

BASQUIAT **BOOM FOR REAL**

FEBRUARY 16 – MAY 27, 2018

WALL PANELS OF THE EXHIBITION

INTRODUCTION

Jean-Michel Basquiat was one of the most significant artists of the 20th century. Born in Brooklyn in 1960, to a Haitian father and a Puerto Rican mother, he grew up amid the post-punk scene in lower Manhattan. After leaving school at seventeen, he invented the character “SAMO©”, writing poetic graffiti that captured the attention of the city. He exhibited his first body of work in the influential group exhibition *New York/New Wave* at P.S.1, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Inc., in 1981.

When starting out, Basquiat worked collaboratively and fluidly across media, making poetry, performance, music and Xerox art as well as paintings, drawings and objects. *Boom for Real* celebrates this diversity, tracing his meteoric rise, from the postcard he plucked up the courage to sell to his hero Andy Warhol in SoHo in 1979 to one of the first collaborative paintings that they made together in 1984. By then, he was internationally acclaimed – an extraordinary feat for a young artist with no formal training, working against the racial prejudice of the time.

In the studio, Basquiat surrounded himself with source material. He would sample from books spread open on the floor and the sounds of the television or boom box – anything worthy of his trademark catchphrase “boom for real”. The exhibition unpicks this encyclopaedia of references – from early cinema to black cultural history to jazz. As the writer Glenn O’Brien wrote following Basquiat’s death in 1988: “He ate up every image, every word, every bit of data that appeared in front of him and he processed it all into a bebop cubist pop art cartoon gospel that synthesized the whole overload we lived under into something that made an astonishing new sense.”

SAMO©

Basquiat had left home in June 1978. At the time, New York was on the brink of ruin. President Gerald Ford had denied federal assistance to save the city from bankruptcy. Violent crime had doubled, while areas such as the Bronx were nightly lit up by flames, as landlords disposed of buildings that they could no longer let or maintain. It was in this context that he teamed up with Al Diaz, a friend from the alternative high school City-As-School, to invent the character SAMO©, a play on the phrase “same old shit”.

The city was awash with graffiti, but the tone of theirs was different – surreal, witty statements designed to capture the attention of the burgeoning art world around SoHo and the Lower East Side where the pair focused their activity. The avant-garde artist Henry Flynt took fifty-seven photographs of their work: from SAMO© AS A CONGLOMERATE OF DORMANT GENIUS to MY MOUTH / THEREFORE AN ERROR.

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SAMO© became a sensation. On 21 September 1978, the *SoHo Weekly News* published an appeal for the artist responsible to come forward. The *Village Voice* beat them to it, with an article on 11 December that revealed the identities of “Jean” and “Al”. The story forced an end to their collaboration. Keith Haring delivered a eulogy at Club 57 and Basquiat wrote SAMO© IS DEAD over their former territories, even though he would continue to use both the name and the hype generated by the project for years to come.

NEW YORK/NEW WAVE

In February 1981, the landmark exhibition *New York/New Wave* opened at P.S.1 in Long Island City. Curated by Diego Cortez, co-founder of the famous Mudd Club, the show featured over 1600 works by more than a 100 emerging and celebrated artists, musicians and writers, including Andy Warhol, Nan Goldin, Robert Mapplethorpe, David Byrne and William Burroughs. Cortez wanted to convey the downtown countercultural scene of the time, capturing the sprawling energy of New and No Wave music and its reach into visual art.

Basquiat was the only artist in the show to be given a prominent space for painting. Reunited here for the first time are 15 of the works he exhibited, which were made on canvas, paper, wood, scrap metal and foam rubber. They depict the ominous skyscraper-laden skyline, complete with soaring planes and cartoon-style cars – his response to the noise of Manhattan life. Basquiat and Cortez placed the works at surprising heights and in unusual configurations, which has been evoked in the hang here.

New York/New Wave launched Basquiat’s career, as he quickly won the admiration of fellow artists, collectors and dealers. Despite being almost entirely unknown, Basquiat was singled out and lauded by almost every critic, with Peter Schjeldahl writing in the *Village Voice*: “I would not have suspected from Samo’s generally grotty defacements of my neighbourhood the graphic and painterly talents revealed here”.

THE SCENE

For the underground scene, nightclubs offered a vital space for connection and inspiration, where Basquiat went to see and to be seen. At the Mudd Club, films were screened, fashion shows were staged, a roster of No Wave bands played and DJs spun an eclectic mix of funk and punk records on a sound system set up by British musician and composer Brian Eno. As *People* magazine described, this was where “New York’s fly-by-night crowd of punks, posers and the ultra-hip ... flaunt its manic chic”. Basquiat could be found there almost nightly. The scene was captured by the artist Maripol on Polaroid: from Klaus Nomi to Grace Jones, Andy Warhol, and Madonna.

When the Mudd Club closed in 1983, it was quickly followed by the opening of Area, which became famed for its themed parties. Basquiat was a regular guest and DJ, creating an installation for the *Art* night in 1985 and designing the invitation for his joint 25th birthday party with founder Eric Goode in December that year.

A similar fusion of art and party was the Canal Zone, a 5000 square foot loft on Canal Street, rented by the British artist Stan Peskett. Basquiat met many friends and future collaborators

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there, notably Fab 5 Freddy, Michael Holman (later a fellow co-founder of the band Gray) and Jennifer Stein, an artist working as an apprentice to Peskett. Stein and Basquiat collaborated on making postcards together: dividing a sheet of paper into four, creating compositions in each quarter, colour photocopying the sheet, spray-mounting it onto cardboard and then cutting it into individual postcards. They drew inspiration for their collages from their surroundings: street detritus, newspaper headlines, cigarette butts, advertisements. Colour photocopying was relatively new – Xerox released the first electrostatic colour copiers in 1973 – and they frequently used the machine at Jamie Canvas art supply store.

BEAT BOP

A vital force in 1980s New York was a new movement known as hip-hop. In the late 1970s, Fab 5 Freddy played Basquiat cassette recordings of live rap performances from parties in the South Bronx and Harlem. He also introduced him to emerging figures from this scene, including experimental artist-musician Rammellzee and graffiti artist Toxic.

In November 1982, Basquiat made an extended trip to California, while preparing for his 1983 show at Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles. Rammellzee and Toxic came to join him on the West Coast, jokingly referring to themselves as the “Hollywood Africans” in reference to the inescapable racism in the film industry. Back in New York, Basquiat and Rammellzee produced the single *Beat Bop* (1983). Originally released as a limited test pressing, the record features K-Rob and Rammellzee on vocals, and was produced on Basquiat’s one-time Tartown record label. He also produced the cover art for the sleeve, featuring anatomical drawings and his iconic crown. Over ten minutes long, the track is typical of early rap records, achieving an experimental and abstract sound.

WARHOL

Like many artists of his generation, Basquiat greatly admired Andy Warhol. As a teenager, he treasured his copy of *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (1975). Their first encounter was in 1979, when Basquiat spied Warhol and curator Henry Geldzahler having lunch in the SoHo restaurant WPA and summoned the courage to show them his work. While Geldzahler dismissed him as “too young”, Warhol bought one of his postcards for a dollar.

On 4 October 1982, art dealer and collector Bruno Bischofberger took Basquiat to visit Warhol’s Factory for the first time. Basquiat rushed back to his Crosby Street studio to paint a dual portrait, *Dos Cabezas*, which captures a likeness of both artists: Warhol with his wild wig and Basquiat with his crown of dreadlocks. Much to Warhol’s delight, Basquiat delivered it back two hours later, still dripping with paint. In 1983, Warhol leased Basquiat an apartment at 57 Great Jones Street and, at Bischofberger’s suggestion, the pair began collaborating – first with Italian artist Francesco Clemente, and then alone.

In September 1985 many of these collaborations were exhibited at Tony Shafrazi Gallery. A harsh review in *The New York Times* dismissed Basquiat as Warhol’s “mascot”, demonstrating a common misconception of the pair. In fact they shared a remarkable friendship. Basquiat convinced Warhol to return to painting by hand, while he started to use the silkscreen technique for which Warhol was famous.

SELF-PORTRAIT

Basquiat was inspired by the creative possibilities of identity. The name Aaron, for example, which is written on a number of early works, could connect to the black baseball player Hank Aaron (who beat Babe Ruth's home run record in 1974). But Basquiat may also have been referencing the black antihero of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and the brother of Moses in the Old Testament, who frees the Israelites from servitude.

When asked in an interview about the figures in his paintings, Basquiat was clear that "a lot of them are self-portraits", though in a number of different guises. In *Untitled* (1982), painted for his first solo exhibition at Annina Nosei Gallery in March 1982, a boxing figure, with fist held aloft, is depicted with a skull-like head, reminiscent of the Voodoo spirit-god Baron Samedi. These powerful, existential figures were followed by several more direct self-portraits from 1983 to 1984.

Basquiat mocked the art world's tendency to reduce artists to their biography (date of birth, schooling, influences), but he was also self-conscious of his youth and the stereotyping of black artists. He questioned the relationship between an artist's identity and their reception, probing the renewed fixation on celebrity in 1980s New York. As Rene Ricard wrote in his article on Basquiat, "one must become the iconic representation of oneself in this town".

BEBOP

Music was a powerful source of inspiration for Basquiat, and he rarely worked without something playing in the studio. The cultural historian Robert Farris Thompson recalled him creating a single collage to the soundtrack of "four styles of jazz – free, mambo inflected, hard bop, and, at the end, fabulous early bop". Although his tastes were diverse – ranging from David Byrne to Donna Summer to Bach – his paintings and drawings were dominated by the history of black jazz musicians and his hero Charlie Parker in particular. Parker was instrumental in the development of "bebop", referenced in the title of the one record Basquiat produced in 1983, *Beat Bop*.

Basquiat's works abound with references to his collection of jazz and blues (among the more than 3000 records that he owned) as well as the library of books that he collected on the subject. His obsession was such that he would trade paintings for rare blues and bebop LPs. He cherished Ross Russell's biography *Bird Lives! The High Life and Hard Times of Charlie "Yardbird" Parker* (1973) so dearly that he kept a box of copies in his studio to gift to friends. Frank Driggs and Harris Lewine's publication *Black Beauty, White Heat: A Pictorial History of Classic Jazz, 1920–1950* (1982) was also an important source.

The musicians whose lives and music Basquiat admired and addressed suffered extreme racial prejudice during their lifetimes. As well as serving as tributes to these artists, his compositions offer a critique of their treatment in society.

NOTEBOOKS

Basquiat populated the pages of his notebooks with poems and word experiments, almost always writing in neat capitalised lettering, as if he intended for them to be seen. Here was a space to

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craft enigmatic phrases imbued with poetic rhythm, such as FAMOUS NEGRO ATHELETES – three stark words, the last deliberately misspelt to suggest a possible pronunciation.

His interest in the musicality of text is evident in many of these works, some of which are even labelled as a PSALM or PRAYER. The word psalm comes from the Greek psalmoi, which can be defined as instrumental music and, by extension, the words that accompany music. When filming *Downtown 81*, a portrayal of New York's downtown scene featuring Basquiat in the lead role, the artist performed a reading of the opening verses of Genesis, which connects to his love of rhetoric, from the Bible to the Beats. Juxtaposed against these compositions are jotted names and telephone numbers, mostly in the back of the notebooks, indicating their functional use too.

In 1981, Basquiat was living with his bandmate Nick Taylor at 39 East 1st Street on the Lower East Side. He asked Taylor and writer Rene Ricard to certify the authenticity of one of his many notebooks, two of which are presented here. Ricard wrote that “this book is absolutely and uniquely the product of Jean-Michel’s hand” and dated it 6 September 1981. Written more than a month before Basquiat’s first US solo exhibition at Annina Nosei Gallery, the certification shows the humour and confidence he had in his artistic ability as well as the significance of these notebooks to his wider practice.

ENCYCLOPAEDIA

Basquiat liked to sample from an extraordinary array of material. As he described: “I get my facts from books, stuff on atomizers, the blues, ethyl alcohol, geese in Egyptian glyphs”. Delighting in the clash between supposedly “high” and “low” culture, he assembled an arsenal of words, images and symbols that connected to his favourite subject matter, whether ancient myth, cartoons or Beat poetry.

Books had a particular appeal, perhaps because of the authority they possessed for an artist who was self-taught. This status was a badge of honour, as seen in the 1983 work on paper *Untitled (World Famous)*, in which he proudly announces, like a certificate, his THESIS in VARIOUS STUDIES OF HUMAN ANATOMY AND WORLD HISTORY, signed with his classic copyright symbol.

Many of the paintings that Basquiat made for and immediately after his exhibition at the Fun Gallery in November 1982 (widely considered to be his most successful show) are gathered here alongside a selection of the books that inspired them. Working against the backdrop of semiotics, the study of signs and their interpretation, Basquiat was obsessed with symbols and the question of how meaning is conveyed. Displaying some of his beloved books, such as his original copy of *Leonardo da Vinci* or Henry Dreyfuss’ *Symbol Sourcebook*, allows us to decode his complex fields of reference.

ART HISTORY

Basquiat drew upon a collection of artistic heroes. While growing up in New York, he visited museums with his mother Matilde, and he remained an avid exhibition-goer. The retrospective of the late abstract expressionist Cy Twombly at the Whitney in 1979 had a formative influence, and he attended the controversial *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* in 1984 both at MoMA and when it

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travelled to the Dallas Museum of Art. He was also a frequent visitor to New York's vast Metropolitan Museum, making drawings directly from its collections.

Basquiat took it upon himself to consume the mainstream "canon" of western art, but he also looked beyond this conventional narrative. He owned a copy of H. W. Janson's *History of Art*, as well as Burchard Brentjes' *African Rock Art* (1969) and Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1984), often taking inspiration from their pages. He had an extensive collection of artist books and catalogues that he used as source material, some of which are displayed here.

Like his taste in music, Basquiat's art historical references were eclectic, encompassing the Venus of Willendorf, African masks, Leonardo da Vinci, Titian, Édouard Manet, Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and African American folk artists Sam Doyle and Bill Traylor. What may connect these diverse figures for Basquiat is an interest in the idea of a signature artistic style and a determination to acknowledge the importance and influence of non-Western art.

THE SCREEN

In 1985 a British film crew shot footage of Basquiat drawing in front of the television. Crouched over reams of paper with a tool kit of drawing supplies, the artist translated the imagery on screen into frenzied drawings, shown nearby. This raptured response was indicative of Basquiat's way of working – as he reflected, "I'm usually in front of the television. I have to have some source material around me to work off."

Basquiat embraced the moving image in all its forms, including early Hollywood classics by Alfred Hitchcock; cartoons such as *Popeye* and *Felix the Cat*; sci-fi films like *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (1961); David Lynch's surreal work; and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which he apparently saw at the cinema ten times in one week. He surrounded himself with his favourite footage, amassing over a 1000 videotapes at a time when a home video set-up was incredibly rare.

Basquiat was particularly interested in the complex histories of film and television. The word VITAPHONE appears on many of his works, referencing the pioneering sound-disc technology for "talkies". He became obsessed with the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, the first feature film to use synchronised dialogue, starring white actor Al Jolson in "blackface". Basquiat understood the power of television and cinema to capture collective consciousness, remaining acutely critical of the explicit racism in these areas of popular culture.

DOWNTOWN 81

At the Mudd Club, Basquiat met Glenn O'Brien, who was known for his music column for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine, as well as for his show TV Party. O'Brien was writing a script for a feature film about the downtown scene and he decided that Basquiat should play the lead role.

Produced by Maripol and directed by Edo Bertoglio, the film would be based on a day in the life of a down-and-out artist, enriched by a live musical soundtrack from Mudd Club favourites including the Lounge Lizards and Kid Creole and the Coconuts, with a few whimsical touches, such as a cameo appearance from Blondie's Debbie Harry as a fairytale princess. Originally titled *New York*

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Beat, the film faced financial struggles for years before being released as *Downtown 81* in 2000. Because the original dialogue audio was lost, the actor and musician Saul Williams dubbed Basquiat's voice.

Today, the film survives as a remarkable document of the run-down city that gave rise to the vibrancy of downtown culture. The story was also uncannily prescient. When shooting began in December 1980, Basquiat was 19 years old and had only exhibited a single work. The canvases that were bought for him to work on as props for the film became some of his earliest paintings, while the production office at 54 Great Jones Street became his first makeshift studio, directly opposite the loft at 57 Great Jones Street that he would rent from Andy Warhol at the height of his career.