangers-on. Painters Julian Schnabel and Keith Haring were joined by musician David Byrne of Talking Heads, Steve Rubell from Studio 54, and actor Richard Gere. Jean-Michel had reached his wish of being a successful painter. He now had money, fame, and enjoyed the celebrity life. But his emotions were in turmoil: he moved between being proud, angry, and depressed the entire evening. After sitting through the party a while, he stormed out and came back obviously high on drugs.

By this time his friends were getting concerned about his use of drugs. His moods could swing from being open and generous to rude

and aggressive. Sometimes he would get scared about his own drug use and try to slow down, but then something would happen that would send him back.

Larry Gagosian, of Basquiat's LA gallery, noticed that the raised expectations of the 1980s boom in art could have a bad effect on artists, and some were really messed up by it. "Basquiat was a flagrant example," he said, "but there are plenty of them."[28]

Basquiat lived with a constant fear of friends taking advantage of him, or of art dealers taking unfinished work or underpaying him. All this was based on real events but could then spiral into delusional paranoia, as when he was scared that the FBI was after him. His relationship with Boone, difficult enough during his last two shows with her, did not get any better. She later claimed that Basquiat's use of drugs made him an inconsistent artist, sometimes almost incapable of working. But, given time, he always seemed able to produce work. Work was a form of therapy, but it also allowed him to continue his drug habit.

When critic Peter Schjeldahl went back to visit Basquiat in 1985, he "looked like a soft young African prince" in the midst of his busy studio. Although he seemed to worry that the "messy and earthy" feeling of his earliest work had faded, he was doing something else now. "It was getting worse, but now it's getting better," he said of his recent work.[29]

Keith Haring was also worried about his friend's drug use but also about his spending on designer clothes and attraction to high society. "From being so critical of the art scene, Jean-Michel was all of a sudden becoming the thing he criticized," he said.[30] Basquiat had spent years homeless, often angry and jealous of people with money. Haring understood that his extravagant spending now on clothes, food, and travel was his way of sticking up his nose at people who were looking down on him. "Being black and a kid and having dreadlocks, he couldn't even get a taxi. But he could spend $10,000 in his pocket," Haring said.[31]

THE PALLADIUM

Also in May 1985, a huge new nightclub called the Palladium opened on 14th Street, by the people who had owned Studio 54. Quite unlike

the seedy Mudd Club, it seemed to sum up the new mood of the 1980s with an immense dance floor under a bank of 25 synchronized video monitors playing the new music videos. Art figure Henry Geldzahler recommended Basquiat as one of four trendy artists to create environments in different parts of the club. Haring peopled the bathrooms with his creations, and Kenny Scharf created a Day-Glo environment out of his customized telephone lounge. More conventional artwork was provided by Francesco Clemente's fresco murals and Basquiat's two large murals in the Michael Todd Room, a VIP section upstairs. One long mural sat behind the bar, and another was based on a Mexican dragon mask he owned. "The rock stars of the' 80s are the painters," co-owner Steve Rubell told the press.

While Basquiat was basking in the limelight, his relationship with Boone continued to deteriorate, following what was becoming a common pattern between him and authority figures. He would not have another show in her gallery, although she would still be his official dealer in New York until the last part of 1986.

After Basquiat left Mary Boone, the dealer explained that it was just as well, as the artist "isn't putting together his vocabulary of forms. He can't grow. He's trying. He simply isn't a good enough artist."[32] Partly she blamed it on his lack of artistic training. Basquiat said simply, "I didn't get along with her."[33]

NOTES

1. Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, ed., *The Andy Warhol Diaries* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), p. 476.

2. Lisbet Nilson, "Making It Neo," *Art News,* September 1983, p. 70.

3. A 19th-century wooden Kkisi Nkondi (power figure) from the Kongo people, covered with nails, was in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum when Jean-Michel went there as a child. Many of the African terms mentioned here are discussed in a book that Jean-Michel had read: Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1983).

4. Cathleen McGuigan, "New Art, New Money: The Marketing of American Artist," *New York Times Magazine* (February 10, 1985), p. 34.

5. Paige Powell, quoted in Franklin Sirmans, "Chronology," in Richard Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (New York: Abrams/Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), p. 244.

6. McGuigan, "New Art, New Money," p. 34.

7. Geoff Dunlop (director), *State of the Art: Ideas and Images in the 1980s* (episode 6). Great Britain: Chanel Four/Arts Council of Great Britain, 1987. DVD distributed by Illuminations, London, 2006. Clip available on Youtube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82agfocSSUA.

8. Warhol and Hackett, *Warhol Diaries*, p. 606.

9. Nicholas A. Moufarrege, "Review of the Boone/Werner Gallery Exhibition," *Flash Art* 119 (November 1984), p. 41.

10. Annina Nosei, in Deitch Projects, Glenn O'Brien, Diego Cortez, et al., *Jean-Michel Basquiat 1981* (New York: Deitch Projects, 2007), p. 88.

11. Vivien Raynor, "Art: Paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat at Boone," *New York Times*, May 11, 1984, p. 26.

12. Raynor, "Basquiat at Boone," p. 26.

13. McGuigan, "New Art, New Money," p. 34.

14. Warhol and Hackett, *Warhol Diaries*, p. 599.

15. Arto Lindsay, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 147.

16. Grace Glueck, "What One Artist's Career Tells Us of Today's Art World," *New York Times*, December 2, 1984, section 2, p. 1.

17. McGuigan, "New Art, New Money," p. 34.

18. McGuigan, "New Art, New Money," p. 23.

19. McGuigan, "New Art, New Money," p. 23.

20. McGuigan, "New Art, New Money," p. 34.

21. A 1985 photograph by Lizzie Himmel from that session can be seen online at *Studio International*, "Basquiat" (June 10, 2005). http://www.studio-international.co.uk/painting/basquiat.asp.

22. Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 245.

23. Anthony Haden-Guest, *True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), p. 131.

24. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1983).

25. Robert Farris Thompson, "Royalty, Heraldry and the Street," in Richard Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (New York: Abrams/Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), p. 31. Robert Farris Thompson,

Jean-Michel Basquiat: 2 March–23 March 1985 (catalogue, Mary Boone/Michael Werner gallery, in cooperation with Bruno Bischofberger gallery).

26. Robert Farris Thompson, *Basquiat: 2 March–23 March*.

27. Robert Pincus-Witten, "Entries: Becoming American," *Arts* (October 1985), p. 103.

28. Haden-Guest, *True Colors*, pp. 177–78.

29. Peter Schjeldahl, "Jean-Michel Basquiat," *7 Days*, September 21, 1988. Reprinted in Peter Schjeldahl, *The 7 Days Art Columns, 1988–1990* (Great Barrington, MA: Geoffrey Young, 1990), p. 50.

30. Haden-Guest, *True Colors*, p. 131.

31. Michael Wines, "Jean Michel Basquiat: Hazards of Sudden Success and Fame," *New York Times*, Saturday, August 27, 1988, section 1, p. 9.

32. Haden-Guest, *True Colors*, p. 146.

33. Jean-Michel Basquiat, interview by Isabelle Graw, *Wolkenkratzer Art Journal*, [Frankfurt] 1 (January/February 1987). Reprinted in Luca Marenzi, *Basquiat* (Milan: Chiarta, 1999), p. lxvii.

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Chapter 9

COLLABORATIONS

In 1949 Andy Warhol moved to New York to become an illustrator, not an artist. Unlike Basquiat, he had a neat and subtle style, and soon became known for his sensitive blotted line. By the 1950s he was already a top commercial illustrator.

But this did not help him become an artist. His skills were completely unsuited to the muscular Abstract Expressionist style painting that was big at the time. It was the appearance of two new artists doing something different that inspired him to try a new kind of art. A generation later, these same artists would be mentioned by Basquiat as among his influences.

Robert Rauschenberg still favored the big splashy composition of the Abstract Expressionists but included bits of everyday objects, often found on the streets, into his work. These ranged from pieces of fabric and collage, to tires, pillows, even a stuffed eagle or goat. Jasper Johns painted flat flags, targets, maps, and other "things the mind already knows."[1] Fascinated by this, Warhol used his illustrator's hand to paint objects like Coke bottles or panels from comic strips onto canvas. But he went even further. He borrowed not just the subject but much of the plain, uninteresting technique from advertisements and product

design. A few other artists were doing similar things, and the style was promoted as "Pop Art."

Soon, Warhol took the next step by using photo silkscreens. He would turn a photograph into a silkscreen, then use the screen to print the image directly onto a traditional artist's canvas. He could then do many images from the same screen, using different colored inks. This production of multiples became a key element of his work and the reason his new studio was called the Factory. For many years, until working with Basquiat in the mid 1980s, Warhol worked with silkscreen, movies, photography, and publishing but never held another paintbrush in his hand.

Warhol and Basquiat had opposite styles. Warhol was known as a "cool" artist, who had given up painting. Basquiat had taken up painting in an energetic "hot" style. When Basquiat first met Warhol he was an unknown 17-year-old, while Warhol, at 50, may have been the most famous living artist in America. But now Basquiat was an up-and-coming artist, while many thought Warhol's best work was behind him. Still, a new generation of young artists looked up to Warhol. "He was everything to us," said Kenny Scharf. "He was the father, and we're the children."[2] While they were interested in Warhol's position in art history, Warhol was interested in their hipness, media attention, and new energy.

PASSING THE PAINTING WITH WARHOL AND CLEMENTE

In late 1983 Bruno Bischofberger got Basquiat, Francesco Clemente (the more fanciful of the Italian Neo-Expressionists), and Warhol involved in a collaborative art project. Bischofberger suggested it would be fun and good marketing promotion, even if the works did not sell well. Clemente chuckled: "It's the three ages of man . . . ha!"[3]

Instead of getting together to work, they decided each artist would start four paintings and one drawing. They would not tell anyone else what they were doing but leave room for it to be finished. They would then send the work on, and then on again, until all three artists had had a turn on each work.

They sometimes met at the Factory to see the work of about 15 paintings, as Warhol recorded in December 1983:

> Clemente brought up some of the paintings that the three of us are working on together, and Jean Michel was so out of it he began painting away. Jean Michel and Clemente paint each other out.[4]

Even there, they rarely were in the same room together painting. "It would be impossible," said Clemente, "we have three completely different ways of working."[5]

In one work that Basquiat started, he covered a small metal square with a collage of photocopies of his goofy drawings featuring Famous All Beef Hotdogs, a UFO, and the Pole Star, which gives the canvas its name. Clemente then painted a surrealist image of a face in profile, with a smaller human figure coming out of the mouth. Instead of adding to this work, Warhol photographed it, produced five photo silkscreens on canvas, and put them all together into one large grid of six panels.

Basquiat often painted out parts of his own works and filled them in again. He had no compulsion about doing the same to other people's painting, although sometimes that was not appreciated. Warhol recorded a time when "Jean Michel came in and painted right on top of the beautiful painting that Clemente did. There was lots of blank space on it that he could've painted on, he was just being mean."[6] Warhol suspected Basquiat was on drugs at the time. In *In Bianco* Basquiat drew a grinning mask on a beautiful transparent head by Clemente which added emotional power. Yet another time, Basquiat added white circles around the eyes of the central figure painted by Clemente, but after some discussion the rings were removed, and the painting was called *Ex-Ringeye*.

For most of the collaborations, it is obvious the three artists were working independently; the strange combinations resulted in a disjointed surreal work, whatever the styles of the individual artist.

The surprise was *Alba's Breakfast*, started by Clemente with a figure at a long table. Instead of bothering with silkscreen, Warhol handpainted a giant GE logo and a commercial illustration of a washing machine, much like his Pop Art works of the early 1960s. Basquiat, who added figures of his own to the table, was very impressed with

Warhol's drawing in this work and told Bischofberger he would try to get the great painter to start working by hand again.

On September 15, 1984, all of the works were shown in Collaborations: Basquiat, Clemente, Warhol at Bischofberger's gallery in Zurich. The review in *Artforum* found moments of pleasure in the collaborations by such well-known painters but was disappointed that they did not engage in any real dialogue.[7]

Despite mixed reviews, the paintings sold. Warhol later complained that the works were selling for $40,000 or $60,000 a piece, but they were not getting their normal cut because Bruno had earlier called them "just a curiosity" and bought the entire lot from them for $20,000.[8]

THE ODD COUPLE

When Clemente went back to his own work, Basquiat and Warhol continued to collaborate in secret. Basquiat became a regular at the Factory, dropping by to work at almost anytime. He was excited to be interacting with Warhol on a daily basis, as a fellow painter. He and Warhol also went out to art openings, dinner, and nightclubs. They even started working out together in the day. Factory assistant Ronnie Cutrone called them "the odd couple."[9]

It had taken a long while for the friendship to develop. At first, Warhol was wary of letting Basquiat, the young man he knew from the streets, into the Factory for the exchange of portraits. But within a month of receiving Basquiat's *Dos Cabezas*, Warhol invited him back for lunch.

Not long after renting his studio from Warhol, Basquiat called the older artist for advice. Warhol recorded in his diary: "He's afraid he's just going to be a flash in the pan. And I told him not to worry, that he wouldn't be. But then I got scared because he's rented our building on Great Jones and what if he is a flash in the pan and doesn't have the money to pay his rent?"[10]

But Warhol took notice when the *Village Voice* called Basquiat "the most promising artist on the scene,"[11] and when Keith Haring told him that Basquiat was "the biggest influence on the new artists."[12] He knew Basquiat was good for more than the rent.

When asked about the collaborative project by Cathleen McGuigan for the *New York Times Magazine*, Warhol deadpanned, "I'd run out of ideas."[13]

"The relationship was symbiotic," wrote Warhol biographer Victor Bockris, "Jean needed Andy's fame and Andy thought he needed Jean's new blood."[14] But it was more than that; during their time working together they developed a real and close friendship.

COLLABORATIONS

The collaboration was done at the Factory. Warhol had large pieces of unstretched canvas tacked to the walls, and they would work on several at a time. Most were about 7 by 10 feet, others up to 10 feet high and 20 feet long. Warhol was using a machine called an epidiascope that would send a blown-up projection of an image onto the canvas. He then carefully traced over the image with a paintbrush to make his contribution.

Basquiat described the process later:

> He would start most of the paintings. He would put something very concrete or recognizable like a newspaper headline of a product logo and then I would sort of deface it, and then I would try to get him to work some more on it and then I would work more on it. I would try to get him to do at least two things, he likes to do just one hit and then have me do all the work after that.[15]

Warhol was going through a period of using corporate logos. He would blow them up and paint them onto the canvases. The round interlocking GE of the General Electric logo was his favorite on the collaborations, but he also used the lightning bolt Zenith, the Paramount pictures logo, and the circular Arm and Hammer logo. All of the logos he used were still being used on products at the time, but none of them were cutting-edge design. They had a classic American look to them; they could have just as well been from the 1950s as from the 1980s. He also used blown-up images from tabloid newspapers: a *New York Post* headline ("Plug Pulled on Coma Mom"),

pictures of appliances from advertisements, or a sale price. They were all painted in a flat style that gave Basquiat a lot of surface to work against.

In *Stoves* (1985), Warhol painted appliances based on advertisements that looked like his earlier Pop Art. Basquiat painted over them the way he had covered a real refrigerator in graffiti earlier in his career.

Many of Warhol's contributions were done so professionally they looked to be silkscreened on, although he occasionally took on a more painterly approach filling in the large areas. Basquiat's creative "defacements" could be broad expressive brush strokes to fill in between the images, or his smaller graffiti-like marks, symbols, and words. The contributions often overlapped. "We used to paint over each other's stuff all the time," said Basquiat.[16]

At times Warhol was unsure of Basquiat's constant erasures and repainting: "He came up and painted over a painting that I did, and I don't know if it got better or not," Warhol wrote in early 1984.[17]

Sometimes, the overlapping is straightforward, as in *Arm and Hammer II*, even if the message is more complex. Here Warhol painted two side-by-side Arm and Hammer logos—the working man's arm inside a circle seen on baking soda boxes. Basquiat painted over only one, with a black man playing a saxophone. The different focus of the two artists is obvious here. Basquiat has also turned the center of the logo into a coin by painting "Liberty" above and the year "1955" below the musician. There is a sense of irony about the use of "Liberty" next to the Afro-American musician, especially in 1955, when the struggle for basic civil rights was still being fought. Critic Trevor Fairbrother later wrote that the "two halves of the picture add up to an allegory of the inequality of American blacks and whites."[18] Another commentator, Frances Négron-Muntaner, describes the *Arm and Hammer* collaboration as one "in which 'black' labor is portrayed as the other side of the coin, the unacknowledged foundation of the American economy."[19] A few of the collaborations hint at such a reading, but most seem to be made of random images from the separate worlds of the two artists.

In some paintings the overlapping gets more complex, with both artists taking several turns at adding and painting over images. Warhol

sometimes moved his projector from canvas to canvas, painting the same logo in different places. To Basquiat the collaborative work was a chance to develop his working with chance associations in a new way, as often neither artist knew what the other one would do. Often there seemed to be no relationship between the images put down by the two artists.

At first Warhol wrote: "I think those paintings we're doing together are better when you can't tell who did which parts."[20] In fact, there were very few of the paintings where that is not immediately obvious. But the artists did confusingly switch techniques, with Basquiat adapting the silkscreen to print a crowd of his goofy cartoonlike figures into several compositions.

Basquiat's little figures and childlike images looked like little doodles next to Warhol's large projected images. But Basquiat also painted many larger and more serious figures, some dark silhouettes and others in the form of decorated masklike heads. They had a fierce presence that would stand out from Warhol's flat painting, as both painters noticed. After working on one piece, covered with masks, Warhol noted, "We painted an African masterpiece together. One hundred feet long. He's better at it than I am, though."[21]

The mixture of Basquiat's masks and primitive figures with Warhol's images can seem random in an individual piece. However, Basquiat insistently reminds the viewer of the "other" left out of Warhol's version of a clichéd America.

Basquiat's heads may have influenced Warhol to bring out one of his own recent images, a silhouette head of Ronald Reagan with figures criticizing the federal budget. It is one of the most obviously political of his works. Reagan, president during the collaborations, had been an actor and spokesperson for the powerful GE corporation. Along with the GE logo, Warhol reused his image in a few collaborations, including the densely composed *Paramount*.

Fairbrother's analysis concludes that "*Paramount* is a disjointed visualization of the fleeting, fragmented experience . . . called Modern Life. It is a reflection of . . . Manhattan at the midpoint of a decade characterized by greed and excess."[22] Others critics said these works were disjointed because they did not work, and any greed and excess was not commented on, but seen in the marketing of the entire collaboration.

It is undeniable that both artists, in their separate hot and cool styles, were reflecting images from their culture, and that they were not presenting a thought-out theoretical critique. It was up to the viewer to decide whether these collaborations functioned as criticism or celebration of consumer society, or an incoherent and unsuccessful artistic experiment.

ANOTHER DIRECTION

In 1984–85 Warhol and Basquiat collaborated on between 50 and 100 paintings. During this time they also worked on their own art. Sometimes this was to explore different directions, like Basquiat's dense and underappreciated semi-sculptural works of 1985.

In *J's Milagro,* he returned to painting on doors. Paintings of a long green snake and human figures fit between a collage of color photocopies of his drawings, with metal and pieces of board found on the street, creating a funky composition. *Brain* is based on a collection of painted and collaged wooden boxes topped by a shoe-shine stand, and another construction, *Untitled,* shows a sculptural brilliance that Basquiat rarely displayed. Made of various sizes of painted wood hanging on a wall, with several bats hanging down from the structure, it was a relief sculpture showing great sensitivity to materials, enlivened by Basquiat's painting over the surface. The critics who had pigeonholed Basquiat as a Neo-Expressionist painter were not ready for this aspect of his work.

Both artists also saw an influence from the collaborations seep into their own work. This can already be seen in Basquiat's 1984 painting *Zydeco*. The subject of *Zydeco* (a Cajun-based Afro-Louisiana music becoming popular in New York in the mid-80s) is illustrated in the painting by a black accordion player and fits into Basquiat's long-standing interest in African American musical traditions. The influence of the collaborations is seen in the sheer scale of the painting (17 feet long), the word "ZYDECO" done as a logo, and especially in the Warhol-like painted refrigerator on the right-hand side.

A unique work by Basquiat at the time is his painting on found metal called *South African Nazism*. In the early summer of 1985, as part of an international protest against apartheid, Keith Haring

printed and distributed 20,000 free posters based on his painting *Free South Africa*. Basquiat's work was done the same year. It features black masks, a Zulu shield, and partially crossed out words reading "no dogs/Pretoria" painted on a large metal sign. The sign had previously displayed a phone number and the word "sale." Basquiat's rough painting against the neat letters of "sale" is reminiscent of the clash of styles in the Warhol collaborations done in the same period.

In September 1984, Basquiat gave his mother a birthday party and asked Warhol to come along to meet her, something he had not done with any of his friends or girlfriends. Basquiat had acted embarrassed by his mother's mental illness, but Warhol enjoyed the visit. Warhol created a photo-silkscreen portrait, *Matilde Basquiat*, in 1986 as a present for him. From December 1984 into 1985 Warhol also made a series of photograph portraits of Jean-Michel, his sister Jeanine, and Gérard Basquiat, looking serious in a suit with just the hint of a smile for the camera.[23] These were added to a growing number of portraits the two artists had made of each other.

Factory regulars said, "Jean-Michel gave Andy a rebellious image,"[24] changing from suit and tie to black leather jacket and sunglasses, and he "started hanging out with a lot of young people again."[25]

Some employees were concerned about Basquiat smoking marijuana in the Factory. They learned to accept it because of the apparent positive effect Basquiat had on Warhol. On the other hand, Warhol was worried about Basquiat using harder drugs, though he did not know what to do about it. Their regular dates to work out together were partly Warhol's attempt to get Jean-Michel interested in a healthy lifestyle. One night Basquiat called Warhol in a panic after reading about John Belushi, the comic who had died after taking a "speedball," a combination of heroin and cocaine. Warhol warned that "if he wanted to become a legend, too, he should just keep going on like he was."[26]

Paige Powell was also concerned, sometimes crying to Warhol about Basquiat's use of heroin and the way he treated her. This led to their on-again-off-again relationship finally ending. Because of their links to Warhol, they couldn't avoid running into each other, which upset Powell.

While they were painting together, Warhol and Basquiat went out together to the newest clubs and were often photographed together at the hippest spots in the society pages. One of these clubs was Area, where, in late 1984, Basquiat met Jennifer Goode, who became a major part of his life. Goode worked at the club designing its changing themes. Basquiat later displayed his construction *Brain* (1985) there, and occasionally served as a guest DJ. When not working at the club, Goode was often out with Basquiat at night, or staying in with him at Great Jones Street.

RELATIONSHIP STARTS TO FRAY

Even though Basquiat's time at the Factory was one of his best, there was trouble brewing. Even in his good times, Basquiat was prone to the mood swings that had made it impossible for Suzanne Mallouk to stay with him. Especially since the negative reviews of his Mary Boone show, where the critics warned him of getting too close to Warhol, he had developed ambiguous feelings toward the still more famous artist. His frustrations would sometimes come out, which made Warhol nervous, never knowing what would set Basquiat off. Perhaps remembering Basquiat's performance when he left Annina Nosei, in August 1984 Warhol wrote in his diary, "I'm just expecting him one day to come and say, 'I hate all these paintings, rip them up,' about the ones we've done together."[27]

Warhol blamed it on the drugs. In early October Jean-Michel came to the Factory to paint but just fell asleep on the floor. When Warhol thought he looked like a bum lying there and woke him up, he painted "two masterpieces."[28] The next day Basquiat called several times, and Warhol thought he had obviously been "taking smack" again, but the day after that he was back in the Factory working, and even did a painting in the dark, which Warhol found great.[29]

"Jean Michel is so difficult," wrote Warhol later that week, "you never know what kind of mood he'll be in, what he'll be on. He gets really paranoid and says, 'You're just using me, you're just using me,' and then he'll get guilty for getting paranoid and he'll do everything so nice to try to make up for it."[30]

When the time for the exhibition was getting closer, Basquiat started calling less and less, and Warhol started to worry that he was "breaking away."[31]

THE EXHIBITION

Warhol and Basquiat chose Tony Shafrazi, a newly hot SoHo gallery that also showed Keith Haring, to show their collaborative work. Shafrazi milked the collaboration for all the preshow publicity he could get. For announcements of the show, he had Warhol and Basquiat dressed up in boxing uniforms and gloves for photographs, as if promoting a fight between the two artists. These were used for announcements, invitations to the post-exhibition party at the Palladium, and a poster for the exhibition.

Basquiat had always been interested in boxing, and this photo session went well. However, in a later publicity shoot with the two of them posing in front of their collaborative paintings, the two do not seem to want to interact at all. The boxing metaphor was lighthearted, but Warhol was worried it might turn into a real fight.

Sixteen of the large works were packed into the gallery for the highly publicized show Warhol & Basquiat: Paintings. On September 14, 1985, when Warhol arrived at the opening by cab, he found the gallery packed. A doorman was needed to police the crowd that was spilled out onto Mercer Street, where idling limousines waited.[32] The huge paintings made the gallery look crowded even without all the people. Giant GE logos from different works dominated one room, where gallery goers could not stand back enough to get a good view.

Warhol spent the time talking to scores of people he knew. Basquiat, wearing a shimmering blue shirt and his hair tucked into his hat, seemed to enjoy the buzz. But he did not talk to Warhol at the opening and was conspicuously absent from the night's dinner party at his favorite restaurant, Mr. Chow's. Warhol could brush it off as another of Basquiat's moods. "The paintings looked really great, everyone seemed to like them," wrote Warhol after the opening.[33] When the reviews came out, they told a very different story.

THE COLLABORATION ENDS

On the night after the show Warhol saw the *New York Times* out on the newsstands. He turned directly to the art section and knew his problems with Basquiat were about to get worse: "I saw a big headline: 'Basquiat

and Warhol in Pas de Deux.' And I just read one line that Jean Michel was my 'mascot.' Oh God."[34]

Times reviewer Vivien Raynor started by looking back at her review of Basquiat's first Mary Boone show a year ago. "I wrote of Jean-Michel Basquiat that he had a chance of becoming a very good painter providing he didn't succumb to the forces that would make him an art world mascot," she wrote. "This year," she added, "it appears that those forces have prevailed." The implication was that Warhol had turned him into his mascot. Given his experience, and his being a black painter in a white art world, Basquiat was especially sensitive to this word. The review went on to say that "the collaboration looks like one of Warhol's manipulations" and that Basquiat "comes across as the all too willing accessory."[35]

It only made it worse that the reviewer who had been positive about Basquiat a year ago went on to criticize him directly. She wrote, "Basquiat continues to alternate between African themes, inherited by way of his Haitian background, and cartoon figures, but the social comment implicit in his previous work has now become obvious and rather silly."[36]

The many reviews were solidly negative, not just disliking the works, but also thinking them cynically commercial. "Having presided over our era for considerably more than his requisite fifteen minutes, Andy Warhol keeps his star in ascendancy by tacking it to the rising comets of the moment . . ." said a review in *Flash Art*. It jibed that everything Warhol touched turned into a "banality," including Basquiat's "authentic" images. "The real question is," concluded the short review, "who is using whom here?"[37] Only one work sold during the exhibition. Neither artist got what they wanted from the show. But it was Basquiat who was really hurt by it. It seemed to confirm his worse fears that he was being used.

After a year in which they were in mostly constant contact, Basquiat just stopped calling or coming by. In mid-October, Warhol noted, "Oh I really missed Jean Michel so much yesterday. I called him and either he was being distant or he was high. I told him I missed him a lot."[38] The call did not seem to help. By the end of November Warhol recorded, "Jean Michel hasn't called me in a month, so I guess it's really over. . . . Can you imagine being married to Jean Michel? You'd be on pins and needles your whole life."[39]

Although the Shafrazi show marked the end of their close friendship, the two still saw each other occasionally. Warhol did come to

Jean-Michel's birthday lunch in December and gave him a set of R&B records. But the closeness had gone from the relationship forever.

INFLUENCE

Later, Basquiat was to boast, "I was the one who helped Andy Warhol paint! It had been twenty years since he'd touched a brush. Thanks to our collaboration, he was able to rediscover his relationship to painting."[40] Back in September 1984, during the three-way collaborations with Clemente, Warhol admitted: "Jean-Michel got me into painting differently, and that's a good thing."[41] Factory employees noticed that Warhol had not been painting this way since his early Pop paintings.

As Mallouk remarked, "I think they inspired each other."[42] The refrigerator in Basquiat's *Zydeco,* and his frequent use of a hand-painted "IDEAL" logo in paintings of 1987 come directly from Warhol's contributions. In other paintings of his last few years there is a more open, almost random, composition, that may have become a habit in these collaborations. But Basquiat still insisted, "I think I influenced him more that he influenced me."[43]

In 1986, Warhol produced a large series of paintings based on Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper,* including a dozen monumental works done with the same overhead projector he used with Basquiat. It was his final big series of paintings. Warhol traced the black outline of a diagram based on the original Leonardo, and in some added projected logos like the ubiquitous GE logo, the camel from Camel cigarettes, and the same yellow on red "6.99" used in a Basquiat collaboration. In other canvases Warhol's version of the Leonardo is untouched by the other elements, remaining a sparse black and white. In fact, much of Warhol's remaining works up to his death look as though they were painted for collaboration and waiting for Basquiat to finish them.

In one he did. Both artists, still hurt by criticism, painted 10 punching bags, dated 1985–86. The Christ image from Warhol's *Last Supper* was the central motif, painted in black in different scales on each hanging white bag. Warhol had begun boxing with his trainer as part of his regular exercising. He knew Basquiat had always been interested in boxers and portrayed them in his work. And, of course, the boxing metaphor had been used in the publicity for the criticized collaborative

show that broke up their friendship. In this late collaboration, Basquiat wrote repeatedly around and in-between Warhol's Christ images, along with a crown and a few other symbols, over and over, the word "Judge."

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Chapter 10

ANDY WARHOL'S DEATH

Andy Warhol had been the one person Jean-Michel could confide in. When Basquiat had been upset by the negative reviews to his earlier shows, or wanted advice on the art business, he knew he could turn to Warhol. He could even talk to Warhol about sensitive subjects like worries about his drug use in a way he could not with his father or his friends.

And so, Jean-Michel was feeling increasingly isolated after the critical disaster of their collaborative show at Shafrazi and the end of their close friendship.

Basquiat's work since joining Mary Boone had been uneven, but much of his interesting moves into three-dimensional constructions had been ignored by galleries and critics who had pigeonholed him as a trendy Neo-Expressionist painter. Basquiat continued to explore different areas in his own work. Not all his works were masterpieces, but he was attempting to develop his art while remaining true to his own vision.

From 1986 he seemed to be less excited by the art world and the downtown environment. When in New York, he became increasingly isolated in his loft. His work also tended to become more inward looking. There were exceptions, where he returned to larger social issues, but in general

his inspiration was less from the streets and more from images in the books contained in his studio, and from his own past work.

NEW WORK

Basquiat was also spending an increasing amount of time outside of New York. At the beginning of 1986, he was in Los Angeles, for what was to be his last show at Gagosian's. The show included several works on unusual supports, including *J's Milagro,* the 1985 collage painting on three doors, and *Peruvian Maid,* a subtle abstract work painted on vertical slats of wood, like a packing crate, with the puzzling phrase "FROM THE VAPOR OF GASOLINE" written across it.

Another drama unfolded on his return from LA. His assistant, Shenge, had secretly started to create his own paintings, modeled on Basquiat's work. When he learned that Shenge had an agreement for a one-person show, Basquiat got furious and kicked him out.[1] Their three-year collaboration had also come to an end.

In 1986, Basquiat applied some of his old themes to his newer wooden constructions in the twin paintings *Black* and *Jazz.* These relief works are painted on slats and have three-dimensional wooden boxes attached to the surface. The boxes are either painted or covered with photocopied drawings and words. He had already done works that challenged the distinction between drawing, painting, and writing, but in these the idea of sculpture is thrown into the mix. The collaged drawings refer to Charlie Parker and Louis Armstrong, and Basquiat's crown logo reappears here, giving them royal status. The logo-like image for the titles "BLACK" and "JAZZ" on these works, unlike Basquiat's usual lettering, again owe something to Warhol's painting in the collaborations, but the tight grid-like composition, primitive heads, and shifts in scale from the sculptural to the detailed drawings are uniquely his own.

Warhol had once thought it would be good business for Basquiat to limit the amount of "screaming Negros" he painted, but as long as Basquiat felt the legacy of discrimination, he continued to come back to the issue of race in his work. In these works he was still painting messages for an audience who could not buy his paintings.

One of his more poignant works from 1986 is titled *Jim Crow,* the term for the official system of segregation in the South after the end of

slavery and before the civil rights movement. It features a black figure with hollow oval eyes rimmed in red against a surface of horizontal wooden slats. But unlike the visible internal organs in the griots' bodies, this head seems to be mounted on delicate traces of a skeleton. Behind the head, a thick ribbon of blue paint mixed on the boards stretches across the canvas. Orange letters over the blue tell the viewer it represents the Mississippi River, while the title of the painting, "Jim Crow," is written in red above the ghostly black head. The word "Mississippi" is written repeatedly on the slats below the figure, and the Hudson, Ohio, Thames, and Red Rivers are also mentioned. This list is most probably a reference to the famous Langston Hughes poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," in which the narrator states "my soul has grown deep like the rivers," drawing a connection from the Nile and Congo in Africa to the Mississippi. Hughes was a poet of the Harlem Renaissance and was depicted in an earlier drawing by Basquiat.

LAST TRIP WITH JENNIFER GOODE

After pushing from Basquiat, Bruno Bischofberger finally succeeded in getting him a show in Africa. The French Cultural Institute in the Ivory Coast set it up for their gallery in the city of Abidjan for the fall of 2006. In August Jean-Michel, his girlfriend Jennifer Goode, and her club-owner brother Eric flew to the Ivory Coast. They were joined there by Bischofberger and his wife. Basquiat had said "my roots come from Africa" and dreamed of experiencing the culture and meeting African artists. However, at the opening in Abidjan he met mostly dignitaries and French-educated artists working in a Western style. He was more excited by a trip the five of them took into the interior of the country.

Back in New York in late October, Basquiat called Warhol to talk about his trip. He also made official the break from Mary Boone's gallery. He asked Warhol about doing some prints together, but nothing came of it. To Warhol, Basquiat "sounded normal, like he was off drugs and missing old times."[2]

While the friendship with Warhol never got back to where it was, the two did start to see each other now and again. For Halloween, Basquiat attended a celebrity-filled costume party organized by Paige Powell, now Basquiat's ex-girlfriend, but still a Warhol employee. Basquiat wore a

homemade tinfoil mask to disguise his identity from some of the guests, including his ex. Later in November Basquiat was again joking with Warhol.

After his return from Africa, Jennifer Goode succeeded in getting herself and Basquiat into a New York drug treatment program. While fitting into Basquiat's lifestyle, she had picked up dependence herself. The two had made several trips to Hawaii together, where they went without opiates, but Basquiat always started up again sometime after returning to New York, and she wanted to be off for good. In the program, users addicted to heroin were given counseling and weaned off the drug by substituting a prescribed maintenance dose of methadone. While Goode stayed in the program and stopped her use of heroin, Basquiat left after a few weeks. According to Goode, he said he did not like talking to the psychiatrists who worked at the program, at least when they asked about his childhood.[3]

By November of 1986, Goode broke up with Basquiat. She had been complaining about his drug use and finally decided there was nothing more she could do for him. The breakup upset Basquiat greatly, and he again felt alone. After reaching the peak of the art world, things in New York seemed to be falling apart for him. He had earlier broken up with his best friend and kicked out his studio assistant, and now his girlfriend had left him. He asked her on several occasions to come back, but she firmly said no.

EUROPEAN RECEPTION

Also in November, Basquiat's second museum retrospective opened, this time in the prestigious Kestner-Gesellschaft Museum in Hanover, Germany. More than 60 paintings and drawings were shown, from his *Untitled* (1981) head with skelly courts, to a 1986 painting on wood titled *To Repel Ghosts*. A 105-page catalogue was published with many color pictures and an essay by R. F. Thompson. Basquiat, still only 25 years old, was the youngest artist ever to have a retrospective at the museum. The heartbroken Basquiat did not go to Germany for his own show.

In December 1986, two days before his birthday, Basquiat did attend a big Christmas party in New York. Blondie's Debbie Harry, who had

bought one of Basquiat's first paintings way back in 1980, was there, as was famous Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, who gave Basquiat an annotated copy of his poem "Howl." Ginsberg and writer William Burroughs made sketches in Basquiat's notebook.[4] Burroughs and Basquiat were becoming friends. The younger artist visited "the bunker" (Burroughs's dark loft at 222 Bowery) several times in 1986, and later Burroughs would visit Great Jones Street. Like Keith Haring, Basquiat had always been interested in Burroughs's idea of the "cut-up" and in his experimental writing techniques. But his favorite Burroughs book was an earlier, semi-autobiographical novel, *Junkie*, portraying the life of a heroin addict. Basquiat was still talking of getting off drugs but had not done so yet. Like everything he did, he wanted to do it his own way. He did not care for drug rehabilitation programs or having to cooperate with authority figures.

Basquiat did travel to Germany later, to complete work he was contributing to a special project in Hamburg. Austrian artist, architect, and performer André Heller was creating a traveling amusement park he saw as a combination of art park and "child's dream." Heller commissioned many modern artists to design or decorate rides and other attractions, scheduled to open in 1987.

Along with famous European artists, Heller had chosen the young Americans Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. The two found it an ideal environment to meet again and meet other artists. Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein made a glass labyrinth, and Salvador Dali designed a typically Surrealist "Dali dome." Young German Neo-Expressionist painters mixed with Jean Tinguely, an older French artist who specialized in moving mechanical sculpture that fit in well in the park. Haring's figures also adapted well to a children's playground, and he created a carrousel of various simple animal shapes. Basquiat's painted figures added a slightly scary tone to the funhouse and a small Ferris wheel. He painted many figures taken from primitive art on the walls and turned the Ferris wheel into a modern version of the traditional "wheel of fortune," an allegory of the ups and downs of fate. Painted on the walls were a top hat and a champagne glass, symbols of the high life, but also a lightning bolt, showing how fate can strike. On either side of the entrance to the wheel was his old text "Jimmy Best on his back from the sucker punch of his childhood files" and a hobo sign, reminders of the bottom of the

ride of fortune. Taken from his painting of the same year was the phrase "Jim Crow©," perhaps reminding perceptive viewers that one's station in life was influenced by race, prejudice, and the structure of society, as well as the laws of chance. Those who knew him could guess that he was using this ride to comment on his own rise to fame, and perhaps also his possible fall if the art world turned against him.

The day set for the festive opening of the park turned out to be rainy, and the party had to be held indoors. But Basquiat saved the day. According to Haring, "Jean was fun as usual! Very fast and very fun," he wrote. "He brought masks to the boring lunch and turned the atmosphere around immediately!"[5]

Basquiat was being treated as an equal among the world's greatest artists, as he had always wanted, and he was finding new ways his work could be enjoyed by ordinary people. Basquiat also had a one-person show in Paris scheduled. In January 1987, the Galerie Daniel Templon showed 12 of his paintings, including *Gin Soaked Critic*, *Gri Gri*, and *Sacred Monkey*. Around this time he created a painted sculpture as a present to Haring, fulfilling a promised exchange for a work Haring had given him several years earlier. Things may have been looking up, but back in New York Basquiat was to have terrible news that set him back even further.

THE DEATH OF ANDY WARHOL

On January 22, 1987, Andy Warhol attended the opening of his Last Supper Series in Italy, without Basquiat. While there, Warhol began to feel a sharp pain in his side. On returning to New York he was diagnosed with an enlarged gall bladder. Warhol did not like hospitals and mused that it was "scary to think that you could lose your life if you were taken to the wrong hospital or if you happened to get the wrong doctor at the right hospital."[6] He put off going, hoping the pain would get better. He did not want to miss his scheduled part in a celebrity fashion show with the great jazz trumpet player Miles Davis. But when Warhol appeared at the event he was in obvious pain and could hardly walk along the catwalk.

He was soon admitted to New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center and underwent surgery to remove the gallbladder, which was

gangrenous. He was stable and recuperating after the operation, but his skin turned blue and his pulse weakened. The private nurse failed to rouse him and called for help, but Warhol was pronounced dead shortly after. He died on February 22, 1987, at the age of 58. Investigations found the cause of death was a sudden and unexpected postoperative heart attack.

Warhol's sudden and unexpected death devastated Basquiat. He said he now felt totally alone. Anthony Haden-Guest, a writer and acquaintance who visited him later, wrote, "Jean-Michel, who had rather pettishly been seeing little of Warhol recently, was wracked by grief and guilt."[7] Many of his friends were worried about him and called to see how he was after hearing of Warhol's death. Suzanne Mallouk, who had not seen Basquiat since the Mary Boone opening, called him for the last time after Warhol's death.[8] Hugh Farris Thompson also called in sympathy: "Jean-Michel told me he was destroyed," he said.[9] Fab 5 Freddy said that the death "put him in a total crisis. . . . He couldn't even talk."[10]

Jean-Michel would claim that he only started to shoot heroin after Warhol's death. In fact, he had been using the drug off and on for years, but grief and loneliness after the death did seem to push him into using even more and certainly made it harder for him to get the support needed to quit.

Annina Nosei also called. Jean-Michel began crying on the phone and asked her to come over. When she did he was still upset. "I don't have anybody to talk to now," he told her. He gave her a small wooden cube sculpture decorated with his art and said she was the only one that understood his paintings. Nosei offered to give him the telephone number of Cy Twombly in Rome, thinking that could be another kindred spirit he could call. But he never did.[11]

PEGASUS

Nosei remembers that while she was there, Basquiat "did a fantastic drawing, which he worked on while we talked. He was actually working the top of it. It's a beautiful black and white drawing." The huge piece of white paper was later stuck to canvas and titled *Pegasus*. Pegasus was the name of the flying horse from Greek mythology. The horse was

used as a symbol of an oil company, where Warhol had copied it from and used it in *Amoco* (1984), one of the Basquiat/Warhol collaborative paintings. But this work looked completely different.

Basquiat's drawing was covered by an even texture of hundreds of small black images and words: technical symbols, parts of a biography of Picasso, drawings of coins, and repeated phrases fitting his mood, like "broken wing" and "heart as arena." Many of the diagrams were copied from Henry Dreyfuss's *Symbol Sourcebook*.[12] Dreyfuss's book displayed tables of graphic information, from the symbols used for washing instructions on clothing tags to those used for diagramming electronic circuitry. Especially intriguing to Basquiat was a page of "hobo signs." These were abstract symbols used by the homeless vagrants in the Depression. One symbol could be chalked outside a house to mark it as promising for a handout; others could mark a neighborhood as dangerous for hobos. Perhaps his past as a homeless graffiti writer gave them special meaning to him. In *Pegasus*, Basquiat repeated the interlocking hobo symbol for "cowards will give to get rid of you" and the circle, with its meaning "nothing to be gained here," throughout the work. Many of his works in the later years contain these symbols.

Basquiat worked on it automatically. It appeared he did not know what to do in his grief and could not think of starting another painting. He kept his mind occupied by copying bits of information from books onto the paper. Basquiat could work much more delicately with graphite on paper than when using oil stick on canvas. Together the small graphic signs created an even pattern, like wallpaper. Only a small strip in an upper corner was covered with black acrylic paint. Nosei remembers that after working on it for hours, "he got bored and filled up the black at the end."[13] The strip gives the work the presence of an abstract painting from afar, but the canvas also has the scale of an intricate diagram when the viewer gets close enough to read it. Although Nosei had not liked much of the work Basquiat had done since leaving her gallery, she called *Pegasus* "the most beautiful drawing ever."[14]

Basquiat had not shown any paintings in New York since the ill-fated Warhol collaborations. In May, the Tony Shafrazi Gallery decided to exhibit *Pegasus* and two other large-scale drawings for a month. It was

not a major show, but people liked the detailed texture of signs, and it was a promising return for the artist.

PERISHABLE

In his studio Basquiat was now at work on a large triptych that would be a memorial to Warhol. It is built out of a wooden door in the center hinged to two other wooden panels on either side. On the left, in yellow, green, and black, is a black tulip and a cross. Basquiat rarely used explicit Christian symbolism but highlighted it here where it connotes both a grave marker, and Warhol's own Catholicism. Painted on the right panel is a white face, possibly a mask or skull, underneath a red heart shape, all partially obscured by quick gestures of paint and black oil-stick scribbles. On the door in the center is scrawled the word "perishable," repeated in fainter letters below and mostly hidden by more black paint strokes, illustrating how perishable was not just Warhol's life, but everyone's. Basquiat titled the piece *Gravestone*.

Not long after Warhol's death, Bruno Bischofberger went to the Factory to go through the remaining Warhol-Basquiat collaborative paintings stored there. Basquiat could not bring himself to go. Although the paintings belonged jointly to Warhol and Basquiat, and no gallery had an agreement to show them, Bischofberger convinced the grieving Basquiat to sell 40 of the collaboration paintings to him. Later on, Basquiat regretted parting with some of them and complained "he pressured me into selling them."[15] He also felt cheated because he was not getting the money he expected from Bischofberger for the sale in one lump sum. Instead Bishofberger was doling out the money in smaller regular payments. According to Bischofberger, they had agreed on an increased price totaling several hundred thousand dollars, with a first payment of $40,000, and the rest given in $10,000 a month payments. Bischofberger thought this steady income would be better for Basquiat, who since leaving Mary Boone's gallery had mainly been living off money that went through him. He was also afraid that Basquiat was in such a state he could waste the huge sum quickly in depressed binges, or even overdose. But Basquiat, who claimed he had no written contract, still felt exploited and angry. After working together for many years Basquiat now broke off relations with Bischofberger as

well, leaving him with no official gallery or dealer in the United States or Europe.[16]

He soon made an agreement to be represented in New York by Vrej Baghoomian, an Iranian immigrant and cousin to Tony Shafrazi, who had recently opened up his own gallery. Both men felt they were sometimes the victims of racism in the art world.

Around this time Basquiat, still missing Jennifer Goode, found a new woman in his life, Kelle Inman. He met her first at the new exclusive nightclub Nell's, where the thin and delicately beautiful young woman worked as a waitress. Soon she was living in what had been Shenge's basement apartment below Basquiat's Great Jones Street loft and working as his "secretary." She did try to get a grip on his finances and communicated with Baghoomian, but mostly assisting Basquiat meant staying home to look after the moody and often depressed artist.

From the fall of 1987 through December, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York was showing a retrospective of the work of Julian Schnabel. For most of the 1980s, Schnabel and Basquiat were the two frontrunners in a contest for who was the most talked about contemporary artist in America. They had both showed at top galleries, but Basquiat's work had hardly been seen in U.S. museums. Schnabel now showing in the Whitney suggested to Basquiat that the New York art world still did not treat him as seriously as it did other artists.

Basquiat attended the opening in an elegant tuxedo, with white shirt and black bow tie, his dark dreads tied up, cutting a very dashing figure. There is a photo of him at the opening playfully kissing Keith Haring for the camera.[17] Unlike Jean-Michel, Haring is wearing the full hip-hop street wear, including one of his own Keith Haring Safe Sex T-Shirts. While Basquiat was dressed to fit in with the rest of the art world at a major museum opening, he still felt more comfortable hanging out with his old friend. After the party, Basquiat returned to his old technique of getting attention, secretly scribbling graffiti on a wall of the Whitney near Schnabel's paintings.[18]

Perhaps his disillusionment with the art world had brought him back to his graffiti roots. He wrote another piece of graffiti at this time, referring to the "Bird Lives" seen around New York after the death of Charlie Parker. Basquiat, devastated over Warhol's death, scribbled

"A.W. lives—SAMO lives" in an art collector's Park Avenue apartment building.[19]

NOTES

1. Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, ed., *The Andy Warhol Diaries* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), pp. 709, 714.

2. Warhol and Hackett, *Warhol Diaries*, p. 769.

3. Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 280–81.

4. Klaus Kertess, "Brushes with Beatitude," in Richard Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (New York: Whitney Museum, 1992), pp. 53–54.

5. Keith Haring, *Keith Haring Journals* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 122.

6. Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties* (Orlando, FL: Harvest Books, 1990), p. 187.

7. Anthony Haden-Guest, *True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), p. 154.

8. Jennifer Clement, *The Widow Basquiat* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2001), p. 171.

9. Robert Farris Thompson, "Royalty, Heroism and the Streets: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat," in Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, p. 32.

10. Franklin Sermons, "Chronology," in Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, p. 248.

11. Annina Nosei in Deitch Projects, Glenn O'Brien, Diego Cortez, et al., *Jean-Michel Basquiat 1981* (New York: Deitch Projects; Milan: Charta, 2007), p. 89.

12. Henry Dreyfuss, *Symbol Sourcebook: An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 1984).

13. Annina Nosei in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 89.

14. Annina Nosei in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 89.

15. Hoban, *Basquiat*, p. 286.

16. Hoban, *Basquiat*, pp. 286–87; and conversation with someone who was close to Basquiat and Bischofberger.

17. The photograph of Basquiat and Keith Haring in 1987, by George Hirose, is reproduced in Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, p. 237.

18. Hoban, *Basquiat*, p. 279.

19. Hoban, *Basquiat*, p. 285.

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Chapter 11

FINAL DAYS

Basquiat had not shown any paintings in a New York gallery for all of 1987. The absence of a New York show, combined with rumors about his state of health and drug use, contributed to the idea that he was going downhill. What many in New York did not know was that throughout 1987 he was working on many new paintings to be shown in exhibitions in Paris, France, and Düsseldorf, Germany, opening in January 1988.

Basquiat had earlier admitted to his new dealer Baghoomian that he was addicted to drugs, but told him he was sick and tired of it, and wanted to stop. Baghoomian was willing to let him stop on his own schedule, which for Basquiat was sometime after his trip to Europe.

The new paintings done since Warhol's death seemed to reflect a depressed and dispirited Basquiat. Several of the large white 1987 canvases purposely lack a theme or compositional structure. The paintings are filled with sourcebook symbols and cartoony characters, but even these seem ironic, not humorous, and give off a distracted, unfinished feeling. *Victor 25448* (1987), with a goofy figure falling amidst "IDEAL" logos and negative hobo signs ("a beating awaits you here" and "fatal injury"), seems the most direct of the bunch in its despair.

Basquiat had gotten away with areas of "bad painting" before, due to sheer confidence of his hand. Art dealer Guillaume Gallozzi now thought his line was "nearly self conscious. It was not a raw, screeching line" that had always been central to Basquiat's look. Basquiat "was vamping himself," and turning out paintings that looked like poor copies of his previous work, he said.[1] Others have been more positive about the open compositions, saying Basquiat was "channel hopping" between ideas in a "stream of visual consciousness" reflecting modern life.[2]

His two Paris shows in January earned him eight different mentions in French language publications that month. At his well-attended Galerie Yvon Lambert opening, Basquiat met a young painter from the Ivory Coast now living and working in Paris, Ouattara Watts. Jean-Michel found the African artist much more interesting than the throng of Parisian art-world types. He visited Ouattara's studio and was impressed by his work combining European modernist approaches with traditional African themes. The two had long conversations in French about art and life. Ouattara could not accompany Basquiat to his Düsseldorf show, opening January 12, but they made plans to show each other their home countries, with Ouattara coming to the United States for a trip to the South in the spring, and Basquiat to be shown the Ivory Coast later in the summer.

BACK IN NEW YORK

After months in Europe, Basquiat came back to New York to prepare for a one-person show of new work at Baghoomian's in late April. At Baghoomian's suggestion, Basquiat took on painter Rick Prol as an assistant. Prol was an East Village artist whose own work was a cross between German Expressionism and crude punk comics. For Basquiat, he helped prepare unpainted canvases, and followed instructions, painting in the "backgrounds."

Anthony Haden-Guest, who was preparing an article for *Vanity Fair* magazine, came by Basquiat's studio around that time. He had heard the rumors of Basquiat's increasing drug use and decreasing painting. But gallery owners and collectors had told him that Basquiat had now stopped doing drugs and was making a comeback. "There

were canvases on the floor, freshly worked upon," said Haden-Guest, "but Basquiat seemed frail, his skin blotchy."[3] Numerous friends had noticed with concern the blotchy shapes and sometimes open sores on Basquiat's face. This was blamed on the loss of his spleen in his childhood accident. But many also mentioned his drug use as contributing to the disorder.

Haden-Guest noted that Basquiat "spoke of the art world with furious resentment." He complained about the Bischofberger deal, and of the fickleness of critical attention in general. "People have a very short attention span," he said. "They're looking for another artist every six months or year."[4] He was particularly concerned with how gallery owner Shafrazi had treated graffiti writer Futura 2000, making him cut his links with Fun gallery to join Shafrazi, then dropping him after a year. "Now he's a bicycle messenger," said Basquiat. "I find that pretty sad, No?"[5] If the fear of losing his own fame seemed to be worrying him again, so did the isolation caused by fame. "All my friends sold the paintings I gave them. Pretty much all of them," he said. "Now I live a pretty solitary life, you know."[6]

TRIP TO THE MISSISSIPPI

In early April Basquiat left New York again for his trip down South with Ouattara, to the famous jazz festival in New Orleans. The two French-speaking artists were interested in the French dialect and the Creole language of New Orleans. While there, the two artists visited a store selling spiritual paraphernalia and bought a gris-gris. The word refers to an African American folk charm (or "hoodoo" charm) of West African origin, often associated with New Orleans. In 1986, Basquiat had already painted a "Gri Gri" figure, one evolved from his 1984–85 griots. As a child, Ouattara had been initiated into the spiritual secrets of the Senufo religion but was also interested in other African and European traditions, a mix Ouattara thought of as a kind of "voodoo." They then took a boat ride on the Mississippi. Basquiat had already paid homage to the music of New Orleans in his paintings *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta* (1983) and *Zydeco* (1984), as well as to the Mississippi in *Jim Crow* (1986). The symbolism of the mighty river to the story of the African diaspora was not lost on either artist. When

their New Orleans trip was over, they were already making plans for Basquiat's trip to the Ivory Coast in late August.

Basquiat was getting more and more tired of his life in New York but had to hurry back for the opening of his Baghoomian show on April 29. Baghoomian staged his shows at an impressive space at the Cable building on Houston Street. Basquiat's choices for the show, like much of his recent work, were sparse paintings, but with an emotional intensity that was absent from the work shown in Paris at the beginning of the year.

Many of his old friends came to the opening, including Jennifer Goode, Diego Cortez, and Annina Nosei. Nosei thought it a "beautiful show" and a personal one. "There were some incredible works," she said. "In that exhibition he showed paintings that were very aware—very strongly aware of his situation, particularly one, which was called *Riding with Death*."[7]

DEATH PAINTINGS

Riding with Death (1988) is an unusual painting for Basquiat, a simple and effective image of a lean black figure riding a skeleton. The painting has often been seen as foreshadowing Basquiat's own death. The skeleton walks on all fours like a horse bearing the human figure riding on its back, but it is a skeleton of a human, not of a horse. The direct source of the painting is a drawing from Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks, subsequently called *Allegorical Composition* (or *Allegory of Envy*).[8] The Da Vinci work shows a grotesque nude woman riding on the back of a human skeleton, which is walking on all fours in the same position as in Basquiat's work. Basquiat has greatly simplified the detailed Leonardo drawing: the rider is only partially painted in, and the skeleton reduced to a skull and a few key bones.

The image plays with a long Western tradition of allegories of death. Basquiat may also have been influenced by Julian Schnabel's painting on velvet, *Death* (1980), which uses the traditional image of a skeleton riding a horse. But something in 1988 brought Basquiat back to Da Vinci with a unique reversal of the traditional allegory.

Klaus Kertess, art critic and Whitney curator, wrote that the painting begged the question, "Who is in control here?"[9] Is it possible to "ride"

death where one wants to take it, or is death taking this figure away as well? "Horse" is a common slang for heroin, and the gleaming white bones under the emaciated black figure also seem to refer to the drug, and, Kertess argues, the dangerous ride of addiction. Richard Marshall, curator and Basquiat scholar, calls the "powerful and moving image," and the title, "a direct reference to the artist and his precarious physical and emotional position. . . . Basquiat now pictures himself riding death, with the final destination understood but unspoken."[10]

Also at the show was a pair of paintings with a very different look, but similar theme, called *Eroica I* and *Eroica II*. These paintings make explicit reference to drug use, as well as to death. The large works share a smeared white ground with black letters and red highlights. They first were painted on one huge sheet of paper, before being separated, reversed, and mounted on canvas. They have a feel very much like some Cy Twombly paintings made of scribblings in white paint, erasing the distinction between painting, drawing, and writing. The words are not referring to Roman myths and romantic poetry, as in Twombly, but to old African American slang and references to death. In previous paintings Basquiat had used many signs from Henry Dreyfuss's *Symbol Sourcebook*. Here he uses only one, from a set on family life, and has repeated it over and over in the painting with its label: "man dies." The phrase "FOR BLUES. FIXINTODIEBLUES" is painted across *Eroica I* with a small alphabetical list of words beginning with B. The words are from a dictionary of African American slang, and include "B.O.A.C Bureau of Drug Abuse," and "Beam to look." References to drug use continue in *Eroica II*, where the list begins earlier in the B's, including "Balloon Room: place where marijuana is smoked," "Bang: Injection of narcotics or sex," and "Bark: Human Skin" (perhaps an allusion to Basquiat's worsening skin problem). The list is set against a repetition of close to 100 "man dies" symbols, some obscured by the white paint.

The word *eroica* (Italian for "heroic") is the name of Beethoven's Symphony No. 3, which contains a funeral march in the second movement, connecting the title to Basquiat's theme of death, and to the heroism it sometimes takes just to stay alive. The blues song *Fixin' to Die Blues*, cited by Basquiat in the painting also contributes to this theme. This haunting song (later popularized by Bob Dylan) was performed

first by blues singer Bukka White in his raw, raspy voice: "I'm lookin' funny in my eyes and I believe I'm fixin' to die. . . ."

The show was a great success and after years without good press in New York, he received a positive response from some critics.

BATTLING WITH DRUGS

With hindsight, these paintings may look as though Basquiat was prefiguring his own death, or saying good-bye. But Basquiat had dealt with the theme of death before, from *Red Man* (1981) and the earliest car crashes to the eulogies to Charlie Parker (1982), Michael Stewart (1983), and others, and the Warhol memorial *Gravestone,* (1987). This constant theme does become especially prominent after Warhol's death, now becoming more personal, and mixing with the theme of drug use. This does not mean that Basquiat was planning to die but that he was aware of the dangers. At this time he told several friends, including William Burroughs, that he wanted to get off heroin, and perhaps start to write.[11]

Burroughs had made several trips to Basquiat's studio, and in 1988 they exchanged artworks. Burroughs gave the younger artist one of his reliefs, titled *Woman as Man,* made by firing a shotgun into a wooden panel. Basquiat gave Burroughs a carefully considered construction from 1986 called *Nod,* along with a letter to Burroughs expressing his admiration for his work, "at the risk of . . . [appearing like] . . . a groupie." Nod probably refers to the semi-conscious state of a user after taking heroin, "being in the land of Nod," a state both artists would be familiar with. The construction is made from a painted box, with a frame hinged to the top. The frame is filled with Basquiat's little images and phrases taken from numerous sources, exhibiting his uniquely visual adaptation of Burroughs's "cut-up" writing technique. Both the white box and the frame are labeled with the large painted word "Nod." In the Bible, Nod is the land east of Eden where Cain was sent as an outcast, perhaps indicating how Basquiat felt at times.

Basquiat was probably worried about his increased drug use. He was looking forward to his trip to the Ivory Coast with Ouattara, and to the cleansing ceremony performed by shamans to help cure him of his addiction. Basquiat had booked a ticket for August 7 but postponed

the trip and arranged to meet Ouattara there on August 18. Many of his friends urged him to stop the heroin now. His old friend, Arto Lindsay, whom he had not seen for a while, remembers that he and John Lurie went to his place and told him he had "got to chill out.'" They commented on his looks "and gave him a super-hard time" about stopping.[12] Soon after that Basquiat decided to go to Hawaii even before his trip to Africa, to try to get away from heroin.

Hawaii and Back

In June, when his Baghoomian show ended, Basquiat left. He flew to Maui, taking the three-hour drive to the isolated Hawaiian ranch he had stayed at before with Jennifer Goode. He had a supply of art materials, and he knew it would be near impossible for him to get hard drugs there. He called his girlfriend Kelle Inman to tell her he was getting off the drugs. She flew out and found him listening to his jazz music and drinking heavily. He had not been artistically productive while he was there, but at least he was not taking harder drugs.

By the end of the month, Basquiat was on his way back to New York. He stopped in Los Angeles where he claimed that he had kicked drugs for good. A former assistant said he looked "extremely happy."[13] However, other acquaintances thought he still seemed physically and emotionally unwell, needy, and depressed.[14]

FINAL DAYS

Back in New York for the hot end of the summer, Basquiat seemed to be out of his loft and on the street more than he had been. But to several friends who ran into him the artist was still not in good shape, appearing "ill" or "gaunt." Somewhere along the way he had lost a few teeth, adding to his desolate appearance. One friend assumed he was on "a little binge."[15]

Another old friend who met him on the street was Fab 5 Freddy. "We just said 'what's up?' We hugged, shook hands, and kept moving," said Freddy. He thought Basquiat "didn't look that good. His skin was bad and I know he had been getting high, very high, on a regular basis."[16] Several of Basquiat's friends found it hard to hang out

with him anymore, as they did not want to watch what they saw as his self-destructive behavior.

On the other hand, Keith Haring also met Basquiat on the street soon after his return from Hawaii and thought he looked great that day. Basquiat told him of the Hawaii trip and said he had definitely kicked heroin this time.

Haring was on lower Broadway with a new camera when they met. He explained he had been asked to do photos of street fashion for *Spin* magazine and asked to take Basquiat's picture. Basquiat appeared jealous that he was never asked to do such assignments but replied that he would love to appear in *Spin*. He lay down on the subway grating in the sidewalk, looking to Haring like a homeless person. Haring remembered taking his picture as Basquiat lay on his back with his eyes closed, looking completely peaceful. They then talked about Basquiat's plans for new artwork and went their separate ways. It was the last time they would see each other.[17]

Stephen Torton, Basquiat's assistant from the Fun Show days, bumped into him at the trendy restaurant Nell's. Basquiat, sneaking up from behind, put his hands over Torton's eyes. Torton, trying to guess who it was, reached up to touch his hands. "I don't know who this is," he said. "These hands are much too soft for anyone I know." Basquiat let go and Torton looked up to see his old boss and noticed the missing teeth. Basquiat repeated quietly, "Hands are much too soft for anyone I know" and then walked away.[18]

In early August, Basquiat met up with Vincent Gallo, whom he knew from his days in the band Gray. They spent a day together, during which Gallo claimed he persuaded his old friend not to buy heroin. He wanted to keep off the drug but was still influenced by the powerful addiction, which was especially difficult in his neighborhood, where dealers stood on corners a short walk away from his house. Basquiat told Gallo, "I gotta get out of New York; I hate it" and praised Hawaii. "There's no heroin there," he said, "and it's so beautiful you don't even think about it."[19]

Overdose

Basquiat was ironically in a vulnerable state because of his attempt to kick off the habit. As a regular user of heroin he had developed a

tolerance, which made him keep on increasing the dose. He in fact bragged to friends about how much his body could take.

However, after going without for a while, his tolerance was reduced. It is a common mistake for drug users who have relapsed after a period of abstinence to go back to the level they had been using at their peak, only to find out that the dose is now too much—often enough to cause an overdose. It is not clear exactly what and how much Jean-Michel was taking the night before he died. But he did follow a classic pattern of increasing use over years followed by a break and then overdose on relapse.

Anthony Haden-Guest, who had interviewed Basquiat earlier in the year, grew increasingly worried about the artist as he began to get "urgent" calls from people who knew him, warning of his "fragile" state. He was even more worried when he met him again. It was 95 degrees and had been exceptionally humid for weeks when Haden-Guest went out clubbing on Thursday night, August 11. When he ran into Basquiat at MK nightclub at 1:00 in the morning he noticed Basquiat's missing front tooth, and his eyes looking "remote."[20] Basquiat made it home to his unair-conditioned Great Jones Street loft late that night. He did not get up the next morning, which was not unusual. But by late afternoon when he had not come downstairs from his bedroom to the studio or kitchen, Kelle Inman went up to investigate. In the late afternoon she found him on the floor beside his bed, unconscious and lying next to a pool of his own vomit.

Inman called a few of Basquiat's friends and an ambulance. When the ambulance finally arrived, the paramedics applied emergency treatment and quickly drove him away with the sirens wailing, like an image from one of his earliest paintings. He was pronounced dead on arrival at the Cabrini Medical Center on East 19th Street.

The Chief Medical Examiner's eventual autopsy report gave the cause of death as "acute mixed drug intoxication (opiates-cocaine)."

SAMO IS DEAD

Basquiat was buried at Brooklyn's Greenwood Cemetery on a rainy August 17, five days after his death. Basquiat's father organized the funeral, limited to the family and a few others. Suzanne Mallouk, very

upset at the death despite not seeing Basquiat in years, called Gérard to ask to be allowed to go.

Family friend Annette Minkalis remembers how Gérard was "grieving deeply" over his son, even if others could not see it. "Gérard phoned me with the tragic news. I couldn't believe it. A few days later as I was about to leave for the funeral, Gérard called and asked that I not attend. He explained he couldn't help but see me as a family friend who knew the kids when they were young—it was too painful. He felt that if he saw me at the funeral he would lose his composure, which he did not want to do in front of the art community and press."[21]

Jeffrey Deitch read the eulogy at the funeral. He remembered Basquiat in the old days, and his unique artistic talents. Deitch concluded his speech by saying that in a time when art is almost becoming a profession, and when success depends on whether you went to the right art school, "Jean-Michel took his own path."[22]

NOTES

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12. Arto Lindsay, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 147.

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16. Fred Braithwaite, in Deitch Projects, et al., *Basquiat 1981*, p. 124.

17. John Gruen, *Keith Haring: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991), p. 190.

18. Stephen Torton, interview with the author, New York City, August 23, 2009.

19. Wines, "Hazards of Sudden Success and Fame," p. 9.

20. Haden-Guest, *True Colors*, p. 154.

21. Annette I. Minkalis, "The Memorable Jean-Michel," in Richard Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat in Word Only* (New York: Cheim & Reid, 2005), unpaginated.

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Chapter 12

LEGACY

Jean-Michel Basquiat is now established as an important modern painter and a unique voice in modern art. He did, as Jeffrey Deitch said at the funeral, take his own path. He wanted to be accepted as a major artist but he never created art designed to be popular. Since he was little he wanted to be famous and was sometimes calculating in how he got noticed, but he was always himself; he never played anyone else's game to get there.

As his one-time assistant noted, Jean-Michel was lucid, strong, and excited by life.[1] His death (like that of his hero, guitar god Jimi Hendrix) was a perfect and terrible example that heroin is stronger than anyone.

MEMORIAL

If Basquiat's funeral service was a small family affair, the November memorial showed the many different people, from very different worlds, who had connected with his life. John Lurie and Glenn O'Brien organized the memorial, held at St. Peter's Church in Manhattan, where many jazz musicians have had their musical memorials.

It was standing room only as the crowd, many downtown friends dressed in black and leather, cried, laughed, and listened quietly at different points. The eulogy was read by the editor of *ArtForum*. Keith Haring spoke of the political aspect of his friend's work, and how he had refused to follow the art world's rules. Jennifer Goode and Suzanne Mallouk read moving poems. John Lurie played a haunting tune on his saxophone, and several members of Gray came together to perform at the occasion. Basquiat had admired poet Langston Hughes, and Fab 5 read the poem "Genius Child," with its biting refrain, "Nobody loves a genius child."

CONTRADICTIONS

Like everyone, Jean-Michel was filled with contradictions, but his were large and public. He was an extremely generous person, with friends and with strangers whom he gave money to on the streets, yet he could also be selfish to the point of seeming cruel. While he could be exacting and calculating in his career and in the way he drew a line across a canvas, he was surprisingly spontaneous in his life and his art. From his prophecy to his papa that he would be very famous one day, he had a certainty of his eventual success, yet he lived with a constant fear of failure, of being a flash in the pan. "You could do anything," he once told his assistant, "but I'd be dead if I wasn't an artist."[2]

Basquiat's personal life often showed a need for acceptance and a need to keep a distance. His openness to others and his paranoia of their motives was played out most obviously in his close relationship with Andy Warhol. His ambivalence to authority figures started with his father and school teachers and was applied to all of the major art-world figures he had to deal with. This self-confessed problem with authority contributed to difficulties in his life, but also to his genius, and his biting hatred of oppression.

Basquiat was not a passive victim; he was aware of the dangers and excitement of the lifestyle he had chosen. Yet he was not living in a world of his choosing and was caught in contradictions larger than he was, contradictions that were concentrated inside the art market.

Basquiat's desire for success (and a need to live off his art) led him to the center of the world he criticized when he was producing $1

postcards and writing SAMO graffiti. Throughout his life many of his paintings were, among other things, jabs at the art market. His works contained many messages, but they were not directed at the people who could buy his paintings. The older Haitian American artist O'Grady noted that "the thinnest aspect of his art was not lack of training, which is irrelevant, but his separation from the audience that could have enabled and challenged him."[3] But while the circle of people who could afford to buy his paintings continued to narrow, the audience for his art, seen in books, the Internet, galleries, and museums, has grown immensely.

RETROSPECTIVE

In 1992, just four years after his death, Basquiat got his wish for an American retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York. The exhibit, which toured the country for a year, was the first time much of the public got an overview of his work. Basquiat was a prolific artist, and one third of the work in the exhibition had never been seen in the United States. It was a revelation to many. The catalogue, with important essays on his art, was just the beginning of a growing mountain of academic and popular writing exploring aspects of the artist. The show reignited debate on his merits as an artist, and it seemed the art world was divided between those who thought he was a genius and those who thought he was a fraud.

One of his key detractors was critic Robert Hughes, who described Basquiat as a minor talent who should have been sent to art school to learn drawing, skills, and disciplines, but instead was made into a star before he was ready by the 1980s art boom.[4] He attacked the hype of the Whitney retrospective, and concluded that while Basquiat ended up repeating his own stereotypes to support his habit, he was made into "a cult figure by a money-glutted, corrupt and wholly promotional art-marketing system."[5]

For Hughes and some other critics Basquiat became seen as emblematic of the 1980s, and all the excess that decade represented. But most criticism was much more positive. By then, he was clearly recognized as an artist whose importance had grown over time, while others of his colleagues had been left behind. "His work is one of the singular achievements of the 80s," said the *New York Times* review of the

Whitney show, adding that its mix of political and personal continued to make it relevant.[6] The review in the *Village Voice* noted that "today, he has become synonymous with the emergence of a critically respected multi culture in America, born in New York."[7] Indeed, his work was now being claimed by a number of trends in art.

LABELING BASQUIAT

There is a richness in Basquiat's work that makes it open to many interpretations. When he first showed his work on the street and in alternative exhibitions, he was linked to both "graffiti art" and "punk art." When a return of representation in painting turned into the triumph of "Neo-Expressionism" in the 1980s art market, his large painted figures seemed to fit right in, and he was carried to the top of that movement. The growth of multicultural studies, with the issues of identity and ethnicity coming to the fore, also led to new ways of approaching Basquiat's work. His exploration of self-image in relation to black history, African cultural symbols, colonial exploitation, and African American musical traditions also fit right in. A different approach has explored his specific artistic influences from Dubuffet and Picasso to Pollock, Rauschenberg, and Twombly, setting him firmly in a Western modernist tradition. He has been called the last of the modernists, while others explain his collage of sources from pop culture, arts, and sciences as a vibrant example of postmodern art. The fact that his work cannot be easily contained illustrates the breadth of his intellectual curiosity, his spontaneous personality, and his artistic creativity.

THE MARKET

The market that both supported and distorted Basquiat's art in his lifetime has continued to grow. Aside from the many expensive art books, his images have appeared recently on UNIQLO T-shirts, notebooks, calendars, and a special edition of Reebok sneakers.

In a recent survey, art dealers, critics, and auction specialists placed Basquiat among the top 25 contemporary artists.[8]

Ten years after his death a Jean-Michel Basquiat self-portrait sold for a record $3.3 million, leading to a *New York Times* headline, "Graffiti Artist Makes Good." His prices kept rising. The many artworks by Basquiat sold

in 2007 alone totaled $102 million. This put him in the top-10 artists for that year. Basquiat was certainly not a flash in the pan. Even after the onset of an economic recession that took the bottom out of the art market, in November 2008, his 1982 *Untitled* (Boxer) from the collection of Metallica drummer Lars Ulrich sold at Christie's for $13.5 million.

More importantly for the public are the chances to see his work in galleries and museums. Hardly a year has gone by recently without a major exhibition of his work somewhere in the world. The most fitting may have been the 2005 retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum, where his mother used to take him as a child. Visiting the show was an exceptionally multicultural crowd, of all ages, speaking all languages. The catalogue, already a classic work on his art, was the most popular the museum had ever produced. For the show, Haitian American rapper Wyclef Jean read passages from Basquiat's interviews and poetry on the exhibit's audio tour. Appropriately, the information panels were in Basquiat's languages of English, French, and Spanish. But once again the works spoke for themselves.

CONTRIBUTION TO MODERN ART

Basquiat's greatest paintings will live on as a permanent addition to the history of modern art. He brought direct and powerful images into an Abstract Expressionist scale that reinvigorated modern painting. His work invented a new form of collage. His direct and natural integration of words and images bridged the concerns of seemingly separate movements in art. The work extended avant-garde ideas in an immediately accessible way. This method of incorporating influences revealed a new way to bring outside life into avant-garde art, from letters on signs to larger social issues.

Basquiat was undoubtedly an uneven painter, to be expected in someone so prolific, so experimental, and so young. But he could also be a great painter. After the Brooklyn Museum 2005 Basquiat retrospective, philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto wrote, "like artists in any period, he was concerned with what Hegel would call the highest needs of the spirit. Basquiat's painting was close to the best the art world had to offer in his day, and his achievement only grows more impressive with time."[9]

The story of Basquiat continues to inspire as one of an unknown artist who came up from the streets through talent and drive. And he still inspires people through his art: a body of work with a social conscience that connects with the world without losing the excitement of constant experimentation and the pursuit of a personal vision.

NOTES

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2. Stephen Torton, interview with the author.
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4. "Requiem for a Featherweight," *New Republic*, November 21, 1988, pp. 34–36. Reprinted in Robert Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical* (New York: Penguin, 1992) pp. 308–13.
5. Robert Hughes, "The Purple Haze of Hype," *Time*, November 16, 1992, p. 88. http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,977017,00.html.
6. Roberta Smith, "Arts: Basquiat: Man for His Decade," *New York Times*, Friday, October 23, 1992, p. C1.
7. Elizabeth Hess, "Black Teeth: Who Was Jean-Michel Basquiat and Why Did He Die?" *Village Voice*, November 3, 1992, p. 104.
8. Dan Thompson, *The $12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 55–56.
9. Arthur Danto, "Flyboy in the Buttermilk," *Nation*, May 9, 2005, p. 28.

Appendix

LIST OF WORKS

Measurements are given in inches, with length preceding height (followed by depth for sculptural works). References to sources of color illustrations are given in abbreviated form. Complete sourcing can be found in the Selected Bibliography. Links to online illustrations of these works can also be found at http://www.basquiatbiography.com.

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For other authors, see the Selected Bibliography.

WORKS BY JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

Aaron 1, 1981. Acrylic and crayon on canvas. 48 × 60. (Illustrated in Marshall, 1992, p. 75; C.R., 2000, p. 74).

Abuelita, 1983. Crayon and ink on paper. 19¼ × 15. (Illustrated in Emmerling, 2003, p. 10; C.R., 1999, p. 74).

Airplanes, 1981. Mixed media on paper. 26 × 18. (Illustrated in Emmerling, 2003, p. 20).

Arroz con Pollo, 1981. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas. 68 × 84. (Illustrated in Marshall, 2005, p. 33; C.R., 2000, p. 76; Brooklyn Museum Web site).

Black, 1986. Acrylic, oil, oil stick, and paper collage on wood. 50 × 36 × 8⅔. (Illustrated in Marshall, 1992, p. 210; Chiappini, 2005, p. 98; C.R., 2000, p. 248).

Brain, 1985. Acrylic, oil stick, and photocopied paper collage on wood boxes, with shoe shine stand. 48 × 48 × 18 overall (each box 11 × 8¾ × 8¾). (Illustrated in Marshall, 1992, p. 207; C.R., 2000, p. 238).

Charles the First, 1982. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas in three panels. 78 × 62. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 80).

Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart), 1983. Acrylic and ink on wallboard panel. 25 × 30½. (Illustrated in C.R., 2000, p. 178).

Dos Cabezas, 1982. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas on tied wood supports. 60 × 60. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 169).

Eroica I, 1988. Acrylic and oil stick on paper mounted on canvas. 91 × 89. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 158; C.R., 2000, p. 268).

Eroica II, 1988. Acrylic, oil stick, and pencil on paper mounted on canvas. 91 × 89. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 159; Emmerling, 2003, p. 78; C.R., 2000, p. 268).

Famous Negro Athletes, 1981. Oil stick on paper. 28 × 35. (Illustrated in Mercurio and O'Brien, 2007, p. 15; C.R., 1999, p. 105).

Flexible, 1984. Acrylic and oil stick on wood. 102 × 75. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 140; C.R., 2000, p. 208; Brooklyn Museum Web site).

Gold Griot, 1984. Oil and oil stick on wood. 117 × 73. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 146; C.R., 2000, p. 208; Brooklyn Museum Web site).

Gravestone, 1987. Acrylic, oil, and oil stick on wood objects, three panels. 55 × 67. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 155; C.R., 2000, p. 256; Brooklyn Museum Web site).

Grillo, 1984. Acrylic, oil, photocopy collage, oil stick, spray paint, and nails on wood. 96 × 212 × 18. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 142; C.R., 2000, p. 206; Brooklyn Museum Web site).

Gringo Pilot (Enola Gay), 1981. Oil stick, marker, pencil and acrylic on paper. Variable dimensions, 81 × 103 at widest. (Illustrated in Meyer 2005, p. 93; C.R., 1999, pp. 72–73).

Head of a Fryer, 1982. Acrylic and oil stick on wood and canvas mounted on wood. 24 × 17 × 18. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 70).

Horn Players, 1983. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas mounted on three wood panels. 96 × 75. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 88; C.R., 2000, p. 206).

In Italian, 1983. Acrylic, oil stick, and marker on canvas, two panels. 88 × 80. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, pp. 40, 115; C.R., 2000, p. 156).

Irony of the Negro Policeman, 1981. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas. 72 × 48. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 32; C.R., 2000, p. 88; Brooklyn Museum Web site).

J's Milagro, 1985. Acrylic, oil stick, photocopy collage, and metal on wood. 80 × 90. (Illustrated in Marshall, 1992, p. 208; Meyer, 2005, p. 172; C.R., 2000, p. 230).

Jawbone of an Ass, 1982. Acrylic, oil stick, and paper collage on canvas on tied wood supports. 60 × 84. (Illustrated in Marshall, 1992, p. 126; C.R., 2000, 130).

Jazz, 1986. Acrylic, oil, oil stick, and paper collage on wood. 50 × 36 × 8⅔. (Illustrated in Chiappini, 2005, p. 99; Mercurio and O'Brien, 2007, p. 289; C.R., 2000, p. 248).

Jim Crow, 1986. Acrylic and oil stick on wood. 81 × 96. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 147; C.R., 2000, p. 248; Brooklyn Museum Web site).

Nod, 1986. Acrylic, oil stick, nails, metal hardware, and xerox paper collage on wood, 25½ × 14¼ × 11. (Illustrated in C.R., 2000, pp. 252–53).

Obnoxious Liberals, 1982. Acrylic, oil stick, and spray paint. 68 × 102. (Illustrated in Marshall, 1992, p. 109; C.R., 2000, p. 106).

Pegasus, 1987. Acrylic, pencil, and colored pencil on paper mounted on canvas. 88 × 90. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 157; C.R., 2000, p. 245).

Per Capita, 1981. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas. 80 × 150. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, pp. 30–31; C.R., 2000, p. 74; Brooklyn Museum Web site).

Peso Neto, 1981. Acrylic, oil stick, and paper collage on canvas. 72 × 94. (Illustrated in Marshall, 2005, p. 34; Studio International Web site).

Red Man, 1981. Acrylic, spray paint, and oil stick on canvas. 79 × 83. (Illustrated in Emmerling, 2003, p. 39; Marshall, 1992, p. 81; C.R., 2000, p. 78).

Riding with Death, 1988. Acrylic on canvas (Illustrated in Marshall, 1992, p. 231; Meyer, 2005, pp. 152–53; Emmerling, 2003, p. 82; C.R., 2000, p. 268).

Slave Auction, 1982. Acrylic, oil stick, and collage, 72 × 120. (Illustrated in C.R., 2000, p. 144; image available at http://www.pompidou-center.info/amisdumusee/popup31.html).

South African Nazism, 1985. Acrylic and silkscreen ink on found metal panel. 72 × 36. (Illustrated in C.R., 2000, p. 240; image available at http://www.ikonltd.com/past/details.cfm?ExID=39&AutoArtID=746).

St. Joe Louis Surrounded by Snakes, 1982. Acrylic, oil stick, and paper collage on canvas. 40 × 40. (Illustrated in Emmerling, 2003, p. 23; Meyer, 2005, p. 76. C.R., 2000, p. 122).

Test Pattern, 1979. Color photocopy on paper. 8½ × 11. (Illustrated in O'Brien, Cortez, et al., 2007, p. 57).

Tobacco versus Red Chief, 1981. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas. 78 × 70. (Image available at http://www.ubs.com/4/artcollection/the-collection/a-z/basquiat-jean-michel-16/tobacco-versus-red-chief-77/description/index.html).

Toussaint L'Overture versus Savonarola, 1983. Acrylic and oil stick and collage on canvas, 7 panels. 48 × 230. (Illustrated in Emmerling, 2003, pp. 88–89; Chiappini, 2005, p. 67; C.R., 2000, p. 162).

Trumpet, 1984. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas. 60 × 60. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 82; C.R., 2000, p. 202; Brooklyn Museum Web site).

Undiscovered Genius, part of the Daros Suite of 32 drawings, 1982–83. Mixed media on paper. 22½ × 30. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 199; Marshall, 1997, p. 166; C.R., 1999, pp. 214–15).

Untitled, 1980 [car crash with pay for soup]. Felt tip marker, oil, spray paint, and varnish on canvas. 40 × 29⅝. (Illustrated in Marshall, 1992, p. 76; C.R., 2000, p. 72).

Untitled, 1980 [Fashion Lounge murals, Times Square Show, destroyed]. Acrylic paint and spray paint on wall, two sections. Unknown dimensions. *Untitled,* 1980–81 [grey cityscape]. Acrylic, spray-paint, and oil stick on canvas. 48 × 48. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 17; Marshall, 1992, p. 78; Studio International site).

Untitled, 1981 [man with broom]. Acrylic, oil stick, and spray paint on wood. 72 × 48. (Illustrated in Marshall, 1992, p. 85; C.R., 2000, p. 88).

Untitled, 1981 [a series of 14 drawings]. Ink, crayon, and acrylic on paper. 30 × 22 each. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, pp. 24–25; C.R., 1999, p. 153).

Untitled, 1981 [signed SAMO, NY 1981 on reverse]. Acrylic, oil stick, and spray paint on canvas, 51 × 56. (Illustrated in C.R., 2000, p. 74; image available at http://www.artfact.com/auction-lot/jean-michel-basquiat-1960–1988-untitled-j086g6mmc8–537-m-6v55nc92s7).

Untitled (Head), 1981. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas. 81½ × 69¼. (Illustrated in Meyer, 2005, p. 35; C.R., 2000, p. 78; *Studio International* Web site).

Untitled (Sugar Ray Robinson), 1982. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas. 42 × 42. (Illustrated in Emmerling, 2003, p. 22; Meyer, 2005, p. 77; C.R., 2000, p. 146).

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