

Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Anatomy of Suffering

By [Prof. Sam Ben-Meir](#)

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The Chiostro Del Bramante, a cloister-turned-gallery in the heart of Rome, is currently presenting “Jean-Michel Basquiat: New York City” – a generous selection of work spanning the short, but immensely prolific, career of this extraordinary artist. The extensive exhibition includes nearly one hundred significant works on loan from the Mugarbi Collection, which includes acrylics and oils, as well as drawings, silkscreen prints, and ceramics completed between the years of 1981 and 1987.

Born in Brooklyn, New York to a Haitian father and Puerto Rican mother, Basquiat’s stunning and breathtakingly rapid ascent to fame and stardom was paralleled by few, if any, other artists in the twentieth century. At Sothebys recently, Basquiat’s painting of a skull, Untitled (1982) sold for \$110.5 million – a record price for an American painter, placing him in the art history pantheon alongside Pablo Picasso and Francis Bacon. We can be pleased that Yusaku Maezawa, the Japanese billionaire who bought the painting, intends to share his taste for art with the public. However, if we are to truly approach these works at all, it is necessary to get beyond the din of the market – the “screeching vultures” as the late John Berger puts it – and give our attention to the sophistication and wit of this painter, the sincerity and exuberance of his canvases.



Untitled, 1982 (Source: Sotheby's New York via artnet News)

From the first early portraits in the exhibit, we see Basquiat's confident and energetic "line", which he used to tremendous expressive effect throughout his career. We also find Basquiat's characteristic use of haloes; and most recognizably, the three-pronged gold crown, which he would use to establish the dignity and worth of something or someone, or simply as an assertion of the artist's power.

The crown features prominently in *Loin* (1982), a painting of a horned bull alongside a bloody knife. On the one hand, we seem to have a sacrificial offering: "loin" as in a cut of beef, a tenderloin. On the other hand, a symbol of sacred strength and power (the bull was in fact one of Zeus' divine manifestations, a form he took when he seduced and abducted Europa). In this case, the "loin" is the creative, generative potency of the artist himself, in what amounts to a kind of self-portrait. Similarly, Pablo Picasso, who influenced Basquiat greatly, depicted himself as a quadruped in his etching *Minotaure* (1935) and included an image of a bull in *Guernica* (1937), a painting which Basquiat credited as being among one of his all-time favorites.



Loin, 1982 (Source: David Bird / Pinterest)

There is no escaping violence in Basquiat, and while it is sometimes presented upfront – with the intention to arrest and confront the viewer – there is often an indeterminate sense of menace. In “Side View of an Oxen’s Jaw” (1982) Basquiat may be invoking the story of Samson – a Biblical figure who slew the masses of Philistines armed with only the jawbone of an ass. Basquiat would explicitly revisit Samson in one of his most successful paintings, *Obnoxious Liberals* (1982) – identifying himself with the black hero/martyr that reappears in so much of his work.

Hand Anatomy (1982) brings our attention to one of the fundamental themes of the show and Basquiat’s work throughout his career. Basquiat’s knowledge of art history was apparently encyclopedic: he painted in dialogue with many of the masters who preceded him and his works are full of such references. Leonardo da Vinci looms large in this sense, not only as a painter (Basquiat seems to have regarded Da Vinci as among his favorite artists), but as a student of human anatomy and physiology. Da Vinci is known to have secretly dissected human cadavers (a practice widely condemned at the time) to understand more fully the inner workings and processes of the human body. Basquiat may have been attracted to this readiness to go underground, as it were; and like da Vinci, he had to escape and outmaneuver the conventions of ordinary social morality to bring to light something that we are almost afraid to see; something that by its very nature interrogates our tendency to conform to established modes of understanding and discourse.

The exhibition includes several works that Basquiat and Andy Warhol painted together. The two had a highly-publicized friendship which led to an exhibition of their collaborative works at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in Soho in 1985. “Warhol and Basquiat: Paintings” was panned by the critics, a reception which contributed to the dissolution of their personal and professional relationship. In *Thin Lips* (c. 1984-1985) (which is to say, “false promises”) the

two artists satirize Reaganomics. Basquiat's work was political throughout, and sometimes his works are most-effectively political when the content is not explicitly so.



Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat (Source: WideWalls)

At his best, Basquiat can be viewed as an American shaman: an artist who brought meaning to a fragmented society by acting as a conduit to another realm of consciousness. In his appropriation of so-called primitive art and renaissance iconography – especially the halo (which sometimes becomes a crown of thorns) – he created a unique vocabulary that he developed as a way of exploring a broken world. Much like the writer William Burroughs, who was a profound influence on the painter, Basquiat is charting a kind of “guide” to the underworld – employing Ancient Egyptian glyphs and petroglyphs, as well as hobo signs, in his mapping of the “in”-visible.

Basquiat's art is inseparable from language – that is, from the power and sometimes the impotency of names, lists and phrases: and even among his earliest pieces we find him charting words and letters in semi-incantatory ways. He saw the disintegration and brutality of everyday life in America: for Basquiat, the world is in tatters, and because of this, his work tends to lack a center as well as a “privileged” point of reference. If we could talk about the metaphysics of Basquiat's world, then it was one of violent explosiveness – he taps into the ‘dehiscence of being’ to create something altogether unsettling, evocative, and distinct.

Basquiat does not abandon, but transforms, the project of high modernism – inasmuch as his paintings are indeed an “autobiographical search for wholeness”. There is, we might say, a therapeutic intention underlying his work: he seemed to want (at least at times) to heal the self – “to repel ghosts” (as one of his late works states).

Some of the later paintings seem to suggest that he saw the end was near: for example, the extraordinary painting *Riding with Death* (1988), or the final piece included in this show *Gravestone* (1987), a work which consists of three doors joined together and the word “perishable” partially blotted out at the top center. This was, on the one hand, a tribute to Andy Warhol (who died that year), and it evokes the painted panel altars of medieval and renaissance art. Like so much of his work, it represents Basquiat's pattern of salvaging and

resurrecting the rejected and discarded. But one must wonder if this piece could also be seen as a requiem for the artist himself, as he was coming to terms with his own self-destruction (he died in 1988 from a heroin overdose).



Gravestone, 1987 (Source: Cie Cefeg / Pinterest)

Much of this exhibition concerns, we might say, the anatomy of suffering, and at the same time the strength, resilience and protest that comes from the stripping down, the peeling away of the outer layers to reveal the blood vessels, the muscles and tendons, and the skeleton itself. In *Rusting Red Car in Kuau* (1984) with its engine (that is, its anatomy) visible, we are witness to another form of Basquiat's self-portraiture.

Basquiat's work remains immensely provocative, often disconcerting, barbed and defiant – scathing in his critique of the racism, greed and moral apathy of American society. He takes a wrecking ball not only to false barriers between conceptualism and expressionism, painting and writing, improvisation, and composition; but to the various social, political, and artistic edifices we have built atop lies. As Berger observed, if Basquiat is an artist whose work is about “seeing through lies,” then we cannot deny his timeliness and the claim his work ultimately makes on us.

Sam Ben-Meir, PhD is an adjunct professor at Mercy College. His current research focuses on environmental ethics and animal studies. sam@alonben-meir.com Web: www.alonben-meir.com

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