ETC

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Jean-Michel Basquiat, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. October 23, 1992 - February 14, 1993

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Number 21, February–May 1993

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/36048ac

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)
1923-3205 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review

Kaplan, S. (1993). Review of [A Post Mortem On The Occasion Of His Retrospective / Jean-Michel Basquiat, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. October 23, 1992 - February 14, 1993]. *ETC*, (21), 56–58.

NEW YORK

A POST MORTEM ON THE OCCASION OF HIS RETROSPECTIVE

Jean-Michel Basquiat, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. October 23, 1992 – February 14, 1993

I didn't particularly care for Jean-Michel Basquiat. That's all right. He wasn't crazy about me either. We hung out at the same New York clubs in the late 70s and early 80s – Tier 3, Squat Theater, CBGBs, Mudd – with other alienated art, film and music types, in a downtown milieu that flirted with junk, struck dangerous dude poses of disaffected cool tinged with subliminal violence, wore leather jackets and thrift store clothes from the 60s, and stayed up all night smoking, drinking, talking, dancing. In retrospect, it was a variation on the typical post-collegiate art student scene duplicated a thousand times over in a thousand towns. But for us, it was the dawning of a Brave New World : the end of punk, the beginning of New Wave, whatever that meant.

Before he ever hung a painting in a SoHo gallery, before his name was all over Artforum, Basquiat was already a star in this scene. His SAMO© graffiti done with several accomplices who similarly attended the experimental City as School, were scrawled throughout SoHo and the East Village on highly visible walls and other surfaces, often right next to the galleries and clubs, as if impatiently knocking on the doors for admittance. SAMO©, short for "same old shit", and suffixed with the telling copyright symbol, would knowingly and trenchantly declaim on issues of identity, pretense and hypocrisy, mixing an attitude of sly sarcasm with the polished epigrammatic brevity of an advertising slogan. For exemple : "SAMO© as an end to mind wash religion, now here politics and bogus philosophy." It was street writing with a conceptual edge, a quantum leap from the autographic tagging that characterized most graffiti of the moment.

Basquiat was leading a fairly nomadic existence at the time, having left his comfortable middle class home in Brooklyn, his Haitian father and Puerto Rican Mother, and giving himself totally to the scene, staying up late at the clubs and crashing where he could, sleeping around a lot, waking up in strange East Village digs and scrawling his first paintings on refrigerators and cupboard doors. It was a fine romantic image, the wild street kid, compelled to express his genius by any means necessary, in any way possible. This underdog energy was charismatic to the max, and there were plans to shoot a film about the downtown scene, starring Basquiat in a barely fictionalized role as itinerant street artist.

Basquiat had also put together an atonal noise band called *Gray*. It was late one night at Tier 3, a converted postal workers bar with three levels and ceilings so low the stage was raised only a foot off the dance floor (if it were any higher, the musicians could not stand up straight without hitting their heads on the tin ceiling). We were all upstairs after a gig. Who played that night ? Maybe John Lurie and an early incarnation of the Lounge Lizards. Basquiat was sitting at a table with his latest girlfriend, rolling a big joint. He was, as usual, a striking figure, with attitude to spare, dressed in *clochard* clothes and sporting a fierce collection of dreadlocks. I approached him and asked when *Gray* would be playing next, since I had missed their last gig. He looked up disdainfully and mumbled "Dont ask.". In a summary fashion, I was dismissed from his presence. He dissed me.

Well, I took it personally. I tought, "Who does this kid think he is anyway ? " His icy *hauteur*, his smug hipper-than-thou attitude was somewhat unnerving, but mostly it was alienating and insulting. And despite his attempt at reconcilation some months later, I never forgave him this slight. I started to refer to him publicly as "Sambo", adding a "b" to his *nom de graffiti*. (In future years, as he became a prominent star in the neo-expressionist firmament, I noticed that others did the same.) I also referred to him as "art pickaninny." Yes, I knew it was racist, but I was pissed off, and I also knew it would get back to him and hurt him.

But in coining these vile epithets, I was not just dissing Basquiat. I was also hoping to communicate something to him, to express my knowledge and, perhaps, offer my sympathy regarding his position as an outsider, a black artist in the precincts of the lily white art world. Basquiat made the most of his difference. He was a consummate player, acutely aware of his status as "other," and of the position he could occupy in art culture if he manipulated his image skillfully. At first, I thought he was getting away with a super scam, hoodwinking the white liberal art establishment. It was not until I overheard one of his early New York dealers cooing "Look how well he uses his culture" to a potential collector that I realized the double-edged bind that Basquiat found himself in. To the same extent that he was skillfully playing the art world, he was himself getting played.

Even in our current climate of political correctness, artists of color constitute a very small percentage of the work shown in galleries and written about in magazines or catalogues. Still, we can point to Martin Puryear sculptures going quietly blue chip, to the race and gender ruminations of Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems and Adrian Piper, to the installation work of David Hammons and Gary Simmons, to the *faux* ethnographic work of Fred Wilson and the linguistic explorations of Glenn Ligon, to the sumptuous cibachromes of Andres Serrano, as some exam-

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Lunapark*, 1982. Polymer synthétique et bâton à l'huile sur toile ; 186,6 x 183,5 cm.
Collection Whitney Museum of American Art, New York ; Don de June et Paul Schorr. Succession de Jean-Michel Basquiat.

ples of black artists being taking seriously in 1992. The climate was different ten years ago, when Basquiat began to show. He was the sole natty dread enthroned in the neo-ex pantheon, a white boy club that included Schnabel, Salle, Haring, Scharf, Clemente, Chia, Baselitz and Penck.

At least since Picasso and other early modernists used African tribal sculpture for inspiration, Western art has been slumming in black cultural forms. It can be called appropriation, but this is an ambivalent relationship, charged with race and class contradictions that are part and parcel of the Western colonialist impulse. While not as pernicious as the institution of slavery – perhaps the ultimate appropriation of black flesh for white consumption – the constant raiding of black music, dance and oral traditions is so well established that it has long been a touchstone of guilty white liberal musing. Can white boys really sing the blues ? Do we have the right ? Have we paid our dues ?

Any black man of even moderate sensitivity is hip to this guilt, and Basquiat was certainly no dope. He mined it like a treasure trove, creating his own private El Dorado. In a sense, Basquiat turned Western appropriation and cultural imperialism on its ear. Obviating the typical model that has Afro-Caribbean forms providing fodder for the dominant white culture, Basquiat put himself in the driver's seat. He became the cultural *bricoleur*, presenting permutations and recombinations of texts culled from anatomy charts, books of art and history, advertising and billboard, as well as from such modernist *haut* art sources as Twombly, Rauschenberg, Dubuffet, Larry Rivers, Warhol, and of course Picasso. Basquiat's highly diverse visual vocabulary was masked, perhaps perversely, in a childlike scrawl, teetering between elementary school misspellings and Freudian deletions. His eye/ear for the telling phrase that could ironically sum up centuries of black/white disparity is apparent, especially in his early, pre-1984 paintings. A scrawled "peso neto" (Spanish for "net weight") brings into sharp relief the broken promises of American democracy, the gap between a formal lip service and the real content of poverty and exploitation. With similar elegant brevity, "famous Negro athlete" parodies the common white assumption that in order for blacks to succeed and become "credits to their race," they must typically excel in either entertainment or sports.

Then there are the crowns, which date from the SAMO© days and continue in the paintings. Aside from the obvious graffiti writer's boast ("I'm the best, I'm king"), Basquiat's assymetrically scrawled, semi legible, almost throwaway crowns reveal a deep ambivalence, as he posits his underclass persona as king of the hobos. Basquiat's carefully crafted identity, which denies his actual upbringing as a middle class son of West Indian her-

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Hollywood Africans*, 1983. Acrylique et techniques mixtes sur toile; 213,3 x 213,3 cm. Collection Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Don de Douglas S. Cramer.

itage, renders him as part Bowery bum, part urban aboriginal child of the streets. It is a synthetic identity designed to signify to Basquiat's prime audience – white, middle class collectors – a heady mixture of underdog energy that incorporates an insolent indifference, a studied contempt, a loathing for the spectator that is in fact mirrored by Basquiat's own self loathing, self contempt, self abuse. Basquiat made no secret of his drug use. If anything, he accentuated its public aspect for the extra shadings it could give to his already dark persona. But all Basquiat really had to do was hint at cocaine or junk. The wanabee hip white spectator could fill in the blanks and readily understand that here was another tortured black genius *à la* Charlie Parker. More than any other painter of the 80s, Basquiat's success in the marketplace was keyed to his own personal charisma and role playing, nurtured over years of club stardom. You weren't just buying a painting when you bought a Basquiat, you were buying a whiff of danger, a raw and authentic voice from the disenfranchised black underclass, now suddenly empowered, vaguely threatening, and hanging in your living room. The *frissons* were just too great. What rich white liberal could say no ?

Basquiat was the closest thing the art world has had to a rock star. But we all know that such stars – like Basquiat's personal heroes Jimi Hendrix, Robert Johnson, and of course Charlie Parker – burn hot, bright and short. They carry with them intimations of mortality, an identification with the tragedy of life that is so overpowering as to be irresistible. So that when Basquiat died in 1988 at age 27, precipitously truncating his career through a massive drug overdose, it almost came as no surprise. It was as if he started to believe his own press clippings and to live, or die, by them. His death brought the image machine around full circle. It fulfilled the persona he hade been carefully crafting all these years even as far back as a decade ago when he dissed me at Tier 3. Perhaps I might have better understood the source of his contempt, and realized that I was only receiving a small dose of what Basquiat ultimately intended for himself. Perhaps we could have triumphed over our differences and established, if not a friendship, then at least a genuine dialogue. At this point, it's too late to revise our relationship. The only dialogue any of us can have with Basquiat now is through his paintings.

STEVEN KAPLAN