



Jean-Michel Basquiat: Charles the First, 1982, acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas, triptych 78 by 62 1/2 inches overall. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.

Altars of Sacrifice: Re-membering Basquiat

A long-overdue retrospective of the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat prompts the author to reconsider this widely misunderstood artist as a perspicacious critic of the white male art world—a world that accorded him such an ambiguous welcome.

BY BELL HOOKS

Is your all on the altar of sacrifice laid? —Black church song

At the opening of the Basquiat exhibition at the Whitney last fall, I wandered through the crowd talking to the folks about the art. I had just one question. It was about emotional responses to the work. I asked, what did people feel looking at Basquiat's paintings? No one I talked with answered the question. They went off on tangents, said what they liked about him, recalled meetings, generally talked about the show, but something seemed to stand in the way, preventing them from spontaneously articulating feelings the work evoked. If art moves us—touches our spirit—it is not easily forgotten. Images will reappear in our heads against our will. I often think that many of the works that are canonically labeled "great" are simply those that lingered longest in individual memory. And that they lingered because while looking at them someone was moved, touched, taken to another place, momentarily born again.

Those folks who are not moved by Basquiat's work are usually unable to think of it as "great" or even "good" art. Certainly this response seems to characterize much of what mainstream art critics think about Basquiat. Unmoved, they are unable to speak meaningfully about the work. Often with no subtlety or tact, they "diss" the work by obsessively focusing on Basquiat's life or the development of his career, all the while insisting that they are in the best possible position to judge its value and significance. (A stellar example of this tendency is Adam Gopnik's piece in the Nov. 9 issue of the *New Yorker*.¹) Undoubtedly it is a difficult task to determine the worth and value of a painter's life and/or work if one cannot get close enough to feel anything, if indeed one can only stand at a distance.

Ironically, though Basquiat spent much of his short adult life trying to get close to significant white folks in the established art world, he consciously produced art that was a *vattier*, a wall between him and that world. Like a secret chamber that can only be opened and entered by those who can decipher hidden codes, Basquiat's painting challenges folks who think that by merely looking they can "see." Calling attention to this aspect of Basquiat's style, Robert Storr has written, "Everything about his work is knowing, and much is *about* knowing."²



Cabeza, 1982, acrylic and oil paintstick on blanket stretched over wood, 66½ by 60 inches. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.



Irony of a Negro Policeman, 1981, acrylic and oil paintstick on wood, 72 by 48 inches. Collection Dan and Jeanne Fauci.



Boy and Dog in a Johnnypump, 1982, acrylic, oil paintstick and spray paint on canvas, 94 1/2 by 165 1/2 inches. Courtesy Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich.

Yet the work resists “knowing,” offers none of the loose and generous hospitality Basquiat was willing to freely give as a person.

Designed to be a closed door, Basquiat’s work holds no warm welcome for those who approach it with a narrow Eurocentric gaze. That gaze which can only recognize Basquiat if he is in the company of Warhol or some other highly visible white figure. That gaze which can value him only if he can be seen as part of a continuum of contemporary American art with a genealogy traced through white males: Pollock, de Kooning, Rauschenberg, Twombly and on to Andy. Rarely does anyone connect Basquiat’s work to traditions in African-American art history. While it is obvious that he was influenced and inspired by the work of established white male artists, the content of his work does not neatly converge with theirs. Even when Basquiat can be placed stylistically in the exclusive, white male art club that denies entry to most black artists, his subject matter—his content—always separates him once again, and defamiliarizes him.

It is the content of his work that serves as a barrier, challenging the Eurocentric gaze that commodifies, appropriates and celebrates. In

keeping with the codes of that street culture he loved so much, Basquiat’s work is in your face. It confronts different eyes in different ways. Looking at the work from a Eurocentric perspective, one sees and values only those aspects that mimic familiar white Western artistic traditions. Looking at the work from a more inclusive standpoint, we are all better able to see the dynamism springing from the convergence, contact and conflict of varied traditions. Many artistic black folks I know, including myself, celebrate this inclusive dimension of Basquiat, a dimension emphasized in an insightful discussion of his life and work by his close friend, the artist and rapper Fred Braithwaite (a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy). Braithwaite acknowledges the sweetness of their artistic bonding, and says that it had to do with their shared openness to any influence, the pleasure they took in talking to one another “about other painters as well as about the guys painting on the trains.”³

Basquiat was in no way secretive about the fact that he was influenced and inspired by the work of white artists. It is the multiple other sources of inspiration and influence that are submerged, lost, when critics are obsessed with seeing him as solely connected to a white

Western artistic continuum. These other elements are lost precisely because they are often not seen, or if seen, not understood. When art critic Thomas McEvilley suggests that “this black artist was doing exactly what classical-Modernist white artists such as Picasso and Georges Braque had done: deliberately echoing a primitive style,” he erases all of Basquiat’s distinct connections to a cultural and ancestral memory that linked him directly to “primitive” traditions.⁴ This then allows McEvilley to make the absurd suggestion that Basquiat was “behaving like white men who think they are behaving like black men,” rather than understand that Basquiat was grappling with both the pull of a genealogy that is fundamentally “black” (rooted in African diasporic “primitive” and “high art” traditions) and a fascination with white Western traditions. Articulating the distance separating traditional Eurocentric art from his own history and destiny and from the collective fate of diasporic black artists and black people, Basquiat’s paintings testify.

To bear witness in his work, Basquiat struggled to utter the unspeakable. Prophetically called, he engaged in an extend-

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ed artistic elaboration of a politics of dehumanization. In his work, colonization of the black body and mind is marked by the anguish of abandonment, estrangement, dismemberment and death. Red paint drips like blood on his untitled painting of a black female, identified by a sign that reads “Detail of Maid from ‘Olympia.’” A dual critique is occurring here. First, the critique of Western imperialism and then the critique of the way in which imperialism makes itself heard, the way it is reproduced in culture and art. This image is ugly and grotesque. That is exactly how it should be. For what Basquiat unmasks is the ugliness of those traditions. He takes the Eurocentric valuation of the great and beautiful and demands that we acknowledge the brutal reality it masks.

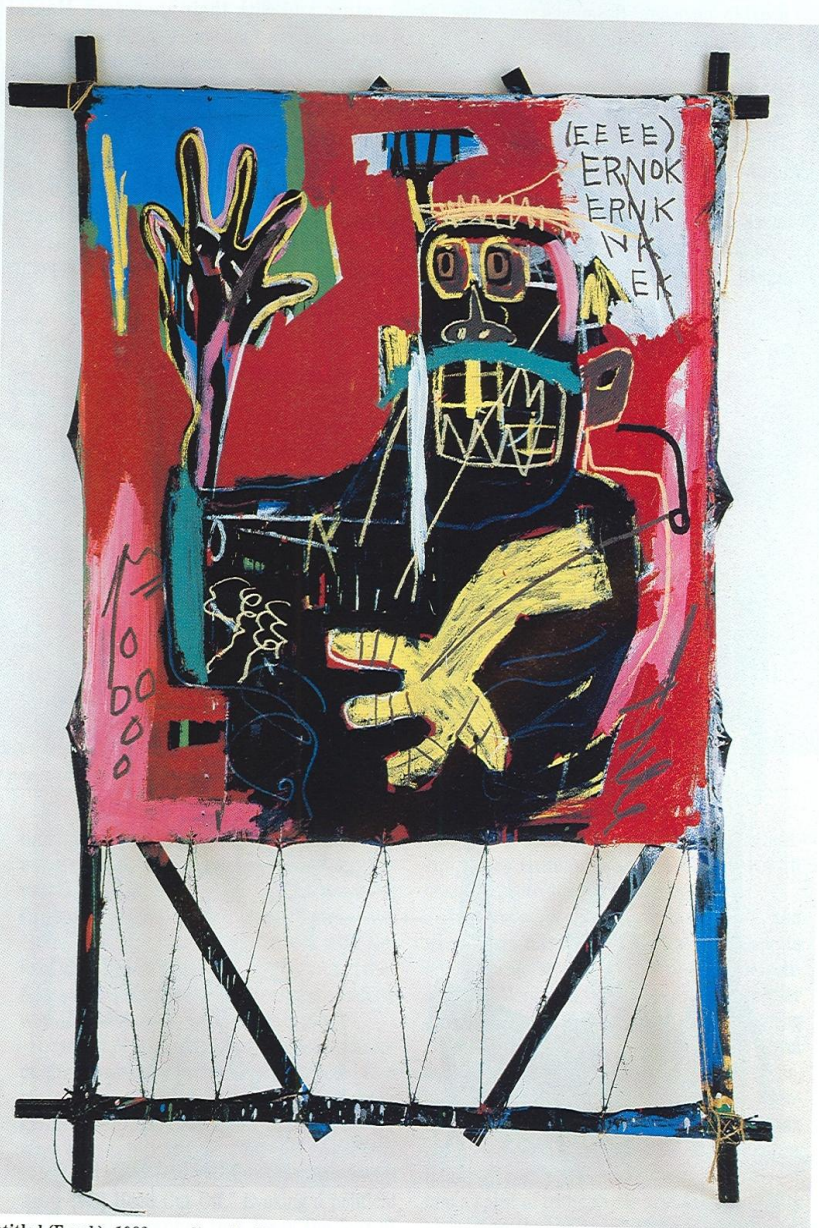
The “ugliness” conveyed in Basquiat paintings is not solely the horror of colonizing whiteness; it is the tragedy of black complicity and betrayal. Works like *Irony of a Negro Policeman* (1981) and *Quality Meats for the Public* (1982) document this stance. The images are nakedly violent. They speak of dread, of terror, of being torn apart, ravished. Commodified, appropriated, made to “serve” the interests of white masters, the black body as Basquiat shows it is incomplete, not fulfilled, never a full image. And even when he is “calling out” the work of black stars—sports figures, entertainers—there is still the portrayal of incompleteness, and the message that complicity negates. These works suggest that assimilation and participation in a bourgeois white paradigm can lead to a process of self-objectification that is just as dehumanizing as any racist assault by white culture. Content to be only what the oppressors want, this black image can never be fully self-actualized. It must always be represented as fragmented. Expressing a firsthand knowledge of the way assimilation and objectification lead to isolation, Basquiat’s black male figures stand alone and apart. They are not whole people.

It is much too simplistic a reading to see works like *Jack Johnson* (1982) *Untitled* (*Sugar Ray Robinson*), 1982, and the like, as solely celebrating black culture. Appearing always in these paintings as half-formed or

somehow mutilated, the black male body becomes, iconographically, a sign of lack and absence. This image of incompleteness mirrors those in works that more explicitly critique white imperialism. The painting *Native Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari* (1982) graphically evokes images of incomplete blackness. With wicked wit, Basquiat states in the lower right-hand corner of the work, “I won’t even mention gold, (oro),” as though he needed to remind onlookers of a conscious interrogating strategy

behind the skeletal, cartoonlike images.

In Basquiat’s work, flesh on the black body is almost always falling away. Like skeletal figures in the Australian aboriginal bark painting described by Robert Edward (X-ray paintings, in which the artist depicts external features as well as the internal organs of animals, humans, and spirits, in order to emphasize “that there is more to a living thing than external appearances”⁵), these figures have been worked down to the bone. To do justice to this work, then, our gaze must do more than reflect



Untitled (Ernok), 1982, acrylic, oil, oil paintstick on canvas stretched with twine on wood support, 83½ by 60 inches. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.

on surface appearances. Daring us to probe the heart of darkness, to move our eyes beyond the colonizing gaze, the paintings ask that we hold in our memory the bones of the dead while we consider the world of the black immediate, the familiar.

To see and understand these paintings, one must be willing to accept the tragic dimensions of black life. In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin declared that "for the horrors" of black life "there has been almost no language." He insisted that it was the privacy of black experience that needed "to be recognized in language." Basquiat's work gives that private anguish artistic expression.

Stripping away surfaces, Basquiat confronts us with the naked black image. There is no "fleshy" black body to exploit in his work, for that body is diminished, vanishing. Those who long to be seduced by that black body must look elsewhere. It is fitting that the skeletal figures displayed again and again in Basquiat's work resemble those

depicted in Gillies Turlle's book *The Art of the Maasai*.⁶ For both Maasai art and Basquiat's work delineate the violent erasure of a people, their culture and traditions. This erasure is rendered all the more problematic when artifacts of that "vanishing culture" are commodified to enhance the esthetics of those perpetrating the erasure.

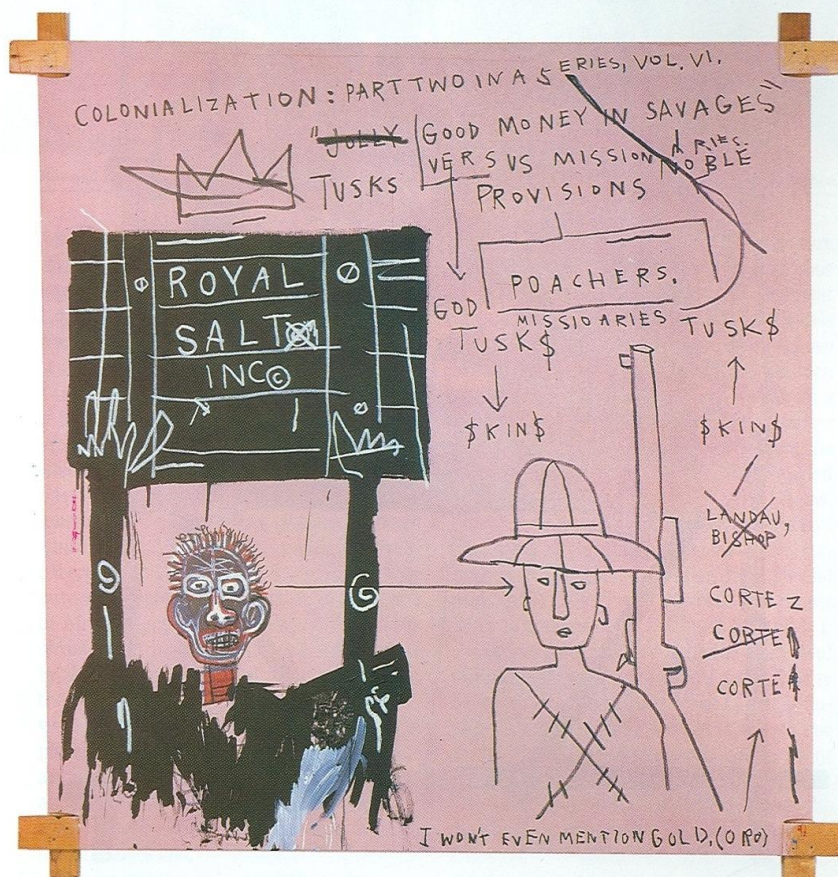
The world of Maasai art is a world of bones. Choosing not to work with pigments when making paintings or decorative art, the Maasai use bones from hunting animals in their art to give expression to their relationship with nature and with their ancestors. Maasai artists believe that bones speak—tell all the necessary cultural information, take the place of history books. Bones become the repository of personal and political history. Maasai art survives as a living memory of the distinctiveness of a black culture that flourished most vigorously when it was undiscovered by the white man. It is this privacy that white imperialism violates and destroys. Turlle emphasizes that while the bones are "intense focus points

For Basquiat, the crown is not an unambiguous image. While positively evoking the longing for glory and power, it connects that desire to men's dehumanized capacity to commit any act that will lead to the top.

to prime minds into a deeper receptive state," this communicative power is lost on those who are unable to hear bones speak.

Even though socially Basquiat did not "diss" those white folks who could not move beyond surface appearances (stereotypes of entertaining darkies, pet Negroes and the like), in his work he serves notice on that liberal white public. Calling out their inability to let the notion of racial superiority go, even though it limits and restricts their vision, he mockingly deconstructs their investment in traditions and canons, exposing a collective gaze that is wedded to an esthetic of white supremacy. The painting *Obnoxious Liberals* (1982) shows us a ruptured history by depicting a mutilated black Samson in chains and then a more contemporary black figure, no longer naked but fully clothed in formal attire, who wears on his body a sign that boldly states "Not For Sale." That sign is worn to ward off the overture of the large, almost overbearing white figure in the painting. Despite the incredible energy Basquiat displayed playing the how-to-be-a-famous-artist-in-the-shortest-amount-of-time game—courting the right crowd, making connections, networking his way into high "white" art places—he chose to make his work a space where that process of commodification is critiqued, particularly as it pertains to the black body and soul. Unimpressed by white exoticization of the "Negro," he mocks this process in works that announce an "undiscovered genius of the mississippi delta," forcing us to question who makes such discoveries and for what reason.

Throughout his work, Basquiat links imperialism to patriarchy, to a phallogocentric view of the universe where male egos become attached to a myth of heroism. The image of the crown, a recurring symbol in his work, calls to and mocks the Western obsession with being on top, the ruler. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson suggests that the icon of the crown reflects Basquiat's ongoing fascination with the subject matter of "royalty, heroism, and the streets."⁷ McEvilley interprets the crown similarly, seeing it as representative of a "sense of double identity, a royal selfhood somehow lost but dimly remembered."⁸ He



Native Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari, 1982, Acrylic, oil and oil paintstick on canvas with wood supports, 72 inches square. Collection Francesco Pellizzi.



Crown's (Peso Neto), 1981, acrylic, oil paintstick and paper collage on canvas, 72 by 92 inches. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Thomas E. Worrell, Jr.

explains that "in Basquiat's oeuvre, the theme of divine or royal exile was brought down to earth or historicized by the concrete reality of the African diaspora. The king that he once was in another world (and that he would be again when he returned there) could be imagined concretely as a Watusi warrior or Egyptian pharaoh."⁹

There is no doubt that Basquiat was personally obsessed with the idea of glory and fame, but this obsession is also the subject of intense self-interrogation in his paintings. Both Thompson and McEvilley fail to recognize Basquiat's mocking, bitter critique of his own longing for fame. In Basquiat's work the crown is not an unambiguous image. While it may positively speak the longing for glory and power, it connects that desire to dehumaniza-

tion, to the general willingness on the part of males globally to commit any unjust act that will lead them to the top. In the painting *Crown's (Peso Neto)*, 1981, black figures wear crowns but are sharply contrasted with the lone white figure wearing a crown, for it is that figure that looms large, overseeing a shadowy world, as well as the world of black glory.

In much of Basquiat's work the struggle for cultural hegemony in the West is depicted as a struggle between men. Racialized, it is a struggle between black men and white men over who will dominate. In *Charles the First* (1982), we are told "Most Young Kings Get Thier [sic] Head Cut Off." Evoking a political and sexual metaphor that fuses the fear of castration with the longing to assert dominance, Basquiat makes it clear that black

masculinity is irrevocably linked to white masculinity by virtue of a shared obsession with conquest, both sexual and political.

Historically, competition between black and white males has been highlighted in the sports arena. Basquiat extends that field of competition into the realm of the cultural (the poster of him and Andy Warhol duking it out in boxing attire and gloves is not as innocent and playful as it appears to be), and the territory is music, in particular jazz. Basquiat's work calls attention to the innovative power of black male jazz musicians, whom he reveres as creative father figures. Their presence and work embody for him a spirit of triumph. He sees their creativity exceeding that of their white counterparts. They enable him not only to give birth to himself as black genius but also to accept the

Riding with Death haunts my imagination, evoking images of riding and being ridden, as a process of revelatory exorcism. It juxtaposes the paradigm of ritual sacrifice with that of recovery and return.

wisdom of an inclusive standpoint.

Braithwaite affirms that Basquiat felt there was a cultural fusion and synthesis in the work of black male jazz musicians that mirrored his own aspirations. This connection is misunderstood and belittled by Gopnik in his essay "Madison Avenue Primitive" (note the derision the title conveys) when he arrogantly voices his indignation at Basquiat's work being linked with that of great black jazz musicians. With the graciousness and high-handedness of an old-world paternalistic colonizer, Gopnik declares that he can accept that the curator of the Basquiat show attempted to place him in a high-art tradition: "No harm, perhaps, is done by this, or by the endless comparisons in the catalogue of Basquiat to Goya, Picasso, and other big names." But, Gopnik fumes, "What is unforgivable is the endless comparisons in the catalogue essays of Basquiat to the masters of American jazz."¹⁰

Gopnik speaks about Basquiat's own attempts to play jazz and then proceeds to tell us what a lousy musician Basquiat "really" was. He misses the point. Basquiat never assumed that his musical talent was the same as that of jazz greats. His attempt to link his work to black jazz musicians was not an assertion of his own musical or artistic ability. It was a declaration of respect for the creative genius of jazz. He was awed by all the avant-garde dimensions of the music that affirm fusion, mixing, improvisation. And he felt a strong affinity with jazz artists in the shared will to push against the boundaries of conventional (white) artistic tastes. Celebrating that sense of connection in his work, Basquiat creates a black artistic community that can include him. In reality, he did not live long enough to search out such a community and claim a space of belonging. The only space he could claim was that of shared fame.

Fame, symbolized by the crown, is offered as the only possible path to subjectivity for the black male artist. To be un-famous is to be rendered invisible. Therefore, one is without choice. You either enter the phallogocentric battlefield of representation and play

the game or you are doomed to exist outside history. Basquiat wanted a place in history, and he played the game. In trying to make a place for himself—for blackness—in the established art world, he assumed the role of explorer/colonizer. Wanting to make an intervention with his life and work, he inverted the image of the white colonizer.

Basquiat journeyed into the heart of whiteness. White territory he named as a savage and brutal place. The journey is embarked upon with no certainty of return. Nor is there any way to know what you will find or who you will be at journey's end. Braithwaite declares: "The unfortunate thing was, once one did figure out how to get into the art world, it was like, Well, shit, where am I? You've pulled off this amazing feat, you've waltzed your way right into the thick of it, and probably faster than anybody in history, but once you got in you were standing around wondering where you were. And then, Who's here with me?"¹¹ Recognizing art-world fame to be a male game, one that he could play, working the stereotypical darky image, playing the trickster, Basquiat understood that he was risking his life—that this journey was all about sacrifice.

What must be sacrificed in relation to oneself is that which has no place in whiteness. To be seen by the white art world, to be known, Basquiat had to remake himself, to create from the perspective of the white imagination. He had to become both native and nonnative at the same time—to assume the blackness defined by the white imagination and the blackness that is not unlike whiteness. As anthropologist A. David Napier explains, "Strangers within our midst are indeed the strangest of all—not because they are so alien, but because they are so close to us. As so many legends of 'wildmen,' wandering Jews, and feral children remind us, strangers must be like us but different. They cannot be completely exotic, for, were they so, we could not recognize them."¹²

For the white art world to recognize Basquiat, he had to sacrifice those parts of himself they would not be interested in or fascinated by. Black but assimilated, Basquiat claimed the space of the exotic as though it were a new frontier, waiting only to be colonized. He made of that cultural space within whiteness (the land of the exotic) a location where he would be re-membered in history even as he simultaneously created art that unsparingly interrogates such mutilation and self-distortion. As cultural critic Greg Tate asserts in "Nobody Loves a Genius Child," for Basquiat "making it . . . meant going down in history, ranked beside the Great White Fathers of Western painting in the eyes of the major critics, museum cura-

tors and art historians who ultimately determine such things."¹³

Willingly making the sacrifice in no way freed Basquiat from the pain of that sacrifice. The pain erupts in the private space of his work. It is amazing that so few critics discuss configurations of pain in Basquiat's work, emphasizing instead its playfulness, its celebratory qualities. This reduces his painting to spectacle, making the work a mere extension of the minstrel show that Basquiat frequently turned his life into. Private pain could be explored in art because he knew that a certain world "caught" looking would not see it, would not even expect to find it there. Francesco Pellizzi begins to speak about this pain in his essay, "Black and White All Over: Poetry and Desolation Painting," when he identifies Basquiat's offerings as "self-immolations, Sacrifices of the Self" which do not emerge "from desire, but from the desert of hope."¹⁴ Rituals of sacrifice stem from the inner workings of spirit that inform the outer manifestation.

Basquiat's paintings bear witness, mirror this almost spiritual understanding. They expose and speak the anguish of sacrifice. A text of absence and loss, they echo the sorrow of what has been given over and given up. McEvilley's insight that "in its spiritual aspect, [Basquiat's] subject matter is orphic—that is, it relates to the ancient myth of the soul as a deity lost, wandering from its true home, and temporarily imprisoned in a degradingly limited body," appropriately characterizes that anguish.¹⁵ What limits the body in Basquiat's work is the construction of maleness as lack. To be male, caught up in the endless cycle of conquest, is to lose out in the realm of fulfillment.

Significantly, there are few references in Basquiat's work that connect him with a world of blackness that is female or to a world of influences and inspirations that are female. That Basquiat, for the most part, disavows a connection to the female in his work is a profound and revealing gap that illuminates and expands our vision of him and his work. Simplistic pseudo-psychoanalytic readings of his life and work lead critics to suggest that Basquiat was a perpetual boy always in search of the father. In his essay for the Whitney catalogue, critic Rene Ricard insists: "Andy represented to Jean the 'Good White Father' Jean had been searching for since his teenage years. Jean's mother has always been a mystery to me. I never met her. She lives in a hospital, emerging infrequently, to my knowledge. Andy did her portrait. She and Andy were the most important people in Jean's life."¹⁶

Since Basquiat was attached to his natural



Riding with Death, 1988, acrylic and oil paintstick on linen, 98 by 114 inches. Collection Francesco Pellizzi. All works this article © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

father, Gerard, as well as surrounded by other male mentor figures, it seems unlikely that the significant "lack" in his life was an absent father. Perhaps it was the presence of too many fathers—paternalistic cannibals who overshadowed and demanded repression of attention for and memory of the mother or any feminine/female principle—that led Basquiat to be seduced by the metaphoric ritual sacrifice of his fathers, a sort of phallic

murder that led to a death of the soul.

The loss of his mother, a shadowy figure trapped in a world of madness that caused her to be shut away, symbolically abandoned and abandoning, may have been the psychic trauma that shaped Basquiat's work. Andy Warhol's portrait of Matilde Basquiat shows us the smiling image of a black Puerto Rican woman. It was this individual, playfully identified by her son as "bruja" (witch), who first

saw in Jean-Michel the workings of artistic genius and possibility. His father remembers, "His mother got him started and she pushed him. She was actually a very good artist."¹⁷ Jean-Michel also gave testimony, "I'd say my mother gave me all the primary things. The art came from her."¹⁸ Yet this individual who gave him the lived texts of ancestral knowledge as well as that of the white West is an

continued on page 117

Basquiat

continued from page 75

absent figure in the personal scrapbook of Basquiat as successful artist. It is as if his inability to reconcile the force and power of femaleness with phallogocentrism led to the erasure of female presence in his work.

Conflicted in his own sexuality, Basquiat is nevertheless represented in the Whitney catalogue and elsewhere as the stereotypical black stud randomly fucking white women. No importance is attached by critics to the sexual ambiguity that was so central to the Basquiat diva persona. Even while struggling to come to grips with himself as a subject rather than an object, he consistently relied on old patriarchal notions of male identity despite the fact that he critically associated maleness with imperialism, conquest, greed, endless appetite and, ultimately, death.

To be in touch with senses and emotions beyond conquest is to enter the realm of the mysterious. This is the oppositional location Basquiat longed for yet could not reach. This is the feared location, associated not with meaningful resistance but with madness, loss and invisibility. Basquiat's paintings evoke a sense of dread. But the terror there is not for the world as it is, the decentered, disintegrating West, that familiar terrain of death. No, the dread is for that unimagined space, that location where one can live without the "same old shit."

Confined within a process of naming, of documenting violence against the black male self, Basquiat was not able to chart the journey of escape. Napier asserts that "in naming, we relieve ourselves of the burden of actually considering the implication of how a different way of thinking can completely transform the conditions that make for meaningful social relations."¹⁹ A master deconstructivist, Basquiat was not then able to imagine a concrete world of collective solidarities that could alter in any way the status quo. McEvilley sees Basquiat's work as an "iconographic celebration of the idea of the end of the world, or of a certain paradigm of it."²⁰ While the work clearly calls out this disintegration, the mood of celebration is never sustained. Although Basquiat graphically portrays the disintegration of the West, he mourns the impact of this collapse when it signals doom in black life. Carnavalesque, humorous, playful representations of death and decay merely mask the tragic, cover it with a thin veneer of celebration. Clinging to this veneer, folks deny that a reality exists beyond and beneath the mask.

Black gay filmmaker Marlon Riggs recently suggested that many black folks "have striven to maintain secret enclosed spaces within our

histories, within our lives, within our psyches about those things which disrupt our sense of self."²¹ Despite an addiction to masking/masquerading in his personal life, Basquiat used painting to disintegrate the public image of himself that he created and helped sustain. It is no wonder then that this work is subjected to an ongoing critique that questions its "authenticity and value." Failing to accurately represent Basquiat to that white art world that remains confident it "knew" him, critics claim and colonize the work within a theoretical apparatus of appropriation that can diffuse its power by making it always and only spectacle. That sense of "horrific" spectacle is advertised by the paintings chosen to don the covers of every publication on his work, including the Whitney catalogue.

In the conclusion to *The Art of the Maasai*, Turle asserts: "When a continent has had its people enslaved, its resources removed, and its lands colonized, the perpetrators of these actions can never agree with contemporary criticism or they would have to condemn themselves."²² Refusal to confront the necessity of potential self-condemnation makes those who are least moved by Basquiat's work insist on knowing it best. Understanding this, Braithwaite articulates the hope that Basquiat's work will be critically reconsidered, that the exhibition at the Whitney will finally compel people to "look at what he did."

But before this can happen, Braithwaite cautions, the established white art world (and I would add the Eurocentric, multiethnic viewing public) must first "look at themselves." With insight he insists: "They have to try to erase, if possible, all the racism from their hearts and minds. And then when they look at the paintings they can see the art."²³ Calling for a process of decolonization that is certainly not happening (judging from the growing mass of negative responses to the show), Braithwaite articulates the only possible cultural shift in perspective that can lay the groundwork for a comprehensive critical appreciation of Basquiat's work.

The work by Basquiat that haunts my imagination, that lingers in my memory, is *Riding with Death* (1988). Evoking images of possession, of riding and being ridden in the Haitian *voudoun* sense—as a process of exorcism, one that makes revelation, renewal and transformation possible—I feel the subversion of the sense of dread provoked by so much of Basquiat's work. In its place is the possibility that the black-and-brown figure riding the skeletal white bones is indeed "possessed." Napier invites us to consider possession as "truly an avant-garde activity, in that those in trance are empowered to go to the periphery of what is and can be known, to

explore the boundaries, and to return unharmed."²⁴ No such spirit of possession guarded Jean-Michel Basquiat in his life. Napier reports that "people in trance do not—as performance artists in the West sometimes do—leave wounded bodies in the human world."²⁵ Basquiat must go down in history as one of the wounded. Yet his art will stand as the testimony that declares with a vengeance: we are more than our pain. That is why I am most moved by the one Basquiat painting that juxtaposes the paradigm of ritual sacrifice with that of ritual recovery and return. □

1. Adam Gopnik, "Madison Avenue Primitive," *The New Yorker*, Nov. 9, 1992, pp. 137-39.
2. Robert Storr, "Two Hundred Beats per Minute," in John Cheim, ed., *Basquiat Drawings*, New York, Robert Miller, 1990, n.p.
3. Fred Braithwaite, "Jean-Michel Basquiat," *Interview*, Oct. 1992, p. 119.
4. Thomas McEvilley, "Royal Slumming: Jean-Michel Basquiat Here Below," *Artforum*, Nov. 1992, p. 95.
5. Robert Edward, *Aboriginal Bark Painting*, Adelaide, Rigby Limited, 1969, n.p.
6. Gillies Turle, *The Art of the Maasai*, New York, Knopf, 1992.
7. Robert Farris Thompson, "Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat," in Richard Marshall, ed., *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992.
8. Thomas McEvilley, "Royal Slumming," p. 96.
9. Ibid.
10. Gopnik, "Madison Avenue Primitive," p. 139.
11. Braithwaite, "Jean-Michel Basquiat," p. 123.
12. A. David Napier, "Culture as Self: The Stranger Within," in *Foreign Bodies: Performance, Art, and Symbolic Anthropology*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992, p. 147.
13. Greg Tate, "Nobody Loves a Genius Child," *Village Voice*, Nov. 14, 1989, p. 33.
14. Francesco Pellizzi, "Black and White All Over: Poetry and Desolation Painting," *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, New York, Vrej Baghoomian Gallery, 1989.
15. McEvilley, "Royal Slumming," p. 96.
16. Rene Ricard, "World Crown ©: Bodhisattva with Clenched Mudra," in Marshall, ed., *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, p. 49.
17. Gerard Basquiat, quoted in Marshall, ed., *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, p. 233.
18. Jean-Michel Basquiat, quoted in *ibid.*
19. Napier, *Foreign Bodies*, p. 51.
20. McEvilley, "Royal Slumming," p. 97.
21. Kalamu ya Salaam, "Interview with Marlon Riggs," *Black Film Review* 7, no. 3 (Fall 1992), p. 8.
22. Turle, *The Art of the Maasai*, n.p.
23. Braithwaite, "Jean-Michel Basquiat," p. 140.
24. Napier, *Foreign Bodies*, p. 69.
25. Ibid.

"Jean-Michel Basquiat," organized by Richard Marshall, was presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art [Oct. 23, 1992-Feb. 14, 1993] and at the Menil Collection, Houston [Mar. 11-May 9, 1993]. The exhibition is currently at the Des Moines Art Center, Iowa [through Aug. 15] and will travel to the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Alabama [Nov. 18, 1993-Jan. 9, 1994]. The catalogue, edited by Richard Marshall, contains essays by Dick Hebdige, Klaus Kertess, Rene Ricard, Greg Tate and Robert Farris Thompson.

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