

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT



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Jean-Michel Basquiat was born in Brooklyn to Haitian and Puerto Rican parents in 1960, and left home as a teenager to live in Lower Manhattan, playing in a noise band, painting, and supporting himself with odd jobs. In the late 1970s, he and Al Diaz became known for their graffiti, a series of cryptic statements, such as "Playing Art with Daddy's Money" and "9 to 5 Clone," tagged SAMO. In 1980, after a group of artists from the punk and graffiti underground held the "Times Square Show," Basquiat's paintings began to attract attention from the art world.

In the 1981 article "The Radiant Child," which helped catapult Basquiat to fame, critic Rene Ricard wrote, "We are no longer collecting art we are buying individuals. This is no piece by *Samo*. This is a piece of *Samo*." This statement captures the market-driven ethos of the 1980s art boom that coincided with polarizing views played out in government and media, known as the culture wars. In this context, Basquiat was keenly aware of the racism frequently embedded in his reception, whether it took the form of positive

or negative stereotypes. In his work, he integrated critique of an art world that both celebrated and tokenized him. Basquiat saw his own status in this small circle of collectors, dealers, and writers connected to an American history rife with exclusion, invisibility, “and paternalism, and he often used his work to directly call out these injustices and hypocrisies.

Before his tragic death in 1988 at the age of twenty-seven, Basquiat expressed seemingly boundless creative energy, producing approximately a thousand paintings and two thousand drawings. Over the decades, the study of Basquiat’s paintings and drawings has offered textured insights of the 1980s and, importantly, continued reflections on Black experience against an American and global backdrop of the white supremacist legacy of slavery and colonialism. At the same time, Basquiat’s work celebrates histories of Black art, music, and poetry, as well as religious and everyday traditions of Black life.

Many of Basquiat’s works have been likened to the improvisational and expansive compositions of jazz. Often themes accumulate through multiple references on the surface, emerging as patterns out of gestural brushstrokes, symbols, inventories, lists, and diagrams. Most images in Basquiat’s works have double and triple meanings, some of which the artist discussed and others that he left undefined, remaining open to viewers’ interpretations. Basquiat sought and enjoyed unlikely collisions of imagery and words, massive influxes of information and stimuli that recreated the experience of being in a world by turns exciting, inspiring, oppressive, and toxic.



Untitled, 1981

Many of Basquiat's paintings contain autobiographical elements, and this untitled work—that is regarded as one of the icons of his career—may be considered a form of self-portraiture. Basquiat labored over this painting for months—evident in the worked surface and imagery—while most of his pieces were completed with bursts of energy over just a few days. Here, the eyes are focused and full of contemplation, yet there are vibrant colors and spirited marks that suggest a surfeit of internal activity. The intensity of this painting, which was presented at his debut solo gallery exhibition in New York City, has been taken to represent Basquiat's anxieties surrounding the pressures of becoming a commercially successful artist. The symbol of the head as the seat of the mind reappears periodically throughout his work. While here enlightenment and inspiration seem to come at a cost, other paintings from this period show the artist with a king's crown.



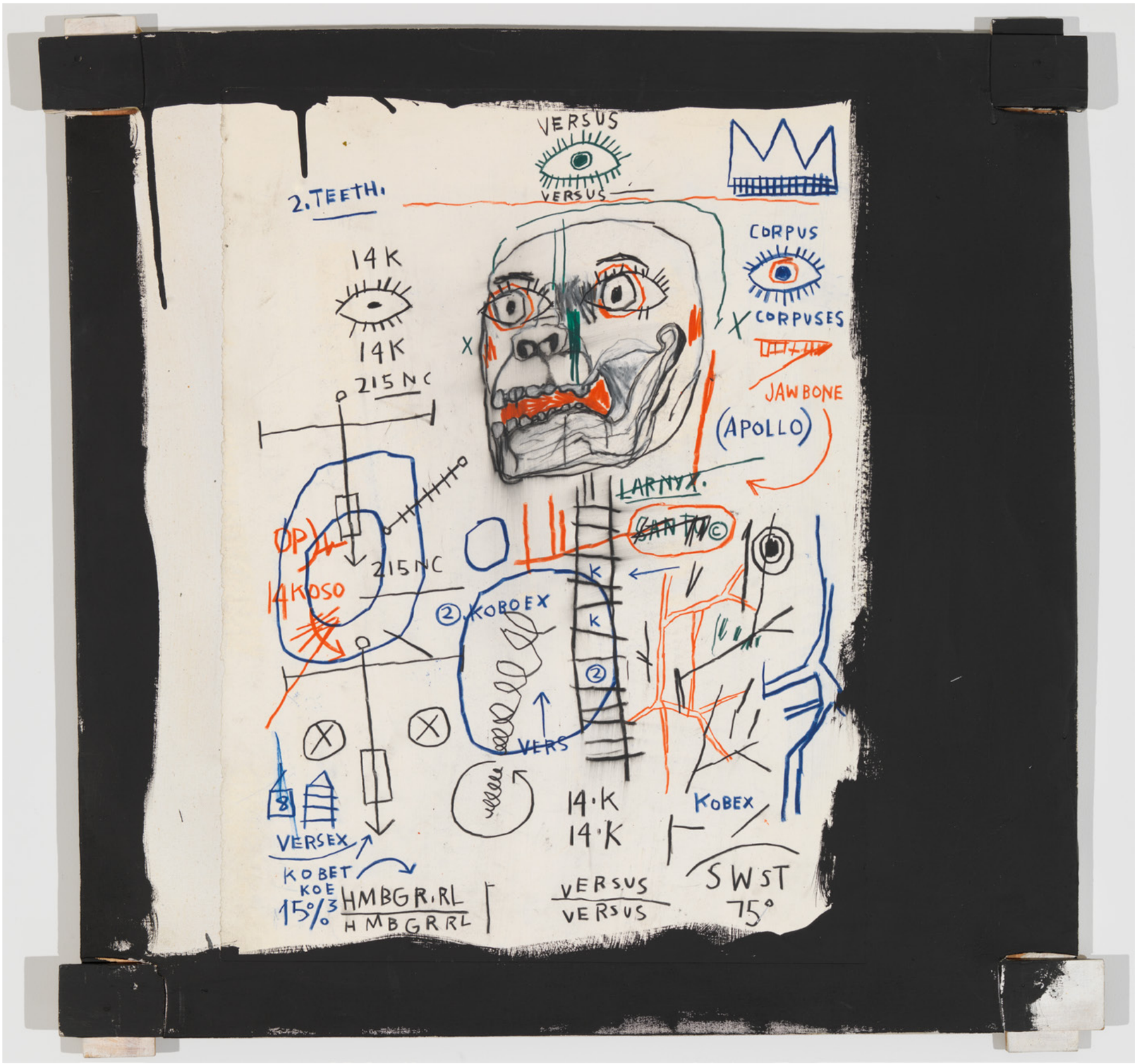
Untitled, 1981

While Basquiat is well known for his prolific production of paintings during his brief career, his drawings were also an incredibly important part of his artistic practice. Often, drawings would be collaged into Basquiat's paintings, serving as the generative material for painted images. The many collaged drawings in this work present incidents taken from the history of the Roman Empire, particularly moments involving transitions of power. References to the burning of Carthage, the assassination of Julius Caesar, and the sack of Rome by the Goths all appear on the surface, partially covered by an aggressive wash of red paint, like the bloody and violent nature of power in its many forms.



Obnoxious Liberals, 1982

The central figure of *Obnoxious Liberals* is often considered a self-portrait of the artist, with “Not for Sale” written on his body and a hand full of arrows (symbolizing the act of painting). This figure is flanked by two other characters. To the left is Samson, the strongman of the Bible, chained to two pillars and caught in a toxic air of asbestos. To the right is a squat man in a fedora, covered in dollar signs, with two x’d out eyes taken from a “hobo language.” The x’s could indicate death, or denote “good place for a handout,” a usage of the symbol that Basquiat adapted from designer Henry Dreyfuss’s *Symbol Sourcebook: An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols*. At stake in *Obnoxious Liberals* is, in the words of curator Franklin Sirmans, “the Black body as a guarded commodity.” Basquiat confronts this historical reality and injustice by situating himself in a capitalistic system that is trying to profit off his work, and that can offer financial success at the expense of personal authenticity.



Santo 2, 1982

Basquiat often mixes disparate cultural references in his paintings and drawings. A wide variety of religious or spiritual figures appears in works throughout his career, from Baron Samedi, a deity and keeper of cemeteries in Haitian Vodou, to ancient gods such as the Babylonian goddess Ishtar to Christ and angels. The *santo* (saint) in the title of this work refers to a small devotional figurine usually found in the homes of countries with a Spanish colonial history. In *Santo 2*, the figure (designated "Apollo," the god of healing, prophecy, music, dance, and poetry in Greco-Roman mythology) is shown in a thicket of symbols, some of which have been decoded and others that remain obscure. Basquiat creates the figure through diagrams of body parts—eyes, throat, and veins—overtly swapping the divine immortality of Apollo with a splayed, dissected corporeal form. Though the *santo* is given a crown of teeth, perhaps even a plating of "14K" gold, this is a saint under great strain, taken apart before our eyes.



Beef Ribs Longhorn, 1982

Mixing collage with painting, *Beef Ribs Longhorn* presents an image of American and global history supported by and dependent on the movement and sale of commodities, such as potatoes, cotton, tobacco, steel, and wheat. As in many of Basquiat's works, repetition and accumulation of writing play a large role. Themes emerge through the words on the white background, including an array of references to US institutions, both public and private (the constitution, the FBI, the AFI-CIO, the YMCA), US symbols (a seal featuring a bald eagle and the slogan "E Pluribus Unum"), global histories (Persia, the Pantheon, China), and personal sources (Basquiat's admiration for the music of Lester Young and the artist's childhood home, a neighborhood called Tar-Town). The central bull stands in for the Black body, bought and sold as a commodity during slavery. In the work's title, Basquiat names the bull at once the consumable "beef ribs" and the majestic "longhorn," a reminder that institutions and ideologies, and their accordant language, dictate oppressions inside a global tournament of wealth and power.



Horn Players, 1983

This painting is an homage to the great horn players Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. On the left is Parker with his alto saxophone, and on the right is Gillespie with his trumpet. Both players are considered among the best ever jazz musicians, and their influential style of bebop resonates loudly throughout the history of modern jazz. Parker's legendary jazz standard "Ornithology," recorded in 1946, is referenced in the middle section of the painting. Basquiat was an avid jazz listener and musician in his own right, and this work shows the relationship between his improvisational style of painting and the alchemy of jazz composition. In both art forms, there is an underlying structure or rhythm, while the melody—or in this case, Basquiat's frenetic brushstrokes—floats and skitters around on top.



With Strings Two, 1983

Completed the same year as *Horn Players*, this work picks up and augments Basquiat's themes of music and Black heroes. Previously titled *Charlie Parker*, the painting features references to the saxophonist throughout, from the crossed-out word "Ornithology" (a Parker musical composition) to the inscription "CERKP," a scramble of the jazz musician's last name. However, the dominant figure in the work shares much in common with Basquiat's self-portraits, especially the clawed hands, often read by commentators as a grip of paintbrushes. By uniting himself with Parker, Basquiat puts forth the difficulties of making art and the vulnerability that comes with sharing it. The figure is struck by lightning and lit from within, alluding to the dichotomy between inspiration and the toll of success, which comes "with strings," a reality that Basquiat knew well.



Eyes and Eggs, 1983

Anecdotally, the painting *Eyes and Eggs* has been tied to a short-order cook named Joe, from a diner that the artist frequented. The cook takes on a gravity and status among Basquiat's many portraits, graphically direct and large in size. His eyes glow with intensity, rendered in red, matching the eggs that he prepares. Yet, purposefully, Basquiat paints the man with no mouth (covered or smeared with white pigment), suggesting that he has been denied his voice, working behind the scenes for little money, seen but not heard.



Gold Griot, 1984

In deciding on a surface for *Gold Griot*, Basquiat was drawn to the odd shapes and informal look of wooden fencing. At the time, he was working in Venice, California, at the corner of Market Street and Speedway, and his studio's back patio had a decaying fence, which Basquiat removed and repurposed. The subsequently painted wood provides a soft golden glow on which a legless figure, with arms in the air, floats. A "griot" is a West African keeper of an oral tradition and history. Basquiat depicts the storyteller with almond eyes, an exposed rib cage, and a bright yellow throat and brain. Basquiat's griot seems to be in the act of performing, expressing and recording through memory, words, and song.



Melting Point of Ice, 1984

Basquiat's *Melting Point of Ice* teeters on the edge of crisis, at the moment when one is fighting to ward off disaster. The painting offers signs of impending doom (references to the people of Sodom, Zillions of Flies, and seawater) as well as potential antidotes (the Rx medical symbol, the Eye of Horus as talisman of protection and healing, the designation of "non-toxic," and a hygrometer to measure the amount of water in the air). The surface is dense with incident and activity, a veritable forest of danger, yet the figure to the right of the canvas has fists raised in the pose of a boxer and has already sent one head rolling. "BIP!" Basquiat writes to signal the sound of the punch.



Wicker, 1984

In 1985, Basquiat told an interviewer that *Wicker* was painted in multiple sessions over the course of one week. He relates the story that a visitor to his studio criticized the painting's use of *nature morte* (still life). Seemingly in response, the artist depicted a figure growing (along with fronds) from the offending wicker basket. Basquiat likened this painting to a representation of his home, a place where artistic energies come to life. Across from the basket, hovering above the brown floor as though the untethered thoughts of the artist, a symbol-laden monster appears, as does a camera, a floating spinal cord, and an elephant. With the inclusion of boxer Henry Armstrong at the "bell," doubled in the buzzer of Basquiat's own door, the artist may be comparing himself again (as he had many times) to a prize fighter.



Pink Devil, 1984

Pink Devil, whose title presumably riffs on the name "white devil," is painted on top of a large collage of Basquiat's drawings. It is a festival of vibrant colors and information, collecting many of the artist's themes into a single statement. Industries connected to slavery (sugar and tobacco) appear among many references to the Mississippi River. Emphasis is placed on how the water flows, how it is used for transport, and how it has historically symbolized and embodied a transition from the legal institution of slavery in the South to the free, poverty-stricken, and embattled lives of Black people in the North. The pink devil, hornet-like in form, presides over this history, hovering over it like a poisonous cloud.



Deaf, 1984

This portrait features a blind harp player emerging from a brushy field of red paint. Through his use of the copyright symbol, Basquiat asserts a familiar theme, the co-option of artists and musicians by the market, to be bought and sold for their talents. However, the painting may also be among the many examples of Basquiat sourcing visual material from Africa, strikingly similar to a relief of a blind harpist found in an Egyptian tomb from the fifteenth century BCE. The title of the painting, *Deaf*, is enigmatic and powerful, implying the steep challenges of communication; though the blind harp player offers a song, others may be deaf to or refuse to hear the music.

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