



Jean-Michel Basquiat

in The Nicola Erni Collection

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“In this cultivated myth, Basquiat is a force of nature whose sheer talent erupted in New York of the 1980s like a geological event.”

One of the most beguiling and mysterious paintings in the Nicola Erni Collection is *Untitled (Car Crash)* made at the outset of Jean-Michel Basquiat's career in 1980 when he was beginning to develop a studio painting practice and making a bid for recognition in New York's art world. What stuns the viewer is not the graphic design or subject, heavily influenced by the artist's experience of making graffiti tags and images, but rather the artist's use of language as “concrete poetry.” A car drives headlong into another beneath a set of black, scrawled lines. Under a red, horizontal slash is the command: “Pay For Soup, Build A Fort, Set That On Fire!” The phrase is haunting. What does Basquiat propose in this enigmatic phrase? How can we make sense of it? The act of paying for food precedes a heroic gesture of building a military fort which in turn must be sabotaged by fire. In this one line, he urges survival, self-defence, and sabotage flowing from one action to another but which don't seem to possess a logical connection. With the advantage of hindsight, we might be reading Basquiat's credo for living, specifically his life as an artist.

This painting assumes a special significance at the start of Basquiat's remarkable assault on the New York art world as an “outsider,” a young, black man from the boroughs without any formal art education. In New York terms, he had “chutzpah,” an attitude and determination which would take him on a climb to the top within a matter of a few years.

In truth, Jean-Michel Basquiat is possibly one of the most Romantic painters of the twentieth century. But this complicates his reputation. He conforms to every expectation of the anguished and visionary artist, qualities associated with the avant-garde and the development of art beyond the academy and museum. Basquiat's life encapsulates the notion of artists as mavericks and prophets, which is amplified by his premature death. Largely shaped by his early tagging of walls, this legendary Basquiat is a carefree spirit unbounded by convention or training. He represents an idealised, creative freedom that his peers in the art world could never enjoy because they were compromised by a system determined by the taste of teachers, dealers, collectors, and curators. In this cultivated story, Basquiat is regarded as a force of nature whose sheer talent erupted in New York of the 1980s like a geological event.

But if we are really going to move beyond this simplistic myth, we need to return to the work, principally his exhilarating paintings which manifest his creative ideas and technical accomplishment. Let us simply return to the pictures in order to ground the man and the artist, to obtain a more objective analysis of his unique artistic contribution. An exhibition of paintings belonging to the Nicola Erni Collection offers an opportunity for re-assessing Jean-Michel Basquiat's art and his brief but distinguished career. This written introduction

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to the collection aspires to be a catalyst for a re-assessment of the pictures, their technique, styling, subjects, and meaning. In time, Basquiat will receive his deserved academic re-examination and any major retrospective of his work will necessarily call upon the holdings of this collection to faithfully illustrate this achievement.

The cryptic nature of Basquiat’s signs, symbols, brushwork, and painterly gestures holds a lasting fascination as if they can be cracked like a secret code. Academics, curators, and critics all jostle to own this knowledge like scholars of an ancient language of which only traces survive. Basquiat’s paintings are evocative of the Dead Sea Scrolls, drawing intensive scrutiny and interpretation. They are so full of suggestion and codification that such curiosity is inevitable. This hunt temptingly offers a treasure trove of meaning, but is inflamed by his stardom and the ensuing desirability of the works on the market. Should we attempt to unveil Basquiat’s extraordinary mind and achievement like excavating a Pompeian artifact trapped in petrified ash?

Certainly, each painting justifies serious research to establish connections to his own life and the identification of cultural references. Such a project will inevitably take place and require informed interpretation. However, while the urge to comprehend his paintings has academic value, in the final analysis they defy any definitive conclusions. Like many artworks, the paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat create a self-sufficient cosmos resisting such attempts—therein lies the beauty of his works. They synthesize so many multiple references that their power lies in their symbiotic layering of the past and present, the personal and political, the fictional with “reality.”

Let’s take a deep breath and step back from this quest for complete comprehension. Can we withdraw from this attempt to master the paintings and instead allow them to operate with more nuance and less imposition? As you look at the paintings they indicate a set of interdependent relationships. One image, idea or word cannot be isolated from the rest of the painting. The pictures nod to a Western tradition of narration but they also belong to the postmodern era of television, the movies, the comic book, cable TV, and MTV. They jump around and have an episodic quality. He fuses ideas together in a way that can feel disjointed and idiosyncratic but these paintings deserve time, consideration, and respect. While displaying the character of spontaneous tagging which he never quite abandons, the paintings are highly strategic. Basquiat blends the premeditated idea with an almost Surrealist “automatism,” summoning images out of his psyche.

To understand the artist, we must always return to the paintings. Each artist’s life inevitably forms a framework for their art. They are inseparable but once we have set aside the sound and fury of gossip, speculation, and flippant details, we are left to address the art that he made in the tragically short period of making studio paintings. The trajectory of how he learnt to make these pictures adds lustre to his myth and may explain some of the

institutional resistance to his art, but it was a fundamental development and a critically important achievement by this young and ambitious artist. The mature paintings maintain a consistent spirit of improvisation, sensitivity, and instinct but they also demonstrate a keen knowledge of Western painting, of making an “auratic” image on a canvas. However, the paradoxes persist. As much as he wished to make culturally and economically valued paintings, he subverts that tradition instinctively by making marks and images on any surface close to hand, which might include a sports helmet, a fridge door or planks of wood.

So too his pictures link the vernacular world of hip hop, sampling, rapping, the clubs, and street fashion to Leonardo da Vinci, Modernist “Primitivism,” Abstract Expressionism, Pop and Neo-Expressionism. In this respect, Basquiat embodies postmodern eclecticism. He keeps hunting for inspiration among the bric-a-brac of popular culture while finding ideas by riffling through illustrated art books or learning from fellow artists. Suzanne Mallouk in *Widow Basquiat* remembers how Basquiat never “read” books in a conventional sense, but scanned them for images and ideas.¹

Basquiat always remains the nomadic hunter and gatherer, quoting and sampling from any source that seduces him, from x-ray goggles found in comic books to the stories of historical leaders and intellectuals. Basquiat is a sifter of found materials uniting memories, nostalgia, popular culture, and knowledge. Arguably, this lack of reconciliation is what makes the paintings so entrancing and tantalising.

Almost alone among late twentieth-century painters, with some possible exceptions like Cy Twombly, Basquiat acts to reveal this accumulation of ideas and distractions across time. He is a hoarder of material which threatens to overwhelm the viewer. But Basquiat holds these conflicting and seemingly disparate thoughts in equilibrium. There is rarely a dominant focal point in these paintings or a hierarchy of interest. This is conceptually explicit in the multi-panelled, horizontal paintings which juxtapose individual “chapters” and yet withhold any clear narrative. Basquiat shares this strategy with Francis Bacon whose triptychs defy a logical progression in any direction. So too Basquiat’s panel paintings loosely share the same physical connection and thematic interests.

Much of the artist’s vitality lies in the tension he establishes between subject and material. The images he paints often feel improvised, immediate, and playful. While quoting from art history, he invents his own language of painting. An ordinary fridge functioning as a storage space for food becomes a white, curved field for self-expression. A set of wooden planks, strapped together resembles a fence and supports phrases resembling messages written in chalk on rural barns by hobos to provide each other with an underground support system.² These paintings on wood, like *To Repel Ghosts*, 1986, artistically recondition materials originally made for another more prosaic purpose. Basquiat seems to be nudging painting out of the studio back onto the street and yet we never lose sight of how he has consciously transformed these objects by contrast with the quick gesture of tagging a public wall.

To some extent the coding of the paintings is a decoy and a trap that leads us astray. Instead of enjoying the liveliness of his painted surfaces, we might become mired in social, political, and cultural distractions. For example, a painting like *The Dutch Settlers*, 1982 deploys a range of painterly techniques and processes, integrating controlled brush-work, running paint, written words, and diagrammatic information. Basquiat’s paintings are as expressive and subjective, lush and layered as the Modernist artworks of Ernst Ludwig

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Kirchner or Willem de Kooning. There is an exuberant handling of brush and pigment. The pictures also reveal the decisions he makes to build these elaborate and captivating dramas. Areas of flat color obscure underlying thoughts and messages which act to reinforce their significance. The paintings also indicate a familiarity with quotation, irony, performance, and ambivalence. We might consider the analogy to Gerhard Richter’s analytic and intellectual paintings situated in that critical space between the authority of art history and the effervescence of popular culture, light as air. So too, we know how Warhol played a seminal role in Basquiat’s artistic development culminating in a contentious collaborative project exhibited at the Shafrazi Gallery in 1985.

The value of the Nicola Erni Collection is that it is comprehensive in the best sense, embracing the chronological extent of the artist’s career as well as possessing examples of the artist’s experimental curiosity about art history and ways he could ingest and reinvent that tradition. Ranging from canvases to mixed media images to a helmet and a fridge, these artworks show the mesmerising power of Basquiat’s art. This essay is written with the benefit of spending time looking at the paintings in the Nicola Erni Collection first hand, thinking about pairs or groups of artworks and how they might relate to one another. They might share formal or thematic interests. This is by no means a definitive survey or a précis of existing literature, but simply a way of illustrating the range of art Basquiat made and how we might begin to understand his accomplishment as an artist and creative spirit.

Tags

Infamously, Jean-Michel Basquiat began on the street playing the jester, tagging walls to express himself through rhymes and raps. Written language becomes indistinguishable from the pictogram. *Untitled*, 1981 illustrates how he could meld together letters with images in a scene of implied sound and movement. A hammer sits beside nails, a car adjacent to aeroplanes. There’s a naivety to this painting but it achieves a coherence despite its fragmentation. Elements rhyme together, cannonballs find an echo in a series of holes that may function too as the letter “o.” Two planes fly within their own space marked out by a long finger delineated by a narrow, grey line. The vehicle may represent medical assistance as it carries the universal red cross on its side mirroring the shape of the long rectangular finger jutting upwards. The artist seems to set up a connection between the small nails and a car and two planes. Whole machines are similarly built this way by assembling the simplest of objects.

He seems to have been absorbing an encyclopaedic range of experience. The multiple “A”s strung together like beads invoke the effort of children learning to read and write but Basquiat takes the solid functionality of the letter and returns it to a shape much in the way that a Bruce Nauman sound sculpture reminds us that overuse of words returns its

solid meaning to gibberish. These “A”s resemble an ornamental chain running across the picture. From units of meaning they return to shapes. From these elemental shapes Basquiat seems to invite us to return to the machines resembling toys. The painting evokes the early education of infancy while simultaneously asking us to consider the building blocks of art as a system of communication. His machines imitate the earliest drawn figures we make to describe the world around us.

So moving from image to language and back again, an equivalence is established reminding us how we use drawing to establish ideas. This early painting is both charming and demanding. It philosophically addresses the human impulse to draw, to speak and to connect. Within the painting Basquiat employs a punning system across language, shape, technology, and construction. Nails fall like weapons, possibly fired out of the visible cannon. The presence of the hammer implies a metaphorical “hammering” from the sky. From the innocence of childish toys, the artist builds a world of suggestion, moving towards a frightening world of adult rage. Only the presence of the medical vehicle introduces a note of mercy. This particular painting demonstrates how Basquiat can move decisively from one idea to another within a single picture.

Heads

In *Untitled (50 Dentures)*, 1984-85) Warhol’s typically hard and clear rendition of a set of dentures anchors the picture as the first move to which Basquiat then responds in his more expressive and instinctual style. The number “50” makes a humorous and even jubilant reference to their joint partnership in a series of paintings. The apprentice has gained equality with the master.

There’s something Freudian in this series in which he would overpaint and even cancel out the clarity of Warhol’s highly styled motifs. Basquiat is the child responding to the father’s preliminary marks. But the child has the final word. He may perform second in this collaboration, but he makes the critical decisions, turning the uncanny dentures resembling an advert into a skull. Dentures imply age and decay and Basquiat takes the symbolic power of the false teeth to a logical conclusion. These teeth anticipate mortality, while at the same time they allow the artist to suggest an animated skull. With a few artful gestures the teeth are embodied inside a head and take on an aggressive, bestial quality. This metamorphosis from human to animal is redolent of Picasso’s series of Minotaur heads produced largely in the 1930s. Illustrating the hybridity of the ancient myth of a creature born out of the union of a bull and a woman, the Minotaur personifies Picasso’s notions of masculine, primal instincts particularly in his relations with women.

The *Year of the Boar*, 1983 is a similarly impressive articulation of a living form positioned on the edge between one state and another. Presented as a floating motif in white outline with red accents, the boar’s head is disembodied and eerie. While the head occupies the central panel, the phrase “Chinese New Year” links the three adjoining panels at the bottom to create the semblance of a medieval altarpiece. This information is completed by the addition of the copyright stamp “C.” The modeling of the head is evocative of a classical, bronze head of a warrior. Ears become horns and the nose becomes the nosepiece on a helmet. Its mouth opens wide to expose sharp teeth. The entire physical gesture appears hostile, while one eye and the mouth glow red as if illuminated from within like a lantern, serving to reinforce a mood of hot ferocity.

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The work elegantly illustrates Basquiat’s talent for economic design in his draughtsmanship. It is so spare and yet embedded with information that it begins to look like a corporate logo complete with its own copyright “C.” We might well be looking at the logo of a cool internet company. Furthermore, the artist subtly instils this head with a Cubist character presenting multiple viewpoints and fluid information.

While we know that the traditional Chinese zodiac contains the pig, Basquiat’s alternative use of the “Year of the Boar” is intriguing. Does he simply use the term for a wild pig instead of the farmed animal or has he wilfully complicated this symbol belonging to Chinese astrology? When we learn that the boar is used in Japanese and Tibetan astrology instead of the pig, the artist’s intended confusion of different cultural sources becomes clearer, especially when we see how the painting clearly says “Chinese New Year.” An enjoyment of hybridity is fundamental to understanding this wild head. Ironically, the pig in the traditional Chinese zodiac is identified with calm in striking contradiction to this boar’s expression. An animal, logo, and helmet are rolled into one snarling head to become a scarecrow, charm, and warning. Promising a festivity, it is transformed into a sinister hunting trophy and a monstrous prophecy.

With a few concise painted lines, Basquiat borrows from art history, armor, Chinese folklore, Manhattan street signage, festival banners, and the graphic simplicity of commercial branding.

Basquiat can make heads in an eclectic range of materials. On *Untitled (Helmet)*, 1981 he paints the name “Aaron.” Using headgear designed for American football, he applies the name of a legendary baseball player. It is a puzzling gesture but a familiar strategy where distortion acts to reinforce his subject. Hank Aaron’s heroic achievements are amplified by confusing the distinction between two different sports. This helmet becomes a proxy for the athlete and invites us to admire his qualities. We are able to imaginatively, if not literally, wear this mantle, crown, and halo while fantasizing of triumph on the pitch. A simple helmet becomes a conjoined head with multiple implications. Thereby the artist shares his fascination with sporting glory through a reverent and disruptive intervention.³

Skulls are a recurring motif in the paintings from gaping, grinning things poised between flesh and bone. In *Their Heads Wrapped*, 1984, a floating black skull is surrounded by four crocodile jaws with teeth bared. The skull becomes an archetypal image of human vulnerability in its direct simplicity while also establishing a ghostly presence in the painting. It’s as powerful and jarring as the more mask-like head in the *Year of the Boar*, 1983. Basquiat made the painting by photocopying one drawing which he then incorporated four times on the support.⁴ The pitch-black skull illustrates the purest black, indicated in the repeating word “carbon.” Basquiat oscillates between material, sooty

blackness, and symbolic “blackness.” This skull is uncannily fleshy. It is rounded and softened as if still alive but threatened by the jaws of predatory crocodiles.

In the work *Venus*, 1982 an absent head reinforces the subject of heads while disrupting the conventions of portraiture. A small drawing is reproduced as a Xerox copy, distancing the viewer from the original design. The word “Venus” acts as a proxy head above an almost archaeological torso. He would call his great love, Suzanne Mallouk, “Venus” as if he were worshipping her as the embodiment of love and beauty.⁵ In this small photocopied drawing, the “goddess” is an archetype of both the female body and an antique but made using the latest technology. He has decapitated instead of representing this “head” but rather like the erased and overpainted areas of the paintings, the gesture emphasizes the idea of what is now visually absent.

History

The horizontal panel paintings in the collection are some of the most challenging and dense images Basquiat ever made. Evocative of murals, these pictures string together figures from history with allusions to the great passages of human achievement and conflict while blending in the vernacular and mundane. *Toussaint L’Ouverture Versus Savonarola*, 1983 sets up a pictorial conversation between two great historical radicals and rebels who never met and lived in different historical periods on different continents. Nevertheless, the painting seems to present each man as a heroic force for progressive change. Spread across seven connected panels, at the left a pin-board effect is established with scraps of information placed side by side. We struggle to find some coherence amidst this set of random references to “Cotton,” “Notary Public,” “Al Jolson,” and “In God We Trust.” These phrases sit beside little drawn diagrams of the human head, scales, crowns, and axes. It is a linguistic and pictorial reference to life using details that flow across many of Basquiat’s paintings. They embody his perennial fascination with the way the past may inform the present.

To the right of this “pin-board” are other chapters such as a white panel partially overlaid with brown brushstrokes. The surprisingly small head of Savonarola is identifiable by his dates. He appears rather like a head found on a commemorative stamp. To the right a panel carries another larger head but this is simply labelled “Ohio” and an off-white field with an element in card which makes the whole panel resemble a light switch implying the potential for sudden alteration, as if going from dark to light and back again. On a more material level, it echoes the Robert Rauschenberg “Combines” of the 1950s, constructed of scrap and intended to blur the distinctions between painting and sculpture.

Basquiat’s significant historical figures assume the role of caricatures and oddly resemble puppets. His restless curiosity about the past is expressed as a duel. “L’Ouverture” raises a toy-like sword from across the neutral ground of the cream panel. “Savonarola” by contrast is proposed as a stamp-like profile with dates accompanying his name; these are repeated twice below but one set of letters is partially erased. Inevitably we might ask what is the connection between the fifteenth-century Florentine religious reformer and the Haitian leader of a slave revolt of the 1790s. They are an odd pairing. Basquiat seems to be conscious of this incongruity, but it serves his purpose to quote from history while simultaneously reducing the past to a series of entertaining caricatures. Politics and passion are summarized as playful symbols. The warrior carries a toy weapon while the religious preacher is rendered powerless as a passive profile.

“This powerful five-panelled painting links together the ironies of African-American experience using language and image.”

In characteristic fashion, Basquiat’s brushwork is loose and rapid. He does not appear to pause and moves with decisive speed. The reference to Haitian history nicely connects the distant past to Basquiat’s own heritage from the island and so the personal becomes political. It’s plausible to ask whether the artist is considering his own place as a significant painter in American art history when many black artists had struggled for opportunities and recognition.

If we compare this work to another important “history” painting, we can see the artist making explicit reference to African-American experience in *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta*, 1983. We can appreciate how Basquiat attempts to learn from history and invites the viewer to follow his investigations. While *Toussaint* focusses more on individuals or a “great man” theory of history, *Undiscovered Genius* considers wider communal experience in the deep south, a cradle of African-American culture and especially the Blues. Basquiat conflates clichés such as “a diet rich in pork products” with the experience of picking cotton with the influence of Mark Twain as a witness to racial tensions before and after Emancipation. Unlike the two portraits in *Toussaint L’Ouverture*, Twain’s name becomes a substitute for the writer’s physical features.

This powerful five-panelled painting links together the ironies of African-American experience using language and image. Words are repeated and crossed out. It is layered like a stream of consciousness, blending together discordant ideas that begin to excavate the South’s troubled past. In the central panel, Basquiat places a seer and witness with x-ray vision. Is it once again a surrogate for the artist himself, looking backwards into the past while at the same time looking into the future? This visionary is articulated by a group of anatomical features and descriptions such as nostrils, jaw, teeth, ear, and “larnyx” misspelled. He is both individually alive and generically human.

Genius, vision, and leadership are celebrated in *Toussaint L’Ouverture versus Savonarola*. But the genius in the Mississippi painting remains “undiscovered.” History may repress talent or leave it unacknowledged depending upon opportunity or freedom.

It’s debateable to what extent *Life Like Son of Barney Hill*, 1983 fits this category of “history” painting. Certainly, it shares the same multiple panels and horizontal format except the events it refers to are more recent. We might describe the quotation of a couple notoriously “abducted” by aliens in New Hampshire during 1961 as “Contemporary History.”⁶ We might even question the use of the term “history” in describing this painting because the events cited are unproven and contentious. Why does Basquiat quote from this mysterious event involving a couple’s reputed ordeal and a “son”?⁷ What’s striking about this case is the fact that they were an interracial couple when it was very rare in the US and fraught with challenges before the civil rights movement produced legal and social changes during the 1960s. Is the artist identifying with them as their “child”? Perhaps their marriage and then ensuing strange experience becomes a metaphor that

Basquiat adopts as an expression of his Creole identity.

Basquiat might be using the story as an analogy for his own sudden fame and financial success in the art world and growing public prominence. It’s possible he sees a fitting parallel in the Barney Hill story reflected in the bouncing head on the spring which is depicted like a released jack-in-the-box. On the left, a more passive face has an exaggerated right eye while the left eye is obscured as if covered by a mask. We might consider that both images represent self-portraits demonstrating different aspects of the artist’s character and role. By contrast with the manic energy of the bouncing figure, we see an adjacent face on the coin at the far right. Again, Basquiat employs the re-occurring photocopied drawing of “Papa Doc” Duvalier, ironically positioned next to the word “Liberty” on the US coinage.

There are echoes in *Life Like Son of Barney Hill* of “Afro-Futurism” exemplified by the character and performances of the musician Sun Ra who borrows from science fiction in order to free himself from the burdens of being African-American. In an essay profiling Sun Ra, Stephany Anne Golberg writes: “African-Americans had always been a secret society within greater American society, with their own music, their own language, their own rituals. This secret history could be an asset for African-Americans in the space Age to come. African-Americans could re-invent their past and create a futurist Utopia, perhaps on a planet other than Earth, which seemed to Sun Ra unbearably steeped in chaos and confusion.”⁸

Could the painter be drawn to this story because it represented aspects of himself? In his mind does he become the “son of Barney Hill,” sharing a sense of displacement and alienation? It’s an intriguing prospect. We know that Rammellzee, the rap musician and a member of the Tag Master Killers, was a close friend and appears in the painting *Hollywood Africans*. Rammellzee made a large installation in his apartment of big, flying letters suspended below the ceiling like spaceships.⁹

In *Son of Barney Hill*, Basquiat takes the challenges of American History and projects them forward in time, imagining the promise of an age free from historic legacies. Science fiction and contact with aliens in space offers a consoling release from stereotype and prejudice. We might speculate that this is a “history” painting which is free from the weight of history by quoting events in order to re-imagine the future.

Totems

In anthropological terms, totems symbolise a community and its beliefs. Often expressed as an object endowed with powers, the totem departs from western painting or sculptural traditions. In using a fridge door and wooden slats, Basquiat returns the brush and paint to the “real” world, a place of material effects and functional objects. We can imagine Basquiat seized by excitement at the idea of transforming his banal fridge into a painted image. It has an immediacy and transitional character. Reminiscent of a blackboard or a notepad, the drawings resemble free association doodles. But the word “tar” repeated twice inevitably invokes the story of the “Tar Baby” and its pejorative association with African-Americans. In the story, the “Tar Baby” is a menacing trap designed to lure Br’er Rabbit into trouble. The fridge feels guided by an immediate impulse. The object remains functional but has been nudged into the status of an artwork while connecting the viewer directly to the life of the aspirational artist in 1981. This fridge illustrates the importance of Basquiat’s world around him and how a lack of formal training or discipline afforded him

new opportunities and a greater degree of artistic freedom.

The object *To Repel Ghosts*, 1986 is more sanctified and consciously spiritual. Operating like an altarpiece or as a magical object for the viewer and an instruction against spirits, it is problematic. The object shares the lack of definition in the same way as Basquiat's fridge but it is more focussed and precise. Despite its simplicity there is a conscious process of taking this wooden image as a notice, sign, and invested object. Once again, the formal limitation of the piece paradoxically reinforces its totemic power. It is an image that speaks of and to a world of spirits, of transformations between the living and the dead. This panel is "trademarked" like a product but is embedded with greater power than a mass produced item because it is handmade, odd, and deliberately awkward. A duality runs through *To Repel Ghosts* as it combines an object with an image and then links together symbolic value with an implied, practical power of exorcism. Is Basquiat expelling external ghosts or ones he carries inside?

These two objects depart from a tradition of easel painting toward a more pagan and "outsider" status. Basquiat the artist becomes a shamanic performer of rites. Such actions reinforced his mythic status as an artist who transcends the studio by channelling something more mysterious and primal. How we disentangle this from the romantic notion of the outsider possessing a sacred knowledge is difficult. Perhaps wary of being stereotyped, he stakes his claim to supernatural powers, even to the extent of ironically claiming its copyright. Mirroring the dispossession of other outsiders in American society, he appears to borrow the styling of capitalism in order to feel more empowered much like individuals who mimic luxury fashion brands to acquire some of the same prestige.

The power of *To Repel Ghosts* lies in its simplicity and directness. Painted on a piece of wood from a disassembled wall found near Bruno Bischofberger's gallery, it illustrates the artist's improvisational instincts and how he could transform mundane materials into a totemic object in the spirit of Pablo Picasso, Kurt Schwitters, or Robert Rauschenberg.

Riddles

Riddle Me This, Batman, 1987 is a great hulk of a painting, impressive in scale and crackling with ideas. When you see the physical object, it is architectural in scale like a piece of masonry covered in doodles. It resembles a flow chart in its immediacy as if one thought leads objectively to another much like a mathematician laying out a rational chain of thought. It also suggests multiple moves to make like a board game. Standing in front of the picture, you are physically diminished by it and then you begin to see those beige diagonal strokes resembling the game "Snakes and Ladders," offering potential ascent or descent. And then you spot the menacing snake under Robin's boot. "Ho," "Ha," "Hee" are liberally scattered across the painting like onomatopoeic sounds. These words hit you with a force like jabs. Around the bottle, these little words and the sounds they make become a buzzing swarm of insects.

Beneath what appears to be strangely Robin and not Batman, and their campy adversary, the Joker, are hints of dark conflicts. The painting implies the necessity of being on your guard. The painting is embedded with objects, sounds, and taunts. Despite the comic strip's promise of "good" defeating the Joker's malicious intentions, the scene becomes a wider metaphor for human relations. Again, Basquiat twice inscribes the hobo term "nothing

Untitled
(Refrigerator), 1981
Mixed media on
refrigerator



“These words hit you with a force like jabs.”

to be gained here.” We might read the scene as a symbolic description of his own life and struggles in the art world. He also adds the phrase “cowards will give to get rid of you.” The painting is fearful and anxious. In the centre is the word “Tizol,” a branded medicine used to treat gastric parasites.

This charged painting is an animated tableau of exchanges, sounds, and physical gestures with all the exaggerated effects of comic book strips and their drama. As we search for connections and meaning, its complex associations are fluid. Undeniably, Basquiat reaches for the world of comics to illustrate his state of mind and bleak observations about human relationships. As always, he does so with humor and charm. Perhaps, the Joker and Batman mirror the struggle within Basquiat himself.

Splashes of pink, green, yellow, and orange add structure to the picture while offering the painter the chance to obscure or obliterate underlying images. We know from a surviving archival photograph that the lower third of the picture was definitively re-worked. In the photograph, Basquiat lies across the canvas and we can identify an area of emphatic brushstrokes in brown paint which he later covers up by adding the details below Batman and Robin. Suzanne Mallouk remembers in *Widow Basquiat* that on one of her last visits to Basquiat he had turned all the paintings in the studio to face the wall except *Riddle Me This, Batman*.¹⁰ Clearly, it had a special significance, occupying much of his effort and time during his final months.

By comparison, *Reok*, 1985-86 feels less shaped by crisis. It is more measured and constructed. Two heads face each other at either end. One observes a group of flies while the other bares his teeth in front of two dangling carrots which attract a cluster of musical notes. Each element may be parsed and explored. Like many of his other paintings, Basquiat is consciously drawing on eclectic references but his painterly quotations move beyond the limited context and enact a semblance of struggle. This is a drama with classical qualities of desire and frustration. The riddle here lies in its lack of narrative resolution but he takes the viewer deep into a set of relationships between figure and object, between observation and action. It is a painting that speaks of the senses, sight, hearing, and taste but it also illustrates the role of impulses in human behavior and our animal responses to stimulation.

These two enigmatic paintings can be “dissected” much like an anatomical drawing, but their power lies in their bravado and the tantalizing way Basquiat estranges the familiar.

Another painting which shares the qualities of a riddle is aptly called *To Be Titled*, 1987 which explores trust in American consumer society. Two poles are established in the picture by the phrases “Laboratory Tested” and “Mouth Tested.” One implies objective analysis, the other a more subjective interpretation of symbolic and literal “taste.” Familiar

commercial marketing language appears ridiculous and insincere. The painting has a topsy-turvy quality, swaying from left to right, from above to below. Small elements jostle for dominance producing an impression of competing forces at work. Basquiat dislocates a cereal brand to create “Corn Flakee,” the word “Good” slips into “Goor,” a pair of arrows produce a circular logo. Oppositions pop up across the picture, for example, between the Lone Ranger and Hawkman. This is a world of signs and illogical communication. These riddles move at a furious pace much like the ridiculous fist fights of cartoon characters simulating real violence.

Raps & Words

Music runs as a muse through Basquiat’s paintings. The freedom and expressive potential of music is a lodestar for him. Great jazz artists exemplify that American spirit of improvisation and self-assertion against the odds particularly faced by African-American singers and players. Language in the paintings may operate like notes. The interplay of lyrics with sound becomes symbiotic in popular music of the twentieth century. Each element reinforces the other. In two of his last great paintings *Eroica I* and *Eroica II*, 1988 Basquiat borrows the title of Beethoven’s great experimental Third Symphony, employing language as building blocks. Both paintings, functioning as a pair, possess a neurotic urgency as if making them could perform a cathartic rite or expulsion. And they offer us a potent account of the artist’s decline as drug addiction took hold.

He creates a list of street names for drugs that takes on a jazzy, improvisational riff or a theatrical soliloquy. Moving down a list in *Eroica II* from “Bagpipe” to “Bark,” he uses slang and suggests the underlying pliability of language. Scattered across the picture are the hobo sign “Man Dies” as a warning and premonition of a mortal reckoning. The chemical formula at the foot of the painting refers to the oxygen balance in an explosive to which he adds, at left, a series of fiery orange strokes. Basquiat takes this allegory and bends it to his own experience. Side by side, the paintings in the Nicola Erni Collection assume a tragic significance.

Jean Michel Basquiat is entranced by the malleability of language. How it can be metaphorically heated and bent through use. He looks for puns and double meanings, introducing familiar names and ironies across the fields of his paintings taking words on journeys away from the stability of original context and usage.

Words, language, and letters are fundamental aspects of Basquiat’s paintings. He often turns to writers such as William Burroughs, borrowing his “cut up” technique to invent new words and accompanying new meanings.¹¹ Jordana Moore Saggese argues that “Basquiat’s use of language complicates traditions of composition and narrative but also the legacies of conceptualism and expressionism Moving outside the visual tradition, he built upon processes and innovations of the Beats, as he did with the appropriations and improvisations of bebop, in order to develop a practice that was expressive and conceptual in equal measure.”

Words, sounds, rhymes tumble out of the artist’s mind and onto canvas, wood or paper. Channelling the world around him, Basquiat has the capacity to make us savor a word like an intense, culinary flavor. He manipulates and stretches words as a piece of clay held in the hand. Words he tells us can be musical, poetic or “concrete.” Meaning becomes elastic as he

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JEAN MICHEL BASQUIAT

cuts up and scatters texts like bits of paper in that “Beat” poet strategy of inviting chance to determine the sense of language. Or words can form solid bricks in the way he stacks them and his accompanying definitions in *Eroica II*. Naturally, they also invite you to hear them in your mind as if they are being spoken out aloud like recited poetry.

Henry Louis Gates identifies the painter’s crucial method of sampling and the influence of hip hop music on the paintings. “Just as a DJ will dig through crates of old vinyl records searching for that one perfect moment, that scintillating, inimitable break to mix and match and layer with other samples, Basquiat’s visual literacy, his unique way of seeing and representing, was informed by oral sources and ‘undersong’ as various as snippets of television and all sorts of musical forms and traditions, and even conversations overheard while he painted.”¹²

Color Fields

Throughout the paintings there is a knowledge of recent trends in art. If we look at just two examples, *The Lake*, 1983 and *Untitled (Infantry)*, 1983 we can see how Basquiat plays with references to “Color Field” painting of the 50s and 60s, namely to paintings by New York School artists such as Rothko, Still, and Newman and later “Mini-malist” painting sometimes described as “Post-Painterly Abstraction.”

The Lake is made in two distinct stages. Much of the painting entails a cancellation of two thirds of the painting with a sweeping area of grey-blue but Basquiat keeps an isolated figure, at far right, threatened by a tide of paint. He holds up his hands in protest and distress. It is a remarkably bold painting in the adoption of such an explicitly altering process. We are left to wonder what lies beneath the final coat of blue paint. It illustrates Basquiat’s decisive way of making a picture guided by instinct. Effectively he produces a painting in two layers and the second coat sweeps away everything from view except the lone figure facing an existential threat of erasure.

The Lake prefigures Basquiat’s approach to the collaborative paintings with Warhol in which he reacts to the older artist’s initial moves when he often reproduced corporate logos. Alternatively, the character in *The Lake* might be read as an inconvenient interruption to the hallowed ground of “Color Field” painting, a jarring note from real life entering into the Modernist painted field. Another work from 1983, *Untitled (Infantry)* is even more comedic in the artist’s use of soldiers as caricatures of bravado and impotency. One carries a weapon above which is the boyish word “BLAM,” while the character on the right

sits dazed on the ground with spirals emitting from his head as if he has just been struck, asking “Where am I” in German.

Much of this canvas is covered in a canary yellow paint which becomes a unifying theme and formal integration of the scene but unlike *The Lake* there doesn’t appear to be any loss of any underlying details except a hand which still remains visible.

Both pictures demonstrate how Basquiat was courageous enough to allow washes of color to dominate some paintings. A duelling quality between brushwork and subject is established which is held in permanent tension. While quoting fashions in American painting, Basquiat maintains the value of popular culture and exaggerated characters often inspired by the world of cartoons and comic books.

Conclusion

Jean-Michel Basquiat recalled how “since I was 17, I thought I might be a star. I’d think about my heroes, Charlie Parker, Jimi Hendrix I had a romantic feeling of how people had become famous. Even when I didn’t think my stuff was that good, I’d have faith.”¹³ This faith drove him forward as the maker of his own painterly world, situated between observation and comment. In the manner of distinguished artists and writers, Basquiat produced a coherent vision that is touching, funny, critical, and immersive.

There’s a “magical realism” in Basquiat’s paintings. Incongruous details are thrust together to create unnerving connections and abrupt shifts. They are antithetical to the resolution found within painting in the pre-modern, western tradition. Coherence is denied in favor of ongoing transformation. The fragment builds the whole, which in turn dissolves to the piecemeal and specific.

What do we learn from Basquiat by seeing the paintings hung together in the Nicola Erni Collection? Can we move beyond the clichés and the market’s fascination with the “super-star” artist? It’s fair to say that Basquiat remains tantalisingly elusive. The paintings head off in multiple directions with each new idea or image added to the canvas. All the while, there is a breath-taking energy here. We see the achievement of an extraordinary mind, sampling and digesting facets of life he was exposed to or discovered, from childhood to maturity. Within the short lifespan of twenty-eight years, we perceive an artist who stretched himself to develop a new technical language in painting while absorbing a vast range of knowledge about the age he lived in, acknowledging the past at the same time. This unceasing curiosity about the world confers great urgency to the paintings. Basquiat’s generous interest in humanity is evident even when addressing our capacity for cruelty and prejudice.

It’s easy to look at Basquiat’s paintings and think that they are too animated and complicated to understand. After spending time with them, you begin to appreciate how his mind works. They are made through a process of gathering and editing images, ideas, and impulses that seduce his eye or ear or touch.

Much like the great jazz musicians he so admired, Basquiat elevates improvisation to a syncretic logic. Instinct and playfulness are integral to his painting. We learn how he embraces and incorporates all of the rhyming and rapping he articulated on walls before adopting studio painting. By necessity, he needed to turn to canvas in order to build a career as a

“In the twentieth century, following the innovations of Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, and Rothko, among other Modernist painters, Basquiat experimented with the illusory surface of the canvas.”

“serious” artist or one who had a shot at being treated with the respect he wanted to earn. From the Renaissance, the canvas has acted as a stage for artistic illusion employing perspective and proportion. In the twentieth century, following the innovations of Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, and Rothko, among other Modernist painters, Basquiat experimented with the illusory surface of the canvas. And in order to be regarded as a significant painter he needed to master the medium. His skills translated well and its traditions allowed him to flourish within the sanctuary of a studio. His nomadic roots were tamed and he was rewarded by the art world.

To observe the paintings and objects made by Jean-Michel Basquiat within the Nicola Erni Collection is a great privilege. It’s the breadth of the collection which allows the viewer to witness his progression as an artist. These paintings are dynamically charged with movement, ideas, jokes, and provocations. Spending time with the pictures stretches you because they demand intensive viewing and thinking.

Ultimately, as one walks away from this encounter with one of the great artistic talents of the past century, you begin to appreciate how he innovates through subversion. The liberties he takes with painting traditions effectively revitalize painting for our age. Jackson Pollock spoke about the need to update painting in the 1940s for the age of the plane, radio, and nuclear bomb. In turn, Basquiat advances painting by anticipating the new age of self-expression and reinvention, the age of the “selfie,” the homemade film or song, the Youtube channel and the Facebook page. These paintings collate the experience of life on the street, in the supermarket, watching television, and listening to music. He only lived to the dawn of these social changes although Jean-Michel Basquiat’s art is as relevant today as the time it was made over thirty years ago, blending together political and social history with the wider popular culture of rapping, tagging, performing, communication, and consumption.

Andy Warhol has been compared to Michelangelo in terms of his influence and achievement. We appreciate how Warhol mentored the young artist and how their friendship produced an important artistic collaboration, but Basquiat arguably takes Warhol’s accomplishment further by introducing experience, emotion, and subjectivity into his paintings enabling the viewer to enjoy a more intimate connection with the man and the artist. An early death is by definition a tragedy, a life cut short, its promise thwarted. However, Basquiat bequeathed a body of work that is astonishing in its audacity and intelligence.

Basquiat takes the viewer on a tumultuous journey across history to the particular details of his own life in post-war American life. His family embodied the immigrant dream of America and an accompanying potential for disappointment. Losing his mother to mental

illness in childhood and adolescence may be left to a more psychoanalytical evaluation but this encounter with deep loss may well have been a catalyst for his painting. If you look at the works, you understand how Basquiat’s paintings are redolent of Greek tragedy in their ability to touch you. There’s a searing honesty about them that is timeless.

Perhaps this is the ultimate gauge of great art. Born out of the particular circumstances of an artist’s time, place, and culture, the artworks retain their vitality and relevance long after their completion. They continue to invite participation and continue to frustrate, entertain, and challenge the viewer. Above all, we apprehend the character of the man who made them in response to all he observed. We necessarily speak of him in the past tense, but the paintings feel fully alive, ready to address new audiences.

This exhibition of paintings is a step towards a fairer and more objective appreciation of an astonishing painter. You will not fail to be excited by the paintings’ flair, wit, and humanity. For a young man in a hurry, Jean-Michel Basquiat had the advantage of talent and the capacity to look intently at the world that made him, from the microcosm of his family home to the fluid world of an American life of the 1970s and 1980s, especially the culture of that great “melting pot,” New York City.

If we over-examine the story of Jean-Michel Basquiat we are in danger of diminishing his achievement as a painter. Let not biography, place, and time drown the artist in extraneous detail. We know this story has now acquired a mythological dimension. To some extent he is compromised by the culture that his mentor Warhol cultivated, namely celebrity, being seen and photographed in Manhattan’s fashionable restaurants, clubs, and bars, being interviewed by the New York Times and appearing on the influential cable shows.

As a painter, Basquiat is alert to both the material world and its suggestibility. He shares with great painters such as Velasquez and Vermeer an eye for the texture of life and a deft distillation of experience and emotion. He is attentive to the nuances, absurdities, and pleasures of life. It takes great skill to observe the world and then find a distinct visual language to describe it.

We return, as we must, to looking at the paintings and their marvellous worlds fizzing with jokes, puns, raps, and riddles. Making art offered him the promise of freedom and respect just as his heroes Charlie Parker had found opportunity on the stage and Joe Louis in the boxing ring. Basquiat’s paintings connect the viewer to childhood, to the whimsical world of the daydream and that imaginative space we each inhabit as we grow up.

For too long Basquiat has been isolated as an artist who defied the rules to become an art world prodigy. His paintings are usually approached through the categorization of “street art,” the outsider, the black artist, the rebel, the addict. Rarely is the man considered just as a painter. The myth diminishes the man as an artist. Can we begin to acknowledge him as a painter of astonishing verve who produced an art-historically important body of work?

At the heart of his painting is a deep sense of irony, of life’s paradoxes. Despite his individual success, he witnesses the melodrama at the heart of the American nation, the ongoing experience of racial strife and discrimination. The novelist James Baldwin describes this consciousness conferring a paradoxical wisdom: “The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed that collection of myths to which white Americans cling; that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country

the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible in battle or wise in peace”¹⁴

One painting in the collection which is easier to define is *Light Blue Movers*, 1987. Two removal men are literally “blue collar” manual labourers. They appear visibly African-American but only one large eye is apparent like the mythical Cyclops. Each figure is depicted as both handicapped and empowered. Quick footed and nimble, they carry their burden forward, a large red armchair for someone else to enjoy. They are comical archetypes of young men in a service industry who have learnt to master their tasks although the effort is evident in the graphical rendition of swearing coming from the smaller figure. The brand “Ideal” is quoted suggesting their toy-like presence. Basquiat re-uses a phrase first seen painted on a wall in the film “Downtown ‘81”:
“The Whole Livery Line, Bow Like This With The Big Money, All Crushed Into These Feet.” Despite their jaunty mood, the effort of their labor is bone-breaking.

So, too, Jean-Michel Basquiat mirrors this “crushing” in his art. These rich, eclectic paintings depend upon a hybrid and mosaic effect. What we learn by looking at the paintings is how he employs a conceptual and figurative breaking apart of an illusory “wholeness.” We might, therefore, justly conclude that his paintings transcend detailed analysis and interpretation.

Paying for soup, building his fort, and setting it on fire, in his short life this artist accomplished his ambition: investing painting with subjective experience to create pictures that are authentic, emotionally honest and connected to life. However, we should be wary about reading too much nihilism or anarchy in this lyrical credo. Rather, he appears to have learnt from an early age that creation is accompanied by destruction.

Jean-Michel Basquiat merges brilliant optical effects with elaborate ideas. We should take this opportunity to look at his paintings more holistically and sensitively in order to discover an art of enduring power and conviction.

1 Jennifer Clement, *Widow Basquiat*, Payback Press, 2000

2 A friend, Brian Gormley, remembered that Basquiat used images found in Henry Dreyfuss' *Symbol Sourcebook*, quoted in Basquiat, Whitney Museum, 1992

3 Sotheby's catalogue entry for Basquiat's *Untitled* in the Contemporary Art Day Auction, May 15, 2014

4 Jean-Michel paid a fortune to own one of the very first photocopiers so he could use it in his studio

5 Clement (see note 1)

6 University of New Hampshire, *Guide to the Betty and Barney Hill Papers*, www.library.unh.edu/find/archives/collections/betty-and-barney-hill-papers-1961-2006 and The New York Times Obituary of Betty Hill, October 23, 2004

7 Barney had two children from his first marriage but there were no children from his marriage to Betty

8 Arkestra was Sun Ra's Utopian band and a *gesamtkunstwerk*. Quoted from an essay by Stefany Anne Golberg, www.sunraarkestra.com

9 Randy Kennedy, The New York Times, February 23, 2012

10 Clement (see note 1)

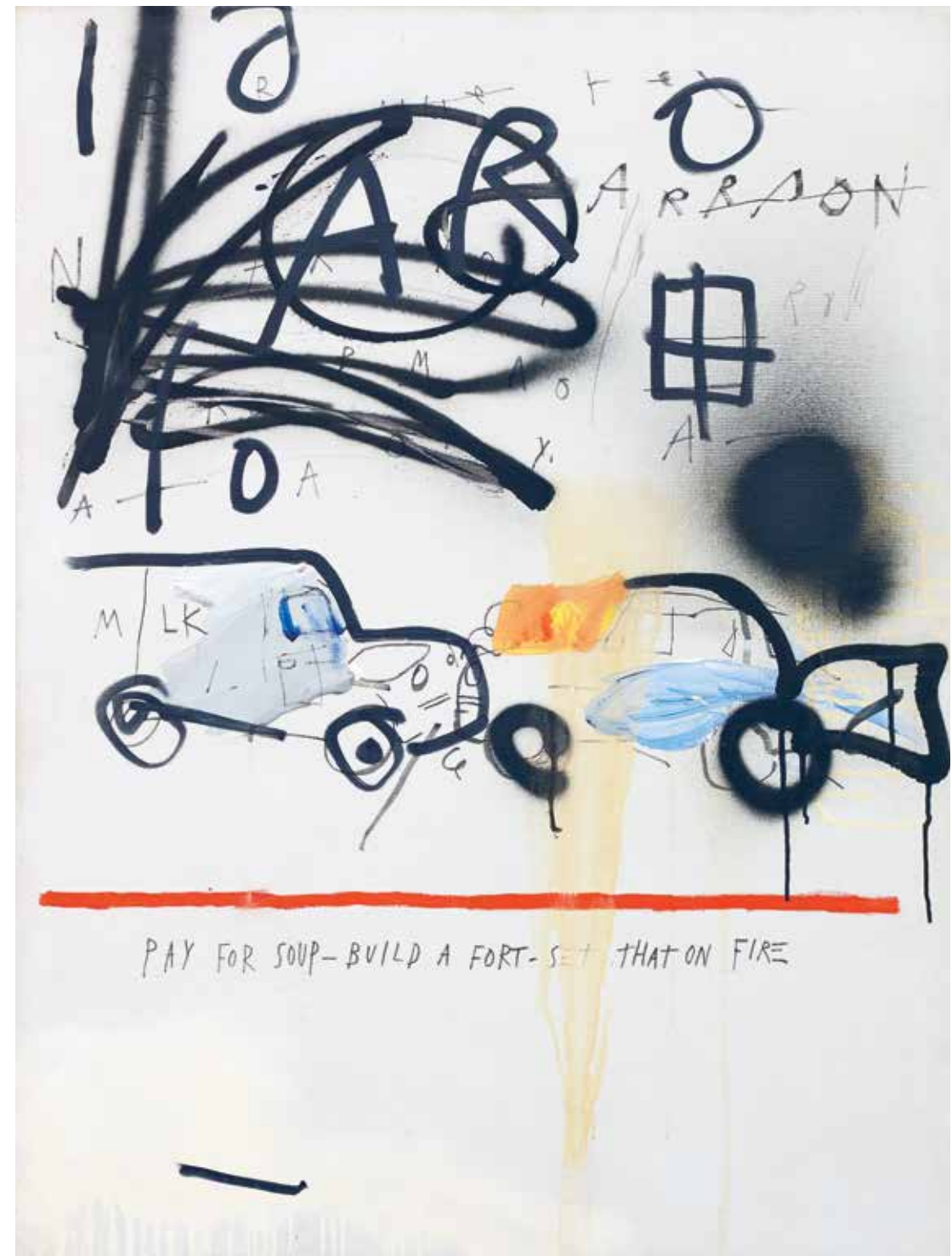
11 Jordana Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art*, University of California Press, 2014, pp. 144–46

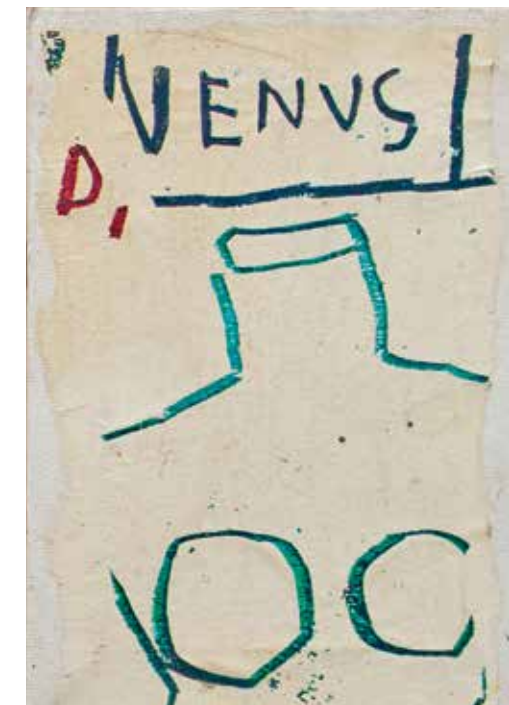
12 *Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks*, Skira Rizzoli, 2015, p. 21

13 Cathleen McGuigan, New York Times Magazine, February 10, 1985

14 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, Penguin Books, 1964, p. 10

Untitled (Car Crash), 1980
Acrylic, spray paint, marker and varnish on canvas





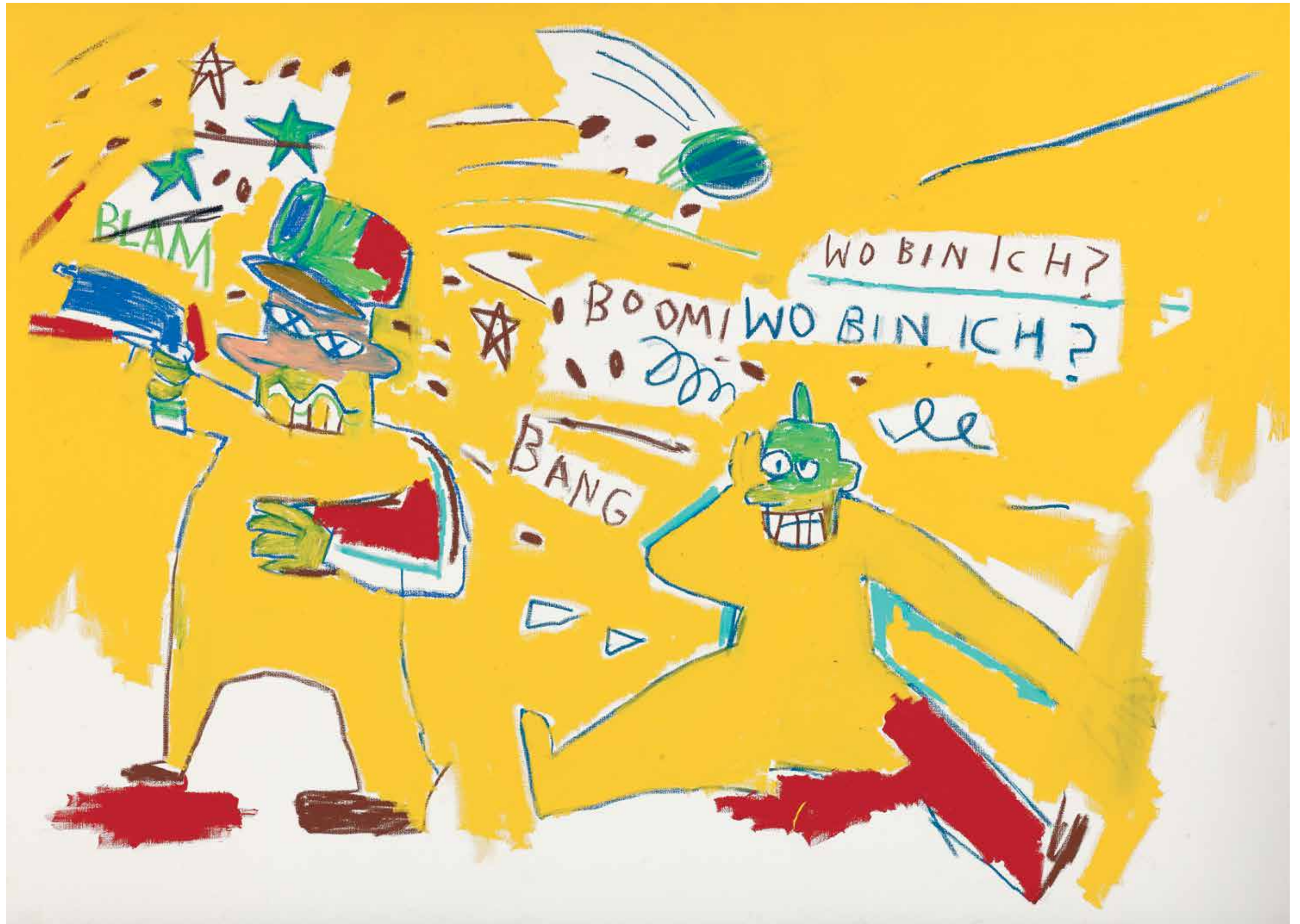
> Venus, 1982
Color Xerox on canvas



Untitled, 1981
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas



The Dutch Settlers, 1982
Acrylic on nine-panel canvas



Untitled (Infantry), 1983
Acrylic on canvas



Life Like Son of Barney Hill, 1983
Acrylic, oil stick and Xerox collage on six-panel canvas



Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta, 1983
Acrylic, oil stick and paper collage on five-panel canvas



Toussaint L'Ouverture Versus Savonarola, 1983
Acrylic, oil stick and Xerox on seven-panel canvas

The Lake, 1983
Oil and encaustic on canvas



Year of the Boar, 1983
Acrylic on canvas mounted on wooden supports





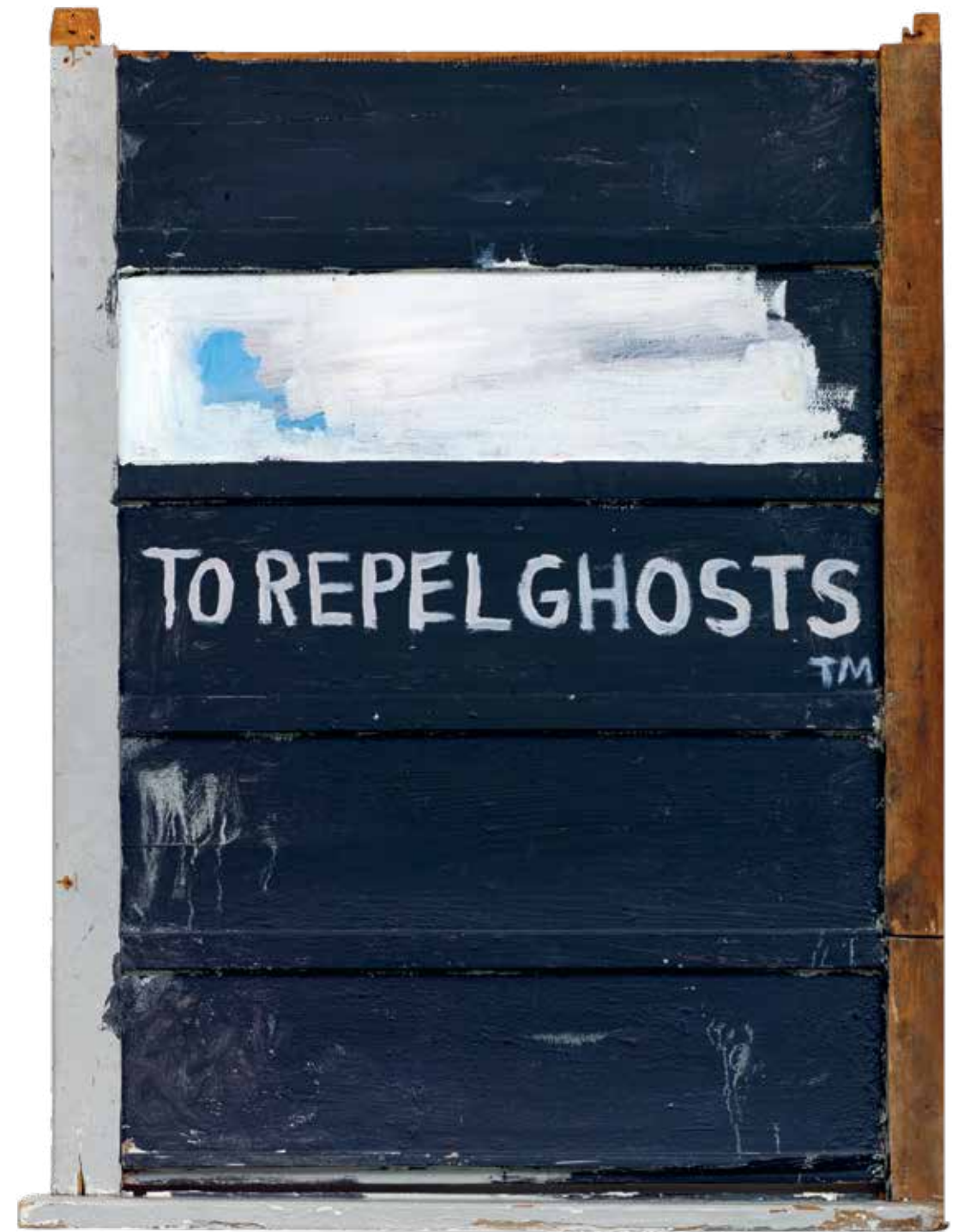
Their Heads Wrapped, 1984
Acrylic and collage on canvas



JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT & ANDY WARHOL
Untitled (50 Dentures), 1984-85
Acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas

Reok, 1985-1986
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas





> *To Repel Ghosts*, 1986
Acrylic on wood



Light Blue Movers, 1987
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas



Riddle Me This, Batman, 1987
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas



To Be Titled, 1987
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas



Re-siting Basquiat in the Canon of Art: A Proposition

DAVID A. PECKMAN

“Throughout art history, revolutionary breakthroughs in the use of line, color, form, construction, medium, and meaning have been recognized as a manifestation of the will and gift of true genius.”

In attempting to evaluate and locate the oeuvre of Jean-Michel Basquiat in the canon of art during the decades since his death, a consensus narrative has emerged, in part placing him broadly in the context of late twentieth-century Neo-Expressionism. Related, overlapping narratives have also evolved, relying heavily on foundational aspects of his artistic practice: his street art, music, and performance, his attachment to words and their varied meanings, and the roots of these influences in his personal history.

These multi-faceted narratives have revealed the complexity and power of Basquiat’s work, offering insights into the signs, words, and symbols that permeate it. However, a more comprehensive understanding of Basquiat’s art is called for, in particular a more extensive analysis of the relationships among and between the formal elements of composition he used.

In the process of further research, it will become clearer that “placing” Basquiat in a category like “Neo-Expressionism” would be doing him an injustice. He is difficult to categorize; there are many aspects of his artistic practice that set him apart from the mainstream of contemporary art. This essay serves one narrow purpose: to propose that, when considered alongside recognised geniuses in art history, Jean-Michel is an equal; that he, like them, stands apart from the mainstream tradition. In doing so, he is removed from categorization; instead his work inhabits a unique place in art history, one that continues to inspire wonder and awe.

Re-siting Basquiat’s place in the canon of art can be realized through a nuanced approach to examining his use of the elements of composition, in his principal medium of choice as a painter. This is where the field of analysis allows for correspondences and parallels to emerge, when comparing his oeuvre to others working in the same medium, no matter the era. This author hopes to provoke further exploration and arguments to understand just how unique and important Basquiat’s contribution to art history has become.

The Constituents of Composition and Genius: A Comparative Approach

Recent literature on Basquiat has made a strong claim for the relationship between formal elements of composition—line, color, form, construction, medium, and materials—to the impact of the idea he wanted to communicate. Basquiat scholar Jordana Sagesse noted that “Basquiat made his compositions intentionally difficult, relying on viewers to recognise the unspoken links between them ... [he] subverted the relationship between artist, object and viewer by creating a nonlinear narrative of painting.”¹ This intent, to render a new way of communicating an idea through complex compositional means, is one of the key markers of a revolution in art. Those responsible have become recognised

for their breakthroughs, and each accorded a special place, set aside from the traditional grand narratives in art history.

In Basquiat’s case, one element of composition has arguably become the most-researched and written-about mode of expression: words, and the ways in which he both figuratively and literally applies and manipulates them. Even though this lies at the heart of much of his practice, over-emphasizing this one compositional element without deeper consideration of the others, signals the need for further exploration of his painting and drawing practice.

Throughout art history, revolutionary breakthroughs in the use of line, color, form, construction, medium, and meaning have been recognized as a manifestation of the will and gift of true genius. To better qualify and comprehend Basquiat’s genius in his use of these elements of composition, it serves our purpose to seek correspondences with the giants in the canon of art, in the hopes of better understanding what factors contributed to their own “canonization.” In the process, we might perceive some parallels among them, and in doing so, better understand Basquiat’s contribution to art history. This can lead us to re-site Basquiat alongside other “saints” in the canon.

While there are a number of artists who could be considered, Caravaggio and van Gogh are well suited to the purpose, not least because there are several biographical common denominators with Basquiat. All three artists:

- emerged from modest, but relatively comfortable home circumstances, only to escape the strictures of a traditional family structure;
- were inspired at a young age by the practice of art, showing early promise;
- evolved their practices quickly and radically, through emergent phases;
- produced large bodies of work in short periods of time, working compulsively;
- harboured a deep sense of “self,” expressed in part through forms of incisive self-portraiture;
- had ambivalent personal connections to both the quotidian and the sacred, which were reflected in their artistic practices;
- were helped, at some point, by patron(s), allowing them to advance their practice without the traditional constrictions of everyday life;
- became deeply aware of the art movements of the day;
- were attuned to the vagaries and dynamics of the contemporary art market, regardless of their individual standing within it;
- were regarded by others as highly controversial, engendering deep feelings both for and against their work;
- led emotionally and psychologically turbulent, short lives, with tragic ends;
- were “canonized” by the contemporary art world shortly after their deaths, with legacies that have influenced generations.

A few of these common denominators play into the antiquated Romantic conception of the “tortured” artist. At first an archetype, this notion has since become a stereotype; all three artists have fallen prey to it, in historical terms. But there is an underlying kernel of truth: that the greatest art has often been the product of genius in combination with a tortured “soul,” whose owner is compelled to produce art as a means of exorcising demons, or of releasing some pent-up inner energy, eventually erupting onto a canvas. It is in the creation of something deeply unsettling or overpowering that the

“The manner and style of his constructions had no identifiable precedent; this was one key trait he shared with Caravaggio and van Gogh.”

viewer witnesses a glimpse of the affliction. It manifests itself in our inability to remove the uncertainty we confront in the object, mesmerized by the challenges it presents.

For Caravaggio historian Troy Thomas: “His pictures undermine clear readings and generate contradictory meanings; the ambiguous gestures and demeanours of his figures make it difficult to determine their roles and actions ... one of his strategies may have been to establish a ‘resistance to didactic clarity’”²

For van Gogh author Carol Zemel: “The complexities of van Gogh’s practice—their internal shifts and turns and the dynamics of their development [lead to] a discursive space, in which contradictions and complexities are not resolved or synthesized, but remain in vital tension”³

For Basquiat scholar Eleanor Nairne: “Basquiat’s work enacts the epistemological anxieties of his age: the certainty of the Grand Enlightenment Narratives becoming redundant and giving way to a new era of relativism, pluralism and irony.”⁴

Each of these artists created a new, complex visual language; the interplay of compositional elements yields a persistent ambiguity in their works. Thus, the challenge of ‘reading’ their pictures becomes almost insurmountable, in the face of the uncertainties bound up in their creation. So the mystery deepens—the explorers of ideas among us are drawn even more to seek out what is contained in the paint, canvas, line and form—visible to all, but hard to see.

To consider only one element of composition, for example, where Caravaggio developed a mastery of chiaroscuro as a means of encrypting messages, and van Gogh punctured the boundaries of color to upend norms of expression, Basquiat violated the traditional picture plane through his radical constructions. For Basquiat, visual references were not anchored to any stable “ground” on the canvas; instead, his constructions released the image and the word from its finite, enclosed space, to which, paradoxically, they were materially bound.

The common threads that bind these three artists together become more apparent; revolutionary artistic practice is borne of a creative agency that breaks boundaries, of an object that operates within and between physical and ethereal dimensions, inspiring new questions, ideas, and interpretations, decades and centuries later. A new way of creating: Caravaggio, van Gogh, and Basquiat each used the elements of composition in original ways, breaking through the boundaries of tradition that held many, if not most, of their contemporaries, in check.

Caravaggio’s Genius

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio’s revolution, encompassing a wide range of compositional elements, has been carefully analyzed and well documented over the generations.

Just to cite a few: dark, obscured backgrounds in place of traditional motifs, light sources that appear to be magical or all-too-natural, models from everyday life rendered with unsettling emotional impact, thrusting movements of the subjects breaking the picture plane, brushstrokes so small and invisible, figures and objects imbued with such realism that one could discern the traces of influence all the way from the Dutch still-life masters onwards toward the photo-realists of the 1960s.

Caravaggio's painterly innovations were intimately tied to his revolutionary notions of presentation, his unique way of communicating ideas in and through his art. Without them, physical innovation using materials of art could be considered merely a new technique, a technical invention that lacks the synergistic power of a true artistic breakthrough. This point is lost all too often in the art world—the idea without the execution, or the execution without the idea, condemns most artistic production to the realm of the copyist, imitator, appropriator, or technician. The more powerful the synergy of the idea with the construction, the more likely the work could be considered the result of artistic genius.

Bernard Berenson, in his book on Caravaggio, employed a detailed study of construction and aesthetics of the image as a principal breakthrough, making the following observation about Caravaggio's own revolt against tradition: "We can assert, with perhaps more conviction, that he deliberately turned his back on what he saw was being painted in Rome. He struck out for himself, partly because he could not help it, because it suited his gifts and his formation, because it was his way, in short; but also perhaps to display his indifference to what was being done in Rome ... he ignored the vocabulary and the phrasing ... that were then current ... he enjoyed introducing incongruities, as an offset perhaps to the *style nobile*, to the graceful, to the pretty, the sentimental, the sugary, that were in vogue at the time."⁵

Berenson's conclusion can serve as a conduit between Caravaggio's actions to those of van Gogh and Basquiat; each in their time responded in a similar way to the art world around them. Basquiat's revolt was not a classic rejection of tradition; he had intuitively absorbed the lessons of past masters. His chosen *subjects* of appropriation had some antecedents among them, however his *methods* of appropriation became part of his existential breakthrough. The manner and style of his constructions had no identifiable precedent; this was one key trait he shared with Caravaggio and van Gogh.

Caravaggio integrated new compositional elements in his "response" to what was then in vogue. One key innovation was his use of light and darkness, his *chiaroscuro*. Instead of a world enveloped in daylight, as was the traditional trope of the time, "Caravaggio proposed a startling new approach in which near total blackness is the unnatural but normal condition; relieved by a piercing, mysterious light that seems to be of simultaneously natural and divine origin ... [his] light must struggle against the darkness so that its very presence seems miraculous"⁶

The complexity of his ideas, writ large on canvas, was expressed in part through his transformations of biblical stories and characters from the high church into a quotidian context, recasting the church's icons as real people. He used these elements of composition to devise new and uncertain narratives in his pictures, producing a synergistic result of construction (physical elements) and meaning (intangible elements). This complicated and clouded the messages encoded in the religious works he created, especially when considered alongside the "profane" works created early in his career.⁷ This was shocking to

“For van Gogh, as much as Caravaggio or Basquiat, a resistance to revealing any specific meaning was quite literally built into the picture.”

the audience at the time, leading to intense interest in, and debate about his work among contemporary Romans of a certain social rank.

Thomas re-sited Caravaggio's work as effectively proto-modern, paving the way for formal comparisons to contemporary artists, including Basquiat. Thomas summarised: "Caravaggio used a visual language different from the norm of his time, so much so that his pictures are characterized by an effective multi-level atterity, originality and unconventionality where he transgressed the standards of the rules-based artistic system Caravaggio's unconventionality involved an ironic subversion of the previous norms of decorum and artistic expression that had lost their orientating power and failed any longer to provide a sense of novelty or astonishment."⁸

Thomas's analytical construct opens up the field: if we use his approach to the artist's ideas as one way to identify revolutionary artistic practice, do we see any fundamental difference between what Caravaggio accomplished and what Basquiat achieved, each in their own time, each with their own choice of the elements of composition? For each of them, the visual field was composed of unconventional arrangements which denied viewers ready access to meaning. For Basquiat, while some could try to trace the use of particular elements, such as graffiti tags, perceived "automatic" writing, use of positive and negative space, and overpainting (among others), as appropriated techniques, it was his original recombination that contributed to his transgressive juxtapositions on canvas. Just as in Caravaggio's time, his work astonished a jaded, art-consuming public. They were held in thrall by something inexplicable, even though constructed using materials and references they thought they could grasp; instead, meaning slips through their hands.

Van Gogh's Genius

Putting aside the deification of Vincent van Gogh in the popular imagination, one must return to the principles and elements of composition, to really be able to peer into the brilliance of his work: the obvious place to start is color, of course. Meyer Schapiro highlights his revolutionary approach: "His first aim was intensity, a firm clear, advancing image exalted by daring color; the objects are now felt in their permanence and inner force ... light is no longer a power external to things, which subdues them and dissolves them, but an emanation from the flattened shadowless objects, the inherent luminosity of their intense local color, which identifies them unmistakably as their form. It is a kind of vitalism, an art of unbounded joy in life"⁹ In van Gogh's painting, the materiality of color is transmuted into an extension of the emotions, an ethereal element that transcends the physicality of the work.

As van Gogh's art evolved, it took an even more radical turn in form; his use of irregular lines and contrasting patterns, realised in the physicality of the impastoed result, was another breakthrough. Schapiro identifies one essential element of van Gogh's composition

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which finds its origin in his own troubled psyche: the patterns and clashes of lines and shapes which inhabit his drawings and paintings. Quoting van Gogh: “... more tangled and fantastic than a thorn hedge, so confused that one finds no rest for the eye and gets giddy, is forced by the whirling of colors and lines to look first here, then there, without it being possible to distinguish one thing from another ...” Meyer comments: “The unstable forms were a world of conflict and stress—the typical patterns of self in its entanglements and wild impulsiveness.”¹⁰ This revolution in color and form, taken together on their own, speak to a significant compositional breakthrough. But it goes much deeper than that, because his identity, his “self,” was expressed through the use of these elements of composition; the nature of artistic identity is inseparable from the result on the canvas. And the result on the canvas reflects the intuition of genius in the rarest of cases.

This observation is more directly comparable to Basquiat’s artistic practice: van Gogh’s lines and irregular patterns were integrated into the overall construction of the picture—they were resolved when taken as part of the whole. When on close observation these lines and patterns emerge, they challenge the form of the composition of which they are a part. For Basquiat, the use of lines and irregular patterns, boxes, grids, and other devices have for many been a marker of automatism (read: Pollock’s use of drip technique); it may be a mistake to make such a direct association. A more nuanced analysis could reveal that he frequently used these elements as a means of encoding his messages; they can signify a direction, point to a symbol, or form separate visual structures on canvas that ultimately become integral to the whole.

Van Gogh elaborated on his wildly impulsive approach in a letter to Emile Bernard: “I follow no system of brushwork at all, I hit the canvas with irregular strokes which I leave as they are, impastos, uncovered spots of canvas—corners here and there left inevitably unfinished—reworkings, roughnesses; well, I’m inclined to think that the result is sufficiently worrying and annoying not to please people with preconceived ideas about technique.”¹¹ Considering the wide gulf of time and changes in artistic practice that separate him from Basquiat, this one thought brings them closer together. Couldn’t Basquiat have said virtually the same about his own work? He, of course, was working in the artistic language of the late twentieth century; the areas of unfinished canvas, the “re-workings” and “roughnesses” took completely different forms and shapes—but the impact on the viewer was similar. The dislocation experienced in seeing something completely new that challenged comprehension is based on a “reading” of the composition: the viewer must look carefully to attempt to untangle an apparent jumble of line, color, form, word. In doing so, a more fundamental question emerges: what was he thinking?

That there is an idea, an implicit or explicit strategy for the creation (and often obfuscation) of meaning in the work’s execution, presents the viewer with greater difficulty in deciphering it. For van Gogh, as much as Caravaggio or Basquiat, a resistance to revealing any specific meaning was quite literally built into the picture. Research on van Gogh’s oeuvre highlights connections to the quotidian (Holland and Arles), utopian desire and modernity (Auvers), sexuality (portraits of women), and perceptions of the self (auto portraits), among other themes. In each case, the fraught, deeply felt nature of each connected idea resonates within the picture.

Albert Aurier wrote the first critical published notice of van Gogh’s work. He quickly captures the interplay between the composition and the idea, and calls out its importance in defining van Gogh’s revolutionary, modern art form. His analysis starts with the tangible, and ends

with the intangible: “He is highly conscious of the importance and beauty of matter, but in addition, he most often considers matter, however enchanting, as merely a sort of fantastic language designed for the translation of the Idea Within this most material matter, there lies, for the mind able to perceive it, a thought, an Idea, and this Idea the essential core of the work, is at one and the same time its efficient and final cause (He) is a great painter driven by his art, by color and by nature, but also a dreamer, a fervent believer, devouring utopias, feeding off the beauty of ideas and dreams.”¹²

Identifying the individual aspects of composition that set van Gogh apart from the rest of the canon, helps to explain the impact of some of his breakthroughs. It is only when all of those individual aspects are taken together, that one can perceive the synchronistic effect of idea and medium, and its actualization on a physical surface. Aurier’s statement is readily applicable to Basquiat—it’s clear that he fed “off the beauty of ideas and dreams” in his work. His compositional devices, made of “matter,” embodied that beauty. Whether it was bright contrasts of color in wild gestural figures, the dense solidity of negative space expressed in a color field, or crossing out and covering over words as a way of heightening (instead of obscuring) their meaning, Basquiat created new synchronistic relationships in construction.

Paul Serusier, a contemporary of van Gogh’s, noted that the “immutable principles” of art consist of the “impeccable harmony of line and colour ... these principles, forgotten little by little, have been rediscovered wholly or in part by extraordinary geniuses ... Given a certain quantity of lines and colours forming a harmony, there is an infinite number of ways of arranging them.”¹³ His implication: it takes a genius to find a new way of doing so.

Seeking Expressions of Genius

As a conceptual construct, “genius” occupies a contested space; by definition it becomes a relativistic measure that will always be subject to challenges of meaning; the same can be said for “revolutionary.” This essay does not seek to address these issues in relation to Caravaggio, van Gogh or Basquiat. Instead, it intends to inspire readers to confront the complexities of their oeuvres, to find correspondences in their accomplishments, and to recognize the qualities that set each of them so far apart from the rest of humanity. If so inspired, one can’t help but be drawn closer to each of them.

Maybe there is more to the common denominators traced through the lives and work of these three artists. Maybe these parallels point to recognition of something beyond coincidental in their unique blendings of composition and idea. Maybe these three artists do share a common bond in the greater pantheon of art history. The connection of the artist’s inspiration to the elements of composition exponentially magnifies the power of the work, when executed by the hands of a genius. Aurier links the notion of the idea to genius in artistic practice: “The normal and final end of painting, as well as of the other arts, can never be the direct representation of objects. Its aim is to express Ideas, by translating them into a special language. Indeed, in the eyes of the artist—that is, the one who must be the *Expresser*

of Absolute Beings—objects are only relative beings, which are nothing but a translation proportionate to the relativity of our intellects, of Ideas, of absolute and essential beings. Objects cannot have more value than objects as such. They can appear to him only as *signs*. They are the letters of an enormous alphabet which only the man of genius knows how to spell.”¹⁴

When we consider the works of Caravaggio and van Gogh in relation to Basquiat, Aurier’s artist as an “expresser of absolute beings” allows us to identify that genius with more certainty. This “enormous alphabet” to which Aurier refers—the interwoven combination of the elements of composition with the elements of meaning, of the idea—can only be mastered by a genius. Coming up with a single notion doesn’t count—one might see a new way of arranging the “letters” once. But a single moment of genius is not the same as a wellspring of genius, gushing with a torrent of ideas, ceaselessly without end, until the wellspring has used up its power; its force diminished, it ceases to exist. It is this notion of genius, the creation of a particularly powerful idea expressed through a unique combination of the elements of composition that can cause true wonder, a rapture of both emotional and intellectual senses. Caravaggio’s presentation of uncertain narratives upended the way in which people interpreted the narratives of the Bible; van Gogh’s radical practice changed how people perceived form and colour on canvas. Basquiat’s innovative use of signifiers to complicate the signified, through his unique modes of composition, mirrors their achievements. These are the standards by which the greatest artists should be measured.

Berenson remarked that “what counts most in visual art ... is not the manifest combination and arrangement of shapes and colours, but their power to stimulate us vitally, life-enhancingly, systematically from top to toe, not more mentally than sensuously, yet taking place in the realm of ideated sensations.”¹⁵ This is the impact of a masterpiece, created by a genius. The art of Caravaggio, van Gogh, and Basquiat all share this trait.

The uniqueness, the true originality, the rare genius, are all there in Basquiat’s pictures. These traits set him apart from a spot in a timeline of art history; his work resists compartmentalization in a progression of cultural change. Re-siting Jean-Michel Basquiat in the canon of art is a tall order. There are discoveries still to be made about his work; there is a lot we don’t know, and a lot we don’t yet see. Placing him among the most important artists of all time is not something accomplished in one essay, in one book, or in one exhibition. But, only by expanding the field of understanding can this re-siting take place. We have to start somewhere. So let’s start here.

1 Jordana Moore Sagesse, *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art*, University of California Press, 2014, p. 8

2 Troy Thomas, *Caravaggio and the Creation of Modernity*, Reaktion, 2016, p. 97

3 Carol Zemel, *Van Gogh’s Progress: Utopia, Modernity, and 19th Century Art*, University of California Press, 1997, p. 6

4 Eleanor Nairne, “The Performance of Jean-Michel Basquiat” in: *Boom for Real*, Barbican Centre, 2017, p. 24

5 Bernard Berenson, *Caravaggio: His Incongruity and His Fame*, Chapman & Hall, 1953, pp. 55–56

6 Thomas (see note 2), p. 77

7 Suggested by Thomas, pp. 16, 88, 114

8 Ibid., p.97

9 Meyer Schapiro, *van Gogh*, Abrams, 2003, pp. 10–11

10 Ibid., p. 27

11 Vincent van Gogh, *The Letters*, Thames & Hudson, 2009, letter 596, vol. 4, p. 52

12 Albert Aurier, “The Isolated: Vincent van Gogh,” reproduced in *Art in Theory: 1815-1900*, Blackwell, 1998, pp. 951–52

13 Paul Serusier “Letter to Maurice Denis,” reproduced in *Art in Theory: 1815-1900*, Blackwell, 1998, p. 1021

14 Albert Aurier, “Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin,” reproduced in *Art in Theory: 1815-1900*, Blackwell, 1998, p. 1026

15 Berenson (see note 5), p. 100