



Jean-Michel Basquiat

Brett as a Negro, 1982
Acrylic on tiling glued on plywood
109 × 109 cm

Jean-Michel Basquiat

Scratching Surfaces

What looks at first like quickly applied daubs is in fact *Brett as a Negro*, one of Jean-Michel Basquiat's works on a nonconventional surface and probably the only one created on tile. Before Basquiat's breakthrough in the art world, the subway and all kind of different objects were Basquiat's earliest and most frequently painted surfaces – but in his later work painted objects can rarely be found. For this portrait, twenty-two-year-old Basquiat chose a surface consisting of turquoise tiles glued to a plywood square. This structure immediately transports the viewer to New York's subway stations and evokes the tiling of the platforms. Although *Brett as a Negro* was painted with black acrylic and some red highlights, one is immediately reminded of marker graffiti encountered in these very public spaces.

Once Basquiat set out on his forays through the urban terrain, no surface remained safe. In the late 1970s and 1980s he strolled day and night through the streets of New York City. The artist born in 1960 in Brooklyn of Puerto Rican and Haitian heritage left home at an early age to plunge into the city's vibrant downtown scene. By his own choice Basquiat frequently lived as a nomad with no fixed address. He would crash at friends' places and sell hand-painted postcards and T-shirts.¹ He often used everyday objects like refrigerators, clothing, doors and windows as a support for his paintings. In a 1985 interview with Becky Johnston and Tamra Davis, Basquiat explained: "The first painting I made were on windows I found on the street. And I used the window shape as a frame, and I just put the painting on the glass part and on doors found on the street."² Wherever he went, he left marks. It was a constant process of soaking up his surroundings and immortalizing himself on chosen surfaces: an exchange between the interior and the exterior; between the inner self and the outer world.

New York during this time was decaying, freeing up spaces to be filled by creatives crisscrossing every artistic movement. Basquiat turned the streets of New York's Lower East Side into his first studio, scrawling poetic lettering on the walls. Together with Al Diaz he created the tag "SAMO".³ His artistic repertoire emerged from the energetic and inspiring New York art scene of the early 1980s alongside the development of hip-hop's cut-and-paste aesthetic.⁴ One had to generate attention for oneself: Basquiat did so in the form of graffiti, using the techniques to present his art in public. He eventually left behind his secret identity as "SAMO" and began to appear as Jean-Michel Basquiat.⁵

The poetics of sampling and graffiti is palpable in this work. Even though Basquiat was no longer actively painting on the streets, his visuals remained tied to their public origins, and the concept and space of association represented by the street became an important artistic subject.⁶ Sampling inspirations from everyday life – compiling parts into something new – was Basquiat's approach to communicating through art. Some of the samples could be real people from his own surrounding, like the subject Brett de Palma for *Brett as a Negro*. Heads, faces and masks are recurring motifs in Basquiat's oeuvre. He often uses heads to honour specific people and establish his own heroes.⁷ Many of his heads are sketchy caricatures that incorporate anatomical peculiarities. In his short but prolific career Basquiat created an emblem that he transformed in many ways. *Brett as a Negro* is different, it is a portrait and has Brett's features. It is a particular face, not a universal head. The twist within this depiction lies beneath the surface, as Brett, born in 1949 and himself an artist, was not African American. Basquiat gave his white friend a black visibility, when at this time African Americans in the United States often found themselves without public representation. Thus, with the portrait of Brett de Palma he is setting up a personal monument in the visual language of the street. This portrait would probably not have survived (or even existed) in public space – not only because graffiti is a volatile form of expression and is often immediately painted over or cleaned up, but also because African Americans were rarely memorialized. Nevertheless, Basquiat made his own space for his personal heroes and *Brett as a Negro* stays forever.

Drawing, scribbling, creating new identities: Basquiat would mix new works of art not only in terms of subject but also in terms of medium. Just as his powerful compositions had a revolutionary socio-critical function, likewise his surfaces defy established traditions. Basquiat clearly was not only scratching surfaces but breaking through them.

Hannah Leuthold

1 See Brett de Palma, *New York's Art Scene in the 80s*, Pulpo Gallery (website), <https://www.pulpogallery.com/viewing-room/3-new-york-s-art-scene-in-the-80s-through-the-eyes-of-contemporaries/> (accessed 30 May 2022).
2 Interview with Basquiat, by Becky Johnston and Tamra Davis, in *Basquiat*, ed. Dieter Buchhart and Sam Keller (exhib. cat., Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel), Ostfildern 2010, p. xxiii.
3 See Glenn O'Brien, "Basquiat and the New York Scene 1978–1982", in *Basquiat*, ed. Buchhart and Keller, p. vi.

4 See Press release for *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Art and Objecthood*, Nahmad Contemporary, <https://www.nahmadcontemporary.com/exhibitions/jean-michel-basquiat-art-and-objecthood> (accessed 29 May 2022).
5 See Dieter Buchhart, "Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Existential Line", in *Basquiat*, ed. Dieter Buchhart with Anna Karina Hofbauer (exhib. cat., Fondation Louis Vuitton), Paris 2018, p.17.
6 See Press release for *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Art and Objecthood*, Nahmad Contemporary.
7 See Jordana Moore Saggese, "The Heads of Jean-Michel Basquiat", in *Basquiat*, ed. Buchhart with Hofbauer, p. 87.

