

## **The cult of the victim? Basquiat: Boom for Real**

Barbican Art Gallery, 21<sup>st</sup> September 2017 to 28<sup>th</sup> January 2018

Questions, questions, questions. So many questions are posed by the Jean-Michael Basquiat exhibition *Boom for Real* at the Barbican that I am at a loss for answers. But given what I think will be the trajectory of this review, let me start with an admission followed by a question of my own.

The admission first – I’m male, pale and stale. I realise of course that this means I’m not part of the target demographic for this exhibition, a phrase I’ve deliberately borrowed from Marketing and that I’ll return to later. But the danger is that anything I write can be dismissed. Of course he doesn’t get it. Why would he? So, in an attempt to write objectively about Basquiat, let me now pose the question – how do you judge great art?

It’s in the eye of the beholder of course but here are three possible answers. The first is that the artist demonstrates mastery of a chosen medium. Essentially this is comparative and can be broken down into two further questions – is the artist more accomplished than their predecessors and contemporaries? And does the artist’s work become more accomplished over time? Secondly, does the artist offer an insight into the human condition, a sense of the transcendent? And thirdly, does the artist capture the zeitgeist, the spirit of the time that sets it apart from other eras?

To set the scene before applying these criteria to Basquiat, here’s a quick review of his work and life, the two being inseparable as this show amply demonstrates. Born in 1960 to a Haitian father and Puerto Rican mother, Basquiat showed artistic talent from a young age but his early life was scarred by immense instability. In the space of ten years from age 7 to 17, his parents split up; he moved with his mother from Brooklyn to Puerto Rico, then back again to Brooklyn; his mother became regularly hospitalized in mental institutions; he ran away from home, then when returned to his father, ran away again until by the age of 17, he was living on the streets and sleeping on park benches.

Perhaps not surprisingly then, Basquiat’s career started with street art and graffiti, Using the character ‘SAMO’, a play on the phrase ‘same old shit’, and working at a time when NYC’s buildings were routinely covered with graffiti, Basquiat’s combination of line drawings and neatly capitalized statements stood out and captured the attention of the art world around SoHo and the Lower East Side.



*'LIKE AN IGNORANT EASTER SUIT', Jean-Michel Basquiat on the set of Downtown 81. © New York Beat Film LLC. By permission of The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Photo: Edo Bertoglio*

Encouraged by this initial recognition, Basquiat began to produce collages composed of everything from newspaper headlines and advertisements to cigarette butts and street waste out of which he produced postcards. One of these Basquiat famously sold to Andy Warhol for a dollar in what would prove to be the trigger for his meteoric rise to fame. From this seminal moment in 1978 until his death ten years later, Basquiat worked individually and collaboratively, including with Warhol, across multiple media including painting, poetry, music and performance. Working rapidly and spontaneously in a style akin to jazz improvisation, Basquiat drew on an eclectic range of source material. As Glenn O'Brien noted on his death, Basquiat 'ate every image, every word, every scrap of data' and synthesized these into 'something that made an astonishing new sense'.



*Jean-Michel Basquiat and Jennifer Stein Anti-Baseball Card Product, 1979, Courtesy Jennifer Von Holstein. © Jennifer Von Holstein and The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York.*

The adulation of the Lower East Side art crowd quickly followed, as did the attention of both New York's mercenary art dealers and celebrity collectors such as Madonna (once Basquiat's ex-girlfriend), Richard Gere, and Paul Simon. Yet as his fame grew, so did the pressure to produce and perform. Already addicted to a range of drugs, Basquiat increasingly found his fame and the demands of the dealers (both art and drug) hard to resist and at the age of 28 and after a brief career of no more than a decade, Basquiat died of a heroin overdose.

Basquiat's meteoric rise and equally rapid decline is well captured by the exhibition. We are presented with his graffiti, his paintings and his music, his TV and film appearances, even his notebooks and doodles. It's nothing if not compendious. But let me now return to the two-part first question. How accomplished an artist was Basquiat? Comparisons are invidious no doubt but was he more accomplished than say other Neo-expressionists? Is there anything comparable to the heroic monumentalism of Julian Schnabel in Basquiat's catalogue for instance or the inventiveness of the 'plate' paintings or the technical accomplishment of Schnabel's portraits? Despite Basquiat's dismissal of Schnabel, I suspect not. Or how about David Salle who at least worked with collage and eclectic source material like Basquiat? Is there anything in Basquiat's work that provides a similarly insightful, intelligent and witty take on contemporary life? Again, I think not.

And if these comparisons are misjudged, what about the second part? Does Basquiat's work progress? Does it become more accomplished over time? Here the answer is unequivocal – no, it doesn't. In fact, quite the reverse. At the height of his fame in the mid 1980's, such was the demand for his work that dealers and collectors would wait by his apartment door, ready to take away the canvases before the paint was even dry. Basquiat's eclectic style is at its best when the juxtaposed images and words create 'statements' that function beyond the pictorial but towards the end of the exhibition, when fame and drug addiction were taking their toll, the works become a kind of random pick-and-mix art. It is little surprise then that with admirable understatement, Christie's the auction house describe the market for Basquiat's work as 'two tiered'. So no, it's hard to argue that Basquiat shows mastery of his medium.

What about the second criterion? Does Basquiat offer transcendence? Perhaps this is an unfair question. After all, Basquiat was a black man depicting the institutional and everyday racism of 20<sup>th</sup> century America. We do know that Basquiat did not want his art categorized as 'black art', perhaps seeking a form of transcendence and a wider connection, but it is nevertheless inescapably and specifically black art. His subject was black subjugation as in *Hollywood Africans* (1983) and his heroes and models were black musicians like Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, and black sportsmen and boxers like Sugar Ray Robinson and Joe Louis. And when asked about the figures in his paintings, Basquiat was clear that many of them were self-portraits, so while the exhibition notes may claim that Basquiat was inspired by the creative possibilities of 'identity', it is hard to escape the feeling that the real subject of the show is Basquiat himself and his life as a black man.



*Jean-Michel Basquiat Hollywood Africans, 1983. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ ADAGP, Paris. Licensed by Artestar, New York.*

So, transcendence? No, I don't think so. These works are about black life in general and Basquiat's ethnicity and struggles specifically, which is absolutely valid, justifiable and perhaps necessary. But equally these then become works about differences, not similarities; works that exclude as much as they include; works that point up the problem but offer no solutions. So no, no transcendence, no insight into the human condition; rather these works deal specifically with Basquiat the artist, the black man, the victim of his circumstances.

And the third question - what about the historical significance of Basquiat's work? Its attempt to capture the zeitgeist? The exhibition makes much of this and locates Basquiat in the fervid atmosphere of the clubs and galleries of the art scene in the Lower East Side at a time when New York felt dangerous, both in the sense of being the epicenter for an explosion of new ideas in art, music and living, but also dangerous in a physical sense. From personal experience, I can recall this being a time when hotel doormen would check your intended route if you ventured out for a walk.

But the history with which the Barbican surrounds these works is a curated and recollected one; it isn't a history that informs the works themselves. There seems no sense in which Basquiat is responding to the wider struggle for black rights. Take the 1980 Miami riots which occurred as Basquiat was experiencing his first taste of fame. These were the deadliest riots since the 1960's and the most significant until the Los Angeles' riots of 1992. Thousands were arrested. Their after-effects rippled through race relations in the US for years. But where is Basquiat's reaction to these events? If there was one, I didn't spot it in the show. Instead what we get in these works is Basquiat's self-regarding, simplified and safe commentary on race that for example equates blacks with the Nubians of ancient Egypt. So again, there's no significant historicity in these works, no sense of engaging with contemporary issues of genuine black political and economic emancipation.





*Jean-Michel Basquiat Self Portrait, 1984 Private collection. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York.*

Three criteria then – art as mastery, as transcendence and as historicity – and three thumbs down. And yet this exhibition was busy. I had to queue; wait for a seat to watch the films; navigate around those engrossed in the audio commentary. So what's going on?

By now, I feel like the boy pointing out the emperor has no clothes and yes of course, I know that being male, pale and stale, I'm not equipped to comment on the young black emperor's state of undress, nor do I have the right to.

And that is sort of the point here. For a couple of decades now, certainly since Pierre Bourdieu published *Distinction: A Social Critique of Taste* in English in 1984, aesthetic judgement has become seen as self-interested, more indicative of social position than of reflection and objectivity. Exercising judgement is partial and an imposition, and as a result, diminishing significance is attached to content. What's more, this reluctance to consider content affects not just individuals, it also affects institutions who desperate to justify their existence, find all manner of non-existent, non-content related ends that they claim to satisfy. So what we have at the Barbican is not about art; it's about social critique that's pumped full of contemporary concerns.

And Basquiat is the perfect vehicle for this approach to 'art'. One of the most insightful writers on Basquiat is Marc Mayer who comments that Basquiat 'speaks articulately while dodging the full impact of clarity like a matador'. We can't quite pin down Basquiat's intentions; instead he works with 'a calculated incoherence'. This combination of trigger words and images with Basquiat's allusive intentions provides then the ideal medium for the construction of a modern-day narrative about victimhood. And to be honest, Basquiat has a full house of disadvantages. Black? Tick. Poor? Tick. Homeless? Addict? Young? Tick, tick, tick. So the narrative arc of this show is of how this young black genius gets discovered, becomes famous but is enslaved by the (white) art establishment and the (white) art business, and eventually crashes and burns, dying from a drug overdose at a suitably young age, a fitting finale to this narrative.

Just to be clear, this isn't to think less of Basquiat who seems a perfect example of the phrase 'be careful what you wish for'; nor is it in any way to belittle the struggle for equality and black rights. Absolutely not. Quite the reverse, it's to point up the blatant manipulation of this exhibition that appropriates genuine struggles, and mythologises these into a safe narrative.

So if you are part of the social demographic that likes your art laced with manufactured social significance, the target demographic for the Barbican's Marketing Department, then this show is for you. It's for you too if you're prepared to stand back and look at what's going on, and then decide for yourself. But don't go if you're looking for art as mastery of a medium, or as transcendence, or as historicity.

A final word for any aspiring critics, the Barbican has banned pens from this exhibition. I kid you not. Pencils are allowed, so you can poke holes in the works, both literally and metaphorically. But no pens – they're forbidden, proscribed. Apparently they represent too big an insurance risk. Which is of course ironic beyond measure. Here is an artist who's fame rests on his ability to deface buildings having to be protected from the same fate. Another cynical example of the Barbican trying to convince us of the 'significance' of this exhibition I'm sure but equally I suspect the irony of this has escaped the po-faced organisers. Seriously, you couldn't make this stuff up.