



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *A Panel of Experts*, 1982, acrylic and oil paintstick and paper collage on canvas with exposed wood supports and twine 152.4 x 152.4 cm. Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, gift of Ira Young © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat / SODRAC (2014), licensed by Artestar, New York

## Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now's the Time at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto

by Steve Rockwell

The artist had intended to attend a Run-DMC concert that night with close friend Kevin Bray. Makeup artist Kelle Inman, who lived in the basement below his studio, had gone upstairs to wake up Jean-Michel at Kevin's urging.

She found him lying on the floor in a pool of vomit. Jean-Michel Basquiat died from a heroin overdose on August 12, 1988 at his art studio on Great Jones Street in Manhattan at the age of 27. To say that Basquiat's streak across

the 80s art world stratosphere was meteoric is not hyperbole. The visible gleam of a shooting star or falling star in the night sky accounts for split second of time. Dusting off Warhol's 15-minutes-of-fame cliché, Basquiat's seven years of lived fame and fortune, condenses to a mere seven minutes, or even seven seconds, when viewed through the tunnel of time's ever-constricting cruel passage. The question begs to be asked. Was the price that the artist paid for a moment success worth it?

The exhibition *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now's the Time* at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto closed on May 10<sup>th</sup> of this year, just a few months shy of the 27-year anniversary of the artist's death. This was the first major retrospective of the artist's work in Canada and featured nearly 85 large-scale paintings and drawings, drawing from private collections and public museums across Europe and North America. Austrian art historian, curator, and critic Dieter Buehler guest-curated the AGO exhibition, opting for a thematic treatment of the artist's work. The strategy was helpful in delineating the influence on Basquiat of graffiti, comics, music, and sports, positioning the raw street graffiti work

at the beginning of the show, with the more facile, if not polished collaborative work with Andy Warhol near its close.

To some extent, given his youth, Basquiat arrived on the New York art scene fully formed, so sure seemed he of his direction, as if the outcome of his bout with the artworld contenders had already been decided. To quote Muhammad Ali, "The fight is won or lost far away from witnesses – behind the lines, in the gym, and out there on the road, long before I dance under those lights." Basquiat's gym was the street. By positioning his tag SAMO® where it would be noticed by the art world, he could announce his arrival on the scene in the guise of a cryptic corporate brand, a punctuation that

came with a jibing poke at culture in general (FOR THOSE OF US, WHO MERELY TOLERATE SOCIETY). As his friend Keith Haring pointed out, "He disrupted the politics of the art world and insisted that if he had to play their games, he would make the rules."

By the time Basquiat popped out of the chrysalis at the end of his teens, years had already gone into the incubation. A seminal moment of his development came with his mother taking him to see Picasso's epic painting *Guernica*. The irony of having African art introduced to him through a white Spaniard was not lost on the artist.

A convergence of traumatic events at and around the age seven, both physical and emotional left scars



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled*, 1982, acrylic and oil on linen, 193 x 239 cm. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam Photographer: Studio Tromp, Rotterdam © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, licensed by Artstar, New York



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled*, 1981, acrylic, oil, paper collage and spray paint on canvas, 205.74 x 175.9 cm  
The Broad Art Foundation. Photography credit: Douglas M. Parker Studio, Los Angeles © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artstar, New York

on the boy's development. His spleen had been removed after being hit by a car, an event which manifested itself as a life-long interest in anatomy, nourished by a copy of *Grey's Anatomy*, which his mother brought to him in the hospital. More difficult to measure might be the impact on the formative development of the youngster with the divorce of his parents at about this time. Well-documented, however, is Basquiat's troubled relationship with his father, the son tending to amplify those difficulties, with the father playing them down.

Until Basquiat finally left home for good and settled in Lower Manhattan, Gérard Basquiat had contended with his rebellious son, who in his opinion never grew up, and as his sister Lisane remembers, her brother tended to harbor resentments. To a bright, sensitive soul, this negative energy must have fueled the artist's single-mindedness, contributing to his legendary independence of thought, something with which his future art dealers soon became acquainted. As Bruno Bischofberger recalled, "But when you dared to put the smallest

criticism, he would really get furious" and say, "these look very sloppy these paintings, but every line and everything I do, I know exactly what I do, and it has to be like that."

The lily pad that made it possible for Basquiat to leapfrog from essentially living on the street to his successful commercial gallery exhibition at Annina Nosei was the *New York/New Wave* show at PS1 in early 1981. Here Basquiat got the attention of Henry Geldzahler from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Peter Schjeldahl, who singled out Robert Mapplethorpe and Jean-Michel Basquiat in his *Village Voice* review. PS1 director Alanna Heiss remembers that people were trying to find Jean-Michel to buy his pictures by the end of the exhibition. The interest of Bruno Bischofberger had already been piqued.

The impact that success had on an essentially fragile psyche might be summed up by the folding of his SAMO identity with his graffiti sign-off LIFE IS CONFUSING AT THIS POINT. Musician Martin Aubert had attested to Basquiat being on heroin already by the end of 1980. The artist had reasoned that if it had helped the creativity of Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Billie Holiday, and Charlie Parker it would work for him. Aubert had pointed out that all those people were dead, to which Basquiat had responded, "If that's what it takes."

To an ambitious Basquiat, gallery representation was a restless juggling act. His list of dealers came to include Annina Nosei, Bruno Bischofberger, Mary Boone, Larry Gagosian, Tony Shafrazi, Maeght Lelong, Yvon Lambert, and Vrej Baghoomian. Basquiat wanted to be #1, and as in sports, artists and dealers were ranked from the top down. He fretted over what each could do for him. Mary Boone allegedly fell out of favor because she was unable to get him a museum show.

Suspensions of exploitation and subtle racism never lay far beneath the surface of Basquiat's demeanor. While getting the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* in 1985 was heady at the first, the wording of its title,

*New Art, New Money: The Marketing of an American Artist*, in the mind of Basquiat, seemed to imply that the accomplishment was not so much his own, but the result of clever marketing.

His 1982 work *Obnoxious Liberals* already captured the artist's ambivalence over the market forces that were, while making him rich and famous, self-serving and suspect in intent. In Basquiat's painting, the Philistines tormenting the chained black Samson appear to be tycoons, one in black top hat with the words *Not For Sale*, lettered on his suit jacket, the other a squat cowboy with a dollar sign poncho and feathers flying from the band of his Stetson. Of course, it had been the "limousine liberals" that were first to cash in on the graffiti movement that lit up the art world in the late 70s – upscale dealers and hip collectors that swooped down from

uptown Manhattan into the inner city, essentially burning out the genre, then moving on to the next new thing.

If there was a weak point in AGO's *Now's the Time* presentation of the Basquiat work, it might have been the attempt to cast the artist as an social activist. It is true that the timing of the show coincided with the racial turmoil in Ferguson, Missouri, events that have had counterparts in New York and Baltimore. A blaring Martin Luther King, Jr. soundtrack, however, served to cloud aspects of a brilliantly complex individual gripped in a singular struggle with private demons.

While Basquiat's art is not overtly political, he was concerned that the black had not been adequately portrayed in art. Taken as a whole, Basquiat's work is a vivid portrait of his own particular experience as a black

man in the New York City of the 80s. He was deeply affected by the beating death of graffiti artist Michael Stewart by New York City Transit Police, all of whom were acquitted. He produced *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)* (1983) as a response to his death. The relevance of his 1981 *Irony of a Negro Policeman* resonates today as it did in his day.

Of course, the tragedy of the artist's death is not allayed by the spectacular rise in the price of his work since his passing. So what else is new? Back then, response critically and commercially to his collaboration with Warhol had been abysmal. Warhol's death had hit him hard. He considered his painting career to be finished, and was losing his battle with heroin. The thought must have crossed his mind, "Was it all worth it?"



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Obnoxious Liberals*, 1982, acrylic, oilstick, and spray paint on canvas, 172.72 x 259.08 cm. The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection  
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