

# **The Basquiat effect: The cultural impact of Jean-Michel Basquiat**

written by Kai Trotz-Motayne

Various art forms have been used throughout history to represent humanity through visual storytelling, often reflecting social and political dynamics of the time. Artworks have been canonized for the ways in which they realistically illustrate periods in time, figuratively and literally. By looking at canonized artworks throughout history, there is a drastic change in the form of art from traditional painterly and sculptural practices to unconventional forms of art that often call for artists to go above and beyond their previous boundaries. Many credit this change to the avant-garde works of Marcel Duchamp, whose work changed perceptions of art, questioning its validity, coining the term '*The Duchamp Effect*' in reference to the historical reception of his work that transcended questions of quality, and called for viewers to acknowledge the conceptual importance of art (Hopkins and Jones, 2006). The legacy of Marcel Duchamp is not necessarily grounded in the aesthetics of his works, but instead the impact they had.

Like Marcel Duchamp, Jean-Michel Basquiat brought forth questions of quality and intent, calling upon viewers to reflect upon their place and space in society in relation to his artwork. Through the use of a graffiti-inspired style, Basquiat forced viewers to explore the importance of context when understanding and validating art, by determining the legitimacy of his style in museums and galleries. Born to Afro-Puerto Rican and Haitian parents, Basquiat further brought a unique perspective to both the elusive and the often-exclusive art world (Basquiat, 2015). As a rather racially homogenous network, Basquiat was the first popularized artist to interrupt this through his work, by bringing black characters to the forefront through both

images and words. Basquiat's unique identities brought him ultimate success that transcended the art world and, for the first time, brought contemporary art to the forefront of popular culture. To understand the importance of Basquiat, one must understand the world around him, and how his identity and experiences in New York City made him a twentieth century icon. Many artists have died young, but no artist has died so young and made as much of an impact as Jean-Michel Basquiat. Leaving behind thousands of paintings at the age of 27, Basquiat's iconography has been used to represent an entire generation of artists. Basquiat's life as a young, Afro-Caribbean New Yorker was reflected in his artwork through political and personalized works. However, Basquiat, unlike Duchamp, is not credited for his effects. The importance of Basquiat, like Duchamp, cannot be properly argued through the observation of his works for no matter whether the viewer finds his work objectively appealing or not, Basquiat has had an undeniably everlasting effect on the art world. Basquiat's work will forever hold conceptual importance through his ability to connect to viewers, transcending race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.

Basquiat's work shares minimal similarities to canonized western artworks. Never trained to paint, and in fact even failing his one and only art course, Basquiat was a self-taught artist (Poullalié, 2017). Finding inspiration through *Gray's Anatomy*, given to him by his mother at age 7 (ibid.) observing other artworks, and by tagging subways and walls throughout New York City, Basquiat represented something new and different. In the beginning of his career, there is no doubt about whether Basquiat was a Graffiti artist; he wrote on walls, found pride and gratification in

'tagging', and self-identified as SAMO ©, his graffiti name (Kane, 2017). However, when entering the art world, Basquiat became quickly acquainted with empirical perspectives that did not categorize Graffiti as art. Graffiti, defined as writing or drawings that have been scribbled, scratched, or painted illicitly on a wall or other surface, often within public view, lives on the margins of art and vandalism (Gartus et al., 2015). Basquiat contextualized art, by bringing 'street art' to museums, and notable galleries. By bringing this style to the forefront, Basquiat exemplified to audiences that art cannot be defined without understanding its context; and through his graffiti-inspired style, called upon his viewers to reflect on the contexts in which art was created.

Basquiat legitimized graffiti-style art by bringing it to the forefront of gallery exhibitions and museums around the world. Although little changed of his style from SAMO © to Jean-Michel Basquiat, moving the placement of his art from the streets to museums contextualized it in ways that allowed for it to be recognised undeniably as art (ibid.). Throughout the late twentieth century, young men would write their name and street number on walls around the city, with the only incentive of being acknowledged and seeing yourself represented in a world where you were often ignored, often due to your age, economic, and/or racial status (Powers, 1996). Museums provide an environment for the undisturbed contemplation of art, and studies have proven that viewers analyzed art longer in museum contexts rather than street contexts (Gartus et al., 2015). The placement of art in a museum or an art gallery is a strong contextual cue for classifying an object as one that "warrants aesthetic processing" (ibid.). Graffiti was not absent from the view of

many, particularly in the streets of New York, but before Basquiat nobody had truly considered these writings to be politically charged art, deserving of analysis, critique, and contemplation.

The context of the street is essential for artwork to be considered street art and/or graffiti. Although Basquiat's roots may be grounded in Graffiti Art, he was no longer a graffiti artist once he stopped painting on the streets. The constant connotation of Basquiat as a graffiti artist has racial undertones that belittle him as an artist (O'Brien, 2015). Indeed, this demoted him to a street artist, rather than acknowledging his ever-growing presence in museums and galleries across the world. In an interview by *Now's the time* (2015) Basquiat is quoted saying the following:

*They're just racist, most of these people... They went and said my father was an accountant for a fast-food chain. And they talk about graffiti endlessly, which I don't really consider myself to be a graffiti artist, you know? So, they have this image of me: wild man running - you know, wild monkey man, whatever the fuck they think.*

Prior to Basquiat's success, Black artists had been largely absent from western art history, and although their bodies and culture were represented in highly coveted pieces like Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and Edward Manet's *Olympia*, black people themselves were never self-represented (Skelly, Feb. 08). The use of 'primitive' styles, such as his notable graffiti-like scribbles, was purposefully used by the artist to reclaim the historically dehumanizing inferences of black people as animalistic (Armand, 2000). Further fascinated by the representation of black people throughout history, beyond just art, Basquiat painted his

heroes, using their figures and words, often placing his signature crown on the canvas with them, reflecting empowerment to many viewers, specifically his black ones. Basquiat's representations of black people were self-reflections that actively granted them agency. Basquiat's artwork, however, went beyond mere representations of his racial identity by heavily politicizing his work through the use of words (Manatakis, 2017). In Basquiat's 1983 work *Hollywood Africans*, the audience is struck with a colourful canvas, littered with words in unidentifiable formations. In this piece Basquiat is directly attacking the media's historically wrongful representations of black people throughout history (Sherwin, 2017). With the words "Hollywood Africans - 1942" written at the top of the canvas in reference to the year Hattie McDaniel won an Oscar for playing the highly stereotypical and problematic 'Mammy' in *Gone with the Wind* (ibid.), written below the title a hand is seen with 'paw paw' written on it in reference to historical connotation of black people as beastly. Below this we then see "Gangsterism" in reference to Hollywood's constant depiction of black people as ghetto, uneducated, and criminal (Whitney Museum). Through the use of words, Basquiat is able to emphasise a political presence within his abstract paintings.

Basquiat further contextualised his racialized pieces through its heavily diasporic context. In the same artwork *Hollywood Africans*, written is "sugarcane" and "tobacco"; industries in the Caribbean and Latin America that were historically reliant on the labour of African slaves. Basquiat lived on the margins as a categorically black man with Caribbean and Latinx roots. Basquiat not only placed African

American people at the forefront of his work, but he placed black people of all diasporas into his images as well. As a heavily westernized artist, it sometimes goes unnoticed that Basquiat's work was grounded in Latin American, Caribbean, and African contexts through his use of color, style, and the Spanish language (Saggese, 2014). The constant Nuyorican (New Yorker of Puerto Rican descent) references are themselves politically charged. Although Puerto Ricans, through colonization and the implementation of the 1917 Jones Act, are citizens of the United States, they have historically been denied equal access to the rights of citizenship (Herrera, 2017). Nuyorican artists, much like Basquiat are representative of a movement that sought to illuminate, "the struggle and labor of the Puerto Rican independence movement and the drug infestation of poverty-stricken neighborhoods, protesting against the pervasive police brutality against people of color and the severe lack of educational and healthcare programs to support low-income families" (ibid.). In identifying his diasporic art, Basquiat brings forth topics that often go unrecognized to the mainstream western viewer. Although he as an artist has a specific geographic placement in the United States, his art goes beyond borders, constantly recognizing the existence and effects of the transatlantic slave trade. Not only did he enter the are world as a racial and ethnic 'outsider', he also did not let his viewers forget. Basquiat's often aggressive, racialized images refused to allow his viewer to ignore their place and space in society, being the first to truly bring racial politics to the front line.

Although Basquiat once represented a unique and different artform, with his ominous presence both within and outside the art world, many younger generations now associate art synonymously with the works of Basquiat. Although many Neo-classical, Baroque, and Renaissance artists have been canonized for their undeniable artistic talent, Basquiat's work, for being so dissident, often has varying reactions. There is no clear artistic skill, and in most pieces the object is untraceable and at times even unrecognizable. Despite his flaws, Basquiat has been able to infiltrate popular culture to create a cult-like following that, through his legacy, demonstrates the commercial possibilities and materialistic aspects of the art world. Much of his cultural success in the popular commercialized industries can in many ways be credited towards the ways he appealed to younger generations. Prior to Basquiat there had not been an 'everyday' figure such as himself; a man who was relatable, who experienced angst, worry and anxiety, a man who connected to those who did not identify with the traditional art world. Basquiat's ability to transcend art and connect to those beyond the art world must be credited for the basis of his artistic success, as he is one of few artists able to instill power within the viewer.

Basquiat appealed to a large audience that throughout time has been overlooked; the youth. Basquiat, a young black man used his existential feelings within the art community and translated it into his work (Arthouse Films, 2010). Although not many can relate to the feelings of a 20-something year old, self-made billionaire, drug-addict; alienation, con-fusion, and loneliness are human emotions felt by everyone. Basquiat, who was

encouraged by his father to embark on the traditional education-to-career path, ignored respectability and refused to condone assimilation (ibid.). Instead, Basquiat depicted an ideal state where categories and expectations were not apparent, and instead difference and divergence were heavily accepted. His representation grew to become symbolic of something larger than himself, and many around him could see his endless possibilities (Laing, 2017). Basquiat's iconography today is some of the most expensive, and only a few months ago Sotheby's sold his piece *Untitled* for \$110.5 million to Yusaku Maezawa, a Japanese billionaire who happened to be only eighteen years old when the artist died at the height of his career (Pogrebin and Reyburn, 2017). The phenomenon that is Basquiat thrives because of Maezawa's generation; a generation that looked beyond their 'expectations', a generation that saw themselves reflected in Jean-Michel Basquiat.

The importance of art is often found in its unique nature; it is all one of a kind. It cannot be recreated and cannot be reproduced. Because of its rarity, art has historically represented a small group of elite, privileged people who could afford to enjoy it. Basquiat is representative of a shift within art away from this extremely exclusive, sub-cultural group to an inclusive and representative body. Basquiat, an unlikely icon has shown the world that anything is truly possible; and to many he represented hope. He brought forth and popularized a style that was often looked down upon, he proudly represented his racial and ethnic heritage, and he showed the possibility of art beyond its small community. Basquiat showed the art world its possibility, and in turn showed the outside world the importance of art.

When entering the western hemisphere, black people are often grouped together as one, and although it is important to recognize the diaspora, we must also recognize our differences. As a child, the media told me that as a black person I was expected to fit into a cookie-like cut out, and that by not being able to fit into these expectations I was not being a proper 'black person'. Basquiat repelled this cut-out and displayed the ways that black (male) identity, much like any other person, is multifaceted, unpredictable, and indefinite. Today, unarmed black men can be shot in front of their family (Philando Castille, 1970-2014); their death can be legitimized by saying that they sold cigarettes illegally (Eric Garner, 1970-2014) or because they wore dark clothes and a hoodie (Trayvon Martin, 1995-2012). Today, black men can only die an unfair death if they fit a picture-perfect cut out of the 'respectable black man'. Somehow, Basquiat was however able to overstep these unfair expectations. A clearly flawed and imperfect man, Basquiat was able to retain his initial reverence, representing the undeniable humanity that black people are too often denied. As an Afro-Caribbean woman, Basquiat represented to me so much more than his painting. His existence reiterated mine, and although I could look in the mirror and acknowledge my presence, I felt that Basquiat in many ways brought me into existence. As an Afro-Caribbean-Latino from a middle-class New York family, I saw myself reflected within him. I saw the expectations set upon his shoulders by both his parents and society, I saw the ways he felt tokenized within his racially homogeneous social group, and I saw his frustration and confusion with who he was as both a person and an artist. Basquiat refused to modify himself and he refused to stay quiet about his experiences; Beyond racial, ethnic, or socio-economic lines,

Basquiat's frustration with the world and its ultimately debilitating boundaries can be understood, accepted, and empathized by anyone. Basquiat was representative of humanity, and he, as an artist, was able to do what nobody else could have done before.

## References

- Armand, L. (2000). "Jean-Michel Basquiat and 'The Art of (Dis)Empowerment'". Lecture at the Comparative Studies Colloquium, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.
- Arthouse Films (2010). *Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child*. Curiously Bright Entertainment & LM Media GmbH present; in association with Fortissimo Films; produced by David Koh ... [and others]; a film by Tamra Davis; produced & directed by Tamra Davis. New York: Distributed by New Video, Print.
- Basquiat, J.-M., in Buchhart, D. (2015). *Jean-michel Basquiat: Now's the Time*. Print.
- Gartus, A., et al. (2015). "The Effects of Visual Context and Individual Differences on Perception and Evaluation of Modern Art and Graffiti Art." *Acta Psychologica*. 156, 64-76.
- Herrera, P. (2017). "Building Latinidad, Silencing Queerness: Culture Clashes Nuyorican Stories." *Theatre Topics*, 27, 1, 71-82.
- Hopkins, D. and Jones, A. (2006). "Rethinking the 'Duchamp Effect.'" *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, Blackwell Publishing, 145-160.
- Kane, A. (2017). "The Story of SAMO©, Basquiat's First Art Project." *Dazed*, Dazed Magazine.
- Laing, O. (2017). "Race, Power, Money – the Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media.
- Manatakis, L. (2017). "Jean-Michel Basquiat in His Own Words." *Dazed*, Dazed Magazine.
- O'Brien, G. (2015). "Every line means something: Glenn O'Brien on Jean-Michel Basquiat." *Artforum International*, p. 125+. *Expanded Academic ASAP*.
- Pogrebin, R. and Reyburn, S. (2017). "A Basquiat Sells for 'Mind-Blowing' \$110.5 Million at Auction." *The New York Times*, The New York Times.
- Poullalié, P. (2017). "'A Study in Grey Jean Michel Basquiat (1960 – 1988)'" *Mediographia*, 39, 3, 241-251.
- Powers, L.A. (1996). "Whatever Happened to the Graffiti Art Movement?" *The Journal of Popular Culture*. 29.4: 137-142.
- Saggese, J. M. (2014). *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art*. University of California Press, pp. 36 - 37.
- Skelly, J. (Feb.08). "Blackness and Postcolonial Theory". Introduction to Contemporary Art. McGill University, Montreal, QC.
- Sherwin, S. (2017). "Jean-Michel Basquiat's Hollywood Africans: A Complex History Lesson." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media.
- Whitney Museum. "Hollywood Africans." *Whitney Museum of American Art: Jean-Michel Basquiat: Hollywood Africans*.