

# JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

HIS STORY IS VERY BIG



Untitled (Helmet), 1981

Jean-Michel Basquiat was the superstar of the New York art scene in the mid-80s. In only eight years he created a vast oeuvre of around 900 oil paintings and over 1,000 drawings. He felt the urge to paint and draw all the time and on everything around him: on napkins, tables, cloth, fridges, walls and in acrylic or oil paint stick, as in *Helmet* from 1981, shown here. Whatever was on his mind, he depicted or wrote down. *Helmet* carries the word AARON and is crowned by Basquiat's typical trident symbol. In 1981, he started to replace his earlier street-art-name SAMO© with AARON—for Henry Aaron—one of the best, black, American baseball players. He was one of Basquiat's heroes, worthy of being crowned. In keeping with Basquiat's own statement, kings, heroes, and the street were themes which interested him and were freely integrated in his artworks.

Basquiat's integration of coincidence and imponderables, a mutation of his direct surroundings into a free field of association, may derive from two very personal sources: firstly, Basquiat's art was influenced by the compositional techniques used by the pioneer of the post-war avant-garde, John Cage; secondly, and perhaps more stringently, looking at the work shown here, *Untitled (Willy Arron)* of 1981, his roots are in street art. *Untitled (Willy Arron)* is painted on an apartment wall, and typical for his mural paintings, executed in graffiti spray, aerosol, and crayon paint, combined here already with material used in academies such as acrylic, enamel paint, or pencil. His use of signs, which is to become a typical feature of his repertoire, such as airplanes, a blue car, a crown and a face, not only gives the work a narrative but also marks the development of his iconic painting language while still creating graffiti art on walls. In *Untitled (Willy Arron)* he also blends happenings and images straight from the urban street scenario into his paintings, even incorporating acoustic associations. The letters in the title "rron," seem to capture the booming noise of the metropolis. In this work, he elaborates his typical hybrid style with echoes, repetitions, obliterations, and scribbles.

These facts—the switch to advanced painterly mediums, the development of his trademark language and the capacity of contextualization—manifest

a turning point in Basquiat becoming a “real” painter. Thus *Untitled (Willy Arron)* can be recognized as a transition work from the time when Basquiat did not have money to buy canvas until when he became a very successful artist, a topic he addresses in the work *Life Like Son of Barney Hill*, discussed later in this essay.

Basquiat's ability to convey his biography and individual artistic message in his artworks is evident in the three paintings *Toussaint l'Ouverture Versus Savonarola*, *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta*, and *Life Like Son of Barney Hill* in the Nicola Erni Collection. All were executed in 1983; all extend over several panels and as a result have an exceptional format of up to six meters in length; all are intensely compelling as a result of their impassioned brushwork and multiple layers; and all show a specific contextual correlation by combining text, image, and color.

Basquiat developed his iconographic repertoire in his artworks through the recurring use of crowns, skulls, texts, money-related signs, and negroid symbols—a pictorial world revealing what deeply affected him: Afro-American history and racial discrimination. In this context, two of these works focus on racism and colonialism: *Toussaint l'Ouverture Versus Savonarola* and *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta*. Both have a powerful narrative contextualizing slavery and revolt and relate to Basquiat's own biography and his half-Haitian, half-Puerto Rican roots. He did not belong to either cultural or ethnic group, but as a colored person living in New York who achieved world fame, he fought social discrimination and felt a strong desire to improve awareness. He elevated his black heroes, mainly from the worlds of boxing and jazz, to idols and kings. Basquiat also saw himself as a genius belonging to the genealogy of heroes. In the painting *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta* he manifests this affiliation, not only indicated in the title but also through adding “Fig 23” in the upper left-hand corner, like a label close to the head of an Afro-American man. This work was executed in the year he turned twenty three.

*Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta* is a prime example of Basquiat's personal interest to highlight the ignorance and incorrectness of stereotyping people because of their race. The stimulus came from personal experience when he traveled to New Orleans and saw the rich black history of the South. The protagonists in Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, referred to here—Huck and Jim—travel along the Mississippi River and team up, despite their uncertainty about the legality or morality of their actions, to help slaves. The novel is regarded as one of the great American tales illustrating the atrocities of slavery, written with satire, irony, and sarcasm. From the central section to the outer right of this vast canvas, the words “Mississippi,” “Mark Twain,” and “Negroes” give strong support to his intentions. The words are like mantras repeated across the panels, once again inducing a subtle acoustic buzz. The sonorous quality of Basquiat's art is symptomatic. The fact that our sense of hearing is addressed beats the storyline deeper into our consciousness and shows the smart artistic way Basquiat forcefully conveys his message full of sarcasm. The cynicism in his drawings and words—a rat, a cow, an udder, and

“PER LB. 49 ¢” relating to slaves, bought and sold cheaply, humanity treated like meat—could well be virulent in its association or rather its assimilation.

The second work in this unique group, entitled *Toussaint l’Ouverture Versus Savonarola*, also has an autobiographical context and addresses Basquiat’s role as a black artist, similar to the Haitian freedom fighter Touissant L’Ouverture, a Caribbean slave who led the Haitian Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. Basquiat again consciously embeds himself in the painting by repeatedly using “his” copyright sign and through the omnipresent head of the African-American man and his hat on the far right. Both signs stand for him as a person in a heretical dispute on current art entities. This work is all about finding and defining his role as a black artist within modern American art history. In this context, one could assume—looking closely at the panels—that the work is a homage and reference to Robert Rauschenberg’s mixed style of “Combines” and experimental use of texture to capture subtleties of sarcasm. And maybe it also refers to Franz Kline’s highly inspiring, powerful brushstrokes, enlarged lines abstracted from a figurative language, and his repeated overpainting. A common feature of works by Kline and Basquiat is that they appear to be straightforward, spontaneous action paintings, although neither of the artists’ works were accidental by nature.

The last of the three works discussed here is *Life Like Son of Barney Hill*. This shows the outcome of the success Basquiat had reached by 1983, with its associated wealth and celebrity status. The enormity of this experience triggered the inclusion of themes in focus: money, fame, life, and freedom, possibly culminating in the supernatural superman. Like the theme depicted here, when the son of a couple called Hill became a star, more or less overnight,<sup>1</sup> Basquiat similarly achieved fame within a very short time and grapples with his sudden celebrity status and new financial situation.

Taken together, this group of paintings is charged with the most idiosyncratic of themes in its imagery and the use of a clever, sensual, artistic language to underscore Basquiat’s personal message. The works define a new style of history painting, capturing honest impulses and acting as a contemporary, almost seismographic sensor.

Basquiat was also extremely ambitious, eager for knowledge and to learn from the best. The impact of Andy Warhol, in particular, with whom he collaborated in the mid 1980s, is visible in the work *Sell Grit*, also of 1983. In the three rows of eight shoes which occupy three quarters of

the painting, Basquiat makes two references to Warhol’s work: to the fascinating series of *Dance Diagrams* executed in 1962, and to Warhol’s use of repetition—a significant and groundbreaking component of Pop Art. In the shoe grid, any perception of time or narrative sequence is subtle; the image can be read not only from left to right but also from top to bottom. Formally speaking, this relates Basquiat’s works to Minimal Art, which used grids and serial forms to evoke an ideal, geometric precision. In this sense, *Sell Grit* is a unique composition within Basquiat’s oeuvre. A further characteristic is the structural three-part division: the far left is overpainted completely in black, the paint still seems to be dripping; the central section is a collage on paper of nervous sketchings, scraps of conversation, and pictograms, partly pasting over the right-hand side, which shows a portrait of a man drawn on a blue background.

The male figure with a hat and moustache may be a reference to the Haitian novelist Jacques Stephen Alexis, a communist writer, who like many other disenfranchised citizens, was killed under the Haitian dictator François Duvalier. Given Basquiat’s Haitian heritage, it is surely an artistic device that, despite the collage overlapping the edge of the blue area, the name Duvalier can still be read—once crossed out with a single line, twice thickly, and finally underlined to ensure its lasting effect once more and that the deleted words are read. The importance of this recurring figure with a hat becomes even more evident as it reappears in all three multiple-panel paintings of 1983 discussed here, and as such acts as a connecting element between these four paintings in the Nicola Erni Collection.

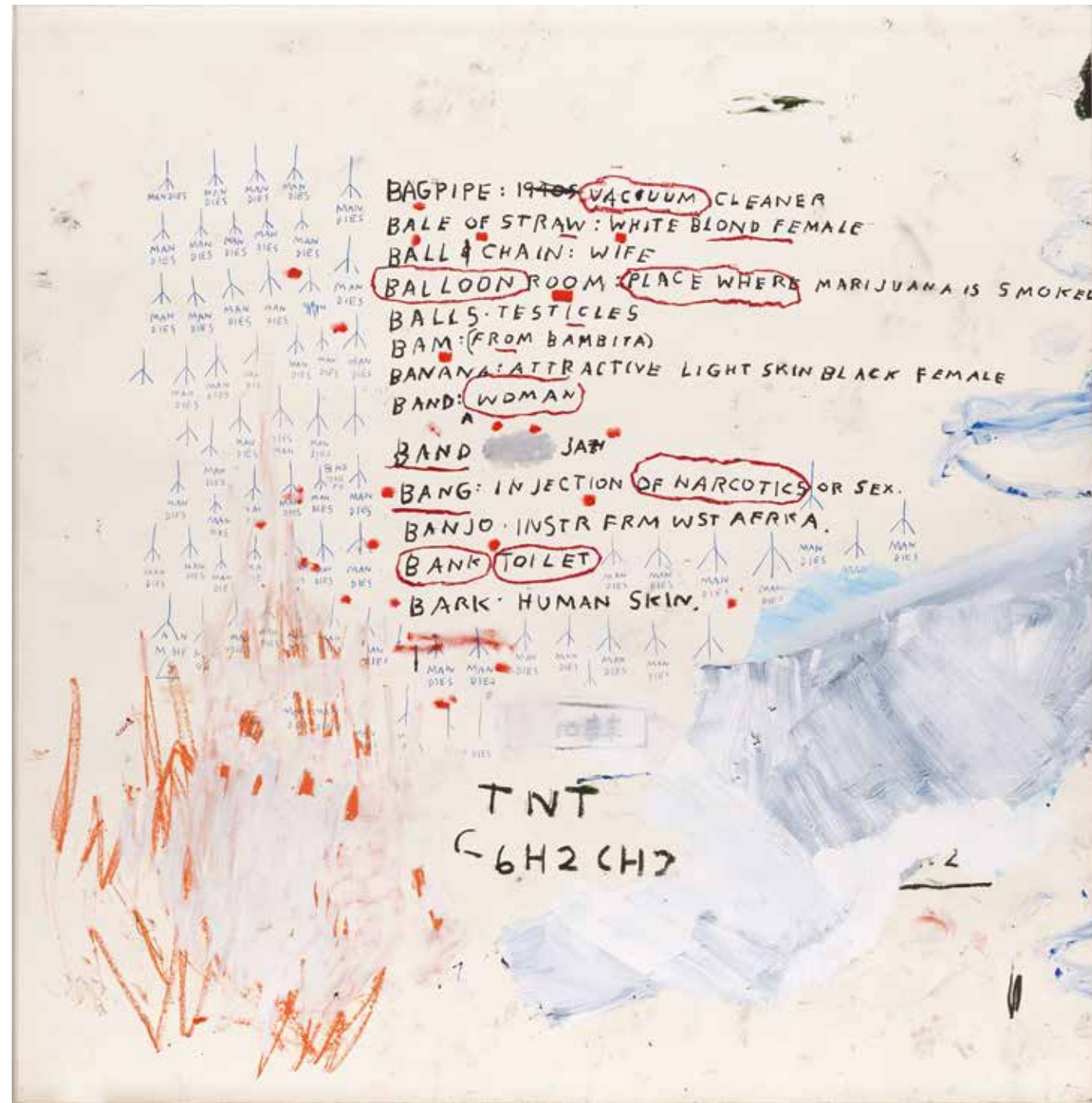
Basquiat’s central cultural legacy addressing the 21<sup>st</sup> century and bridging ethnicities is just as relevant today. Artistically, his success is not only to be found in his combination of graffiti-like elements and fine art, but also in his ability to create a pictorial autobiography, subtly emitting pointed messages in an artistic language which addresses more than one sense. Art historically, Basquiat’s work traces an arc from a Picasso-like interest in “primitive” art to references mainly to Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, elevating graffiti to become institutionalized, while integrating Afro-American culture and issues at the same time—a vast spectrum which reflects the truism: “His story is very big.”

Florentine Rosemeyer

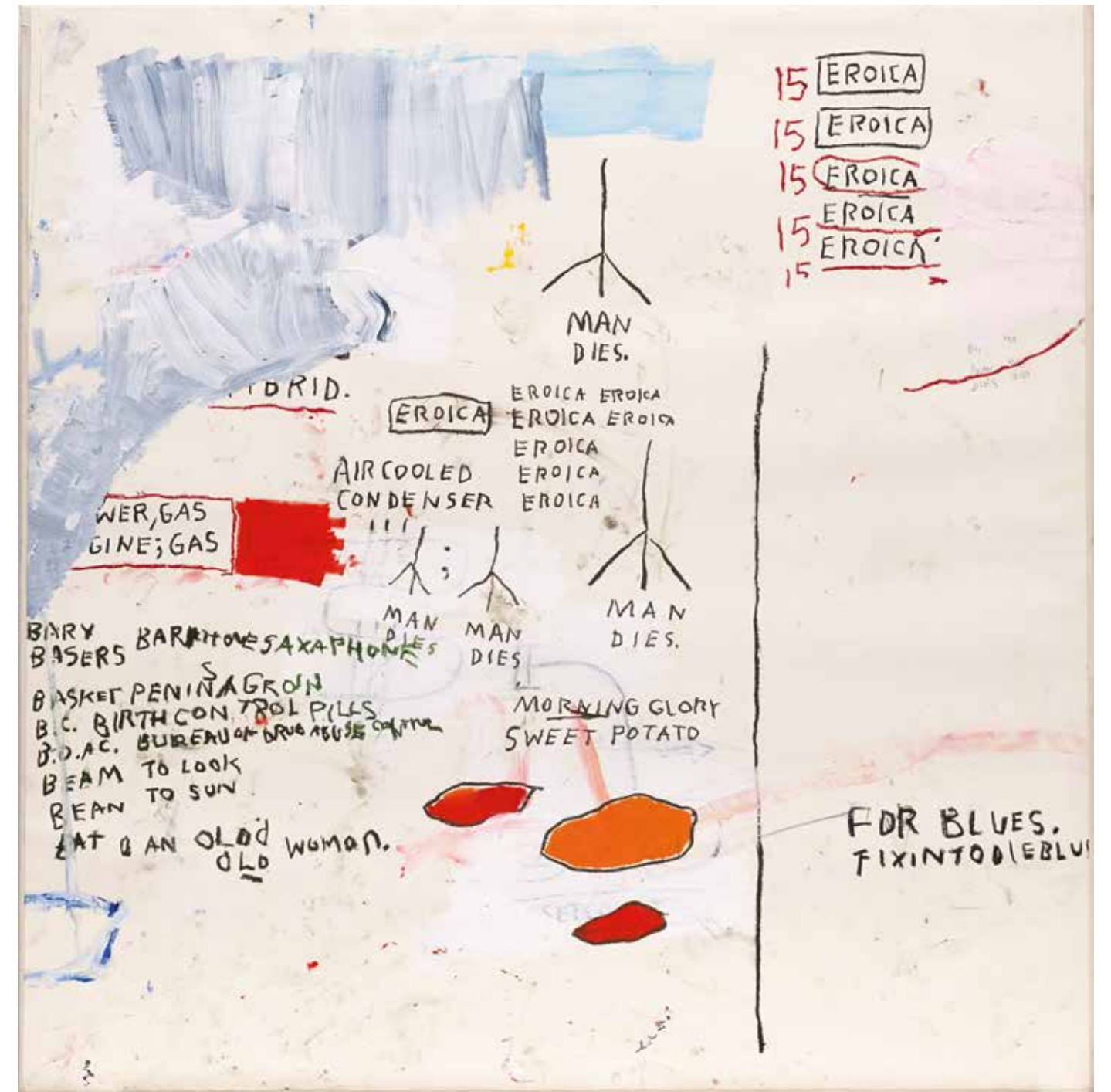


*The Lake*, 1983

<sup>1</sup> This deals with the highly sensational story in the media of Betty and Barney Hill, who were allegedly kidnapped by aliens for a short time and held in a UFO. The couple became famous as a result.



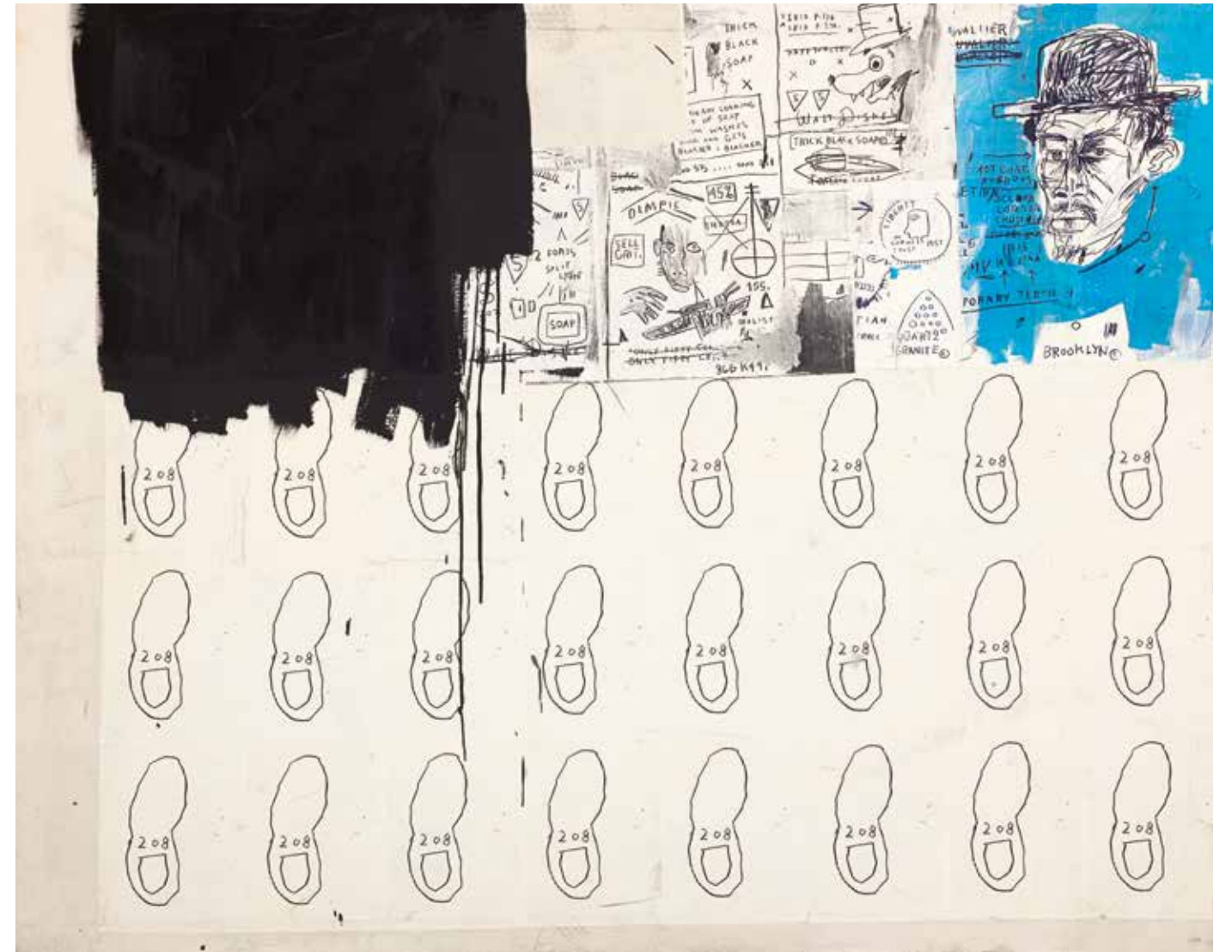
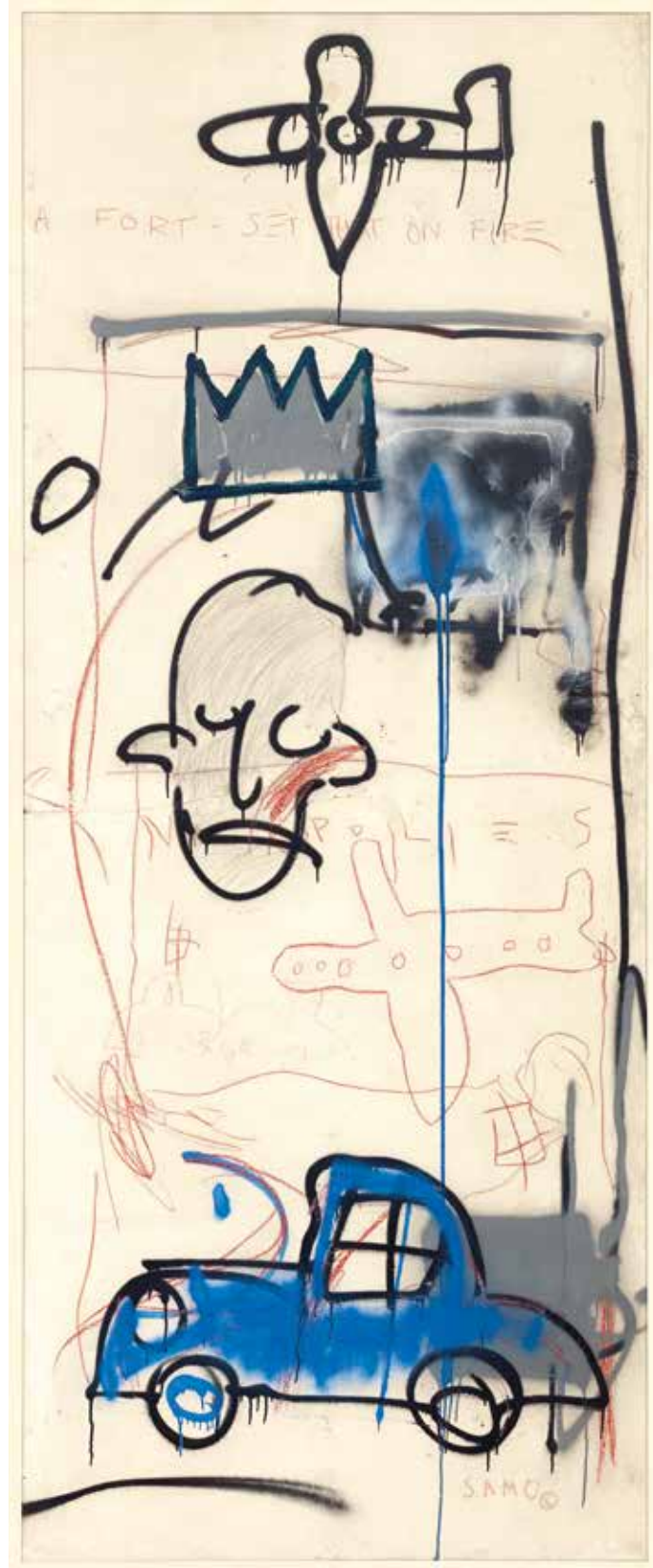
Eroica II, 1988



Eroica I, 1988



Untitled (Willy Arron), 1981



Sell Grit, 1983



Toussaint l'Ouverture Versus Savonarola, 1983



Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta, 1983



Life Like Son of Barney Hill, 1983