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Saving Basquiat: Seeing the Art Through the Myth-Making at Gagosian

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Installation view of the Jean-Michel Basquiat exhibition at Gagosian, West 24th Street, New York

by Ben Davis

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With over 50

Jean-Michel Basquiat / Courtesy of ITVS / Lee Jaffe

paintings, “museum-quality” is probably the term you’d use to describe Gagosian’s Jean-Michel Basquiat show, which has been drawing rock-star crowds to West 24th street since it opened. But

really, it might be better to call it “warehouse-quality.” The show is overwhelming and difficult to write about, partly because there doesn’t seem to be any idea behind it at all; the works are hung neither by chronology nor by theme. They are merely a spectacularly impressive collection of largish Basquiats from a number of private collections. In this way, the show replicates the tragedy of this artist’s short and chaotic life, where the feverish buzz of celebrity came to overpower any assessment of the works as individual objects.

Basquiat’s art is brimming with life — he worked fast, and painted everywhere, on everything around him — and it owes much of his continued cachet to the enduring legend of its unfiltered immediacy. But if you look closely, what you will see is that they are records, almost every one, of an almost crippling self-consciousness. These paintings are allegories, not just about race in general, but of Basquiat’s own troubled status caught between communities, in a web of expectations that he couldn’t meet. Indeed, if you read them right, his works are actually a scathing indictment of the very audience that adopted them so eagerly, and of the fame that came to kill him.

Take a work from the Gagosian show like “Eyes and Eggs” (1983). It shows a tortured-looking figure with black skin, in Basquiat’s piquant expressionist style. (His figures, in general, have all been submitted to the scrutiny of some fiery X-ray machine, deformed and torn apart, teeth and ribs showing through flesh, genitals isolated.) The man’s smock bears a nametag that reads “JOE.” He is holding a skillet, and in it are two frying eggs, their blood-red yolks rhyming visually with the glaring sockets in his skull, as the title indicates, as if to suggest that he were actually serving an omelet of his own eyes. Such a work is not just of the baleful impact of the “gaze” — that standby of cultural criticism — but of something more complex: The figure is both subject and object; he is taking his own *vision*, his own perception of the world, cooking it up, and serving it up for his patrons to consume.



From a troubled but well-off Brooklyn family — his dad, a wealthy accountant, owned a building on Pacific Street where the family lived, and Jean-Michel was a Junior Member of the Brooklyn Museum at six — Basquiat rose to fame at the time of the art world’s brief and fraught infatuation with graffiti, the major cultural form of New York in the bankrupt '70s. Basquiat, however, was never really part of the Bronx-based graffiti scene, and his street works were aimed squarely at Soho, which is to say, at gaining the attention of the mainly white downtown creative set. It worked. He went from making offbeat text-based street art as SAMO to selling out gallery shows for hundreds of thousands of dollars in just a two short years at the beginning of the '80s. He would date Madonna, hang out with Warhol, and become a human symbol of '80s money’s coked-up infatuation with art (literally in the case of the infamous “New Art, New Money: The Marketing of the American Artist” cover story for New York Times Magazine).

By the end of 1982, he went to Los Angeles to chill out. The guy who a year before had survived by living off of generous girlfriends now rented a studio from Larry Gagosian for \$2,500 a month. A vibrant yellow canvas from that year, his famous “[Hollywood Africans](#)” (now in the collection of the Whitney Museum), centers on three figures, cartooned portraits of the graffiti artists RAMELLZEE and TOXIC, whom he had brought with him to the West Coast, alongside a self-portrait. In Tamra Davis's documentary *The Radiant Child*, dealer Fred Hoffman describes the reception of Basquiat in L.A. in a way that is incredibly telling:

I was in the waiting area at Spago's at like 10 o'clock at night waiting to get in, and Jean-Michel walked in with RAMELLZEE and FAB 5 FREDDY, all behind Larry Gagosian, and the restaurant came to a complete silence. I mean, these three young black men, all more handsome than the next, and I don't know if people thought they were in front of the newest Hollywood stars or were about to get robbed. But the restaurant just came to a dead silence. It was fantastic.

Somehow, I doubt that Basquiat found it “fantastic” to imbibe such an odd cocktail of exoticization and not-so-subtle racism. When he scrawls the word “GANGSTERISM” across the foreground of “Hollywood Africans,” he's not just referencing the roles that African-Americans were historically given to play in Hollywood — a common interpretation of this painting. He's literally foregrounding the stereotype that he and his fellow artists actually were dealing with.

At the same time, from within the New York graffiti scene itself, Basquiat faced a quite different set of pressures: Graffiti writers thought that any “street artist” who had never bombed a subway train was basically a dilettante. RAMELLZEE accused Basquiat of being a fraud, and even banned him from contributing to the seminal proto hip-hop album “[Beat Bop](#)” while they were in L.A., even though he paid for the recording. Basquiat's seemingly easy fame in the mainstream art world left behind lasting bitterness: “Jean-Michel is the one they told, ‘You must draw it this way and call it Black man folk art,’” RAMELLZEE would remark later, with withering disdain, “when it was really white man folk art that he was doing.” A wry trace of these tensions makes its way into “Hollywood Africans:” alongside his own face, Basquiat scribbles the phrase, “Self-Portrait as a Heel, #3.”

Everyone who met Basquiat remarked on his raw ambition, his drive to claim the creative heights (his emblems, after all, were the crown and the copyright symbol, obsessively stamped on everything). When he turned to painting on canvas, he kept the jittery style that suggested urban scrawl, but peppered the canvasses with classical art references. “This is to let you know you are entering art history,” he once explained, simply; such references were there to let his audience know that he was not some outsider primitive, but someone to be taken seriously. From the point of view of pure need to succeed, there was a clear logic behind trying to distinguish his work from graffiti art. The mainstream art world never knew what to do with graffiti beyond slightly patronizing appropriation; “the people presenting this work were often unwilling or unable to present those artists as individuals with a very distinct vision,” the artist ZEPHYR [remembered later](#). By the mid-'80s, all but Basquiat and Haring were sinking back into obscurity, unable to escape the purgatory of group shows.

Still, an argument can be made that in this respect the very conditions of his success were what cut him off from the tools that could have helped him survive. He was — despite a famously outgoing and larger-than-life personality — in a key sense *alone*. In *The Radiant Child*, another '80s art star, Julian Schnabel, remembers a troubled Basquiat asking for advice, and being at a loss: “No one else was in that situation.” In a particularly powerful essay, the artist [Lorraine O'Grady argues](#) that Basquiat's self-imposed exile from the Black art world is key to understanding the tragedy of his life and work. She recalls meeting with him and identifying with his drive as a fellow product of a “Caribbean-American family of a certain class.” But she also had a premonition of how the pressures of fame and ignorance were chewing away at his self-confidence: “I knew the art world was about to eat him up,” she writes, “and before it did, I hoped to connect him to black artists who, picked up in the '60s and then dropped, could give him perspective on its mores in a way his graffiti friends could not.”

In the end, O'Grady says, Basquiat rejected her overture, seeming to think the association with African-American art would be uncool, and preferring to pursue a show with Mary Boone. Who knows if O'Grady is right that her offer of community could have given him perspective on the unique perils of fame for artists of color, and that this could have saved him? We know that as he hurtled towards the end of the '80s, he was all-too aware that despite all his efforts to avoid the label, he was still pigeonholed as a kind of novelty; every time a cab refused to pick him up on the streets in NYC — an experience he brought up frequently — he must have been reminded of the sense that no amount of money could take away the stigma of difference. Basquiat could see that the media focused on his physiognomy, not his art. When, in 1985, his collaborative show with Warhol was critically panned, he had the sense that he had become a novelty act whose time was almost up.

As an artist, the sense that he was always onstage, always performing, must have been acute; his very first stretched canvas work, after all, was done for a 1981 movie where he *played* the role of a down-on-his-luck artist, a fact that gives a sense of how much he lived a self-created myth. Drugs helped him concentrate and meet the demands of the output the art market expected of him. They also were part of the role of tortured Rabelaisian artist, a legend that he knew remained the fuel of his success. “They tell me I need to get off the drugs,” he is supposed to have said, “and then when I do they tell me my work suffers.”

If you sort your way through the many canvasses in the Gagosian show, you can see the endgame in the few later works, where Basquiat is trying to

paint his way out of this trap. In April of 1988, Basquiat staged his first solo show in years at Vrej Baghoomian Gallery in New York. Among the works was "Riding With Death." It lacks all the wild text fragments that had become so characteristic of him; it is as if he were trying to come down, to clear his head. At its center is a single dark-skinned figure, twisted and alone. He is seated atop a horse made of bones — a reference, perhaps, to "horse," the slang term for the drug that would take his life just four months later, in August 1988.

The background of the painting is a flat and featureless field of gold. This might be a suggestion of something holy, of a better life that he was straining towards. Or it could be a reference to the culture of glitz and money that he was drowning in. A blessing or a curse, it's hard to say, and that makes it particularly sad.