Jean-Michel Basquiat – Gift of the Elegant Clochard

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"I'd rather have a Jean-Michel [Basquiat] than a Cy Twombly. I do not live in the classical city. My neighborhood is unsafe. Also, I want my home to look like a pile of junk to burglars."[1] So joked René Ricard in his groundbreaking piece on Jean-Michel Basquiat for *Artforum*, "The Radiant Child," in 1981. This kind of characterization of Basquiat's art as "junk" and Ricard's later description of the young artist having the affected "elegance of the clochard who lights up a *megot* with his pinkie raised" helped set the stage for the art world's problematic fascination with Basquiat as the "true voice of the ghetto."[2]

"Famous Moon King," (fig. 1)—oil and acrylic on canvas, 180 x 261 cm—was painted at the height of Basquiat's short career, in1984/85. It demonstrates a sophistication of the visual vocabulary and idiosyncratic graffiti style Basquiat was already developing in 1981. The work makes use of heterogeneous representational styles: three darkly filled-in figures with brightly outlined visible innards seem to float above a chaotic background of interpenetrative vignettes of line-drawn faces, body parts, stick figures, words and symbols. There is a logic of accumulation and appropriation to this work, consistent with the medium of graffiti, Diaspora culture, and the hoarding practices of the homeless and dispossessed. Familiarity with Basquiat's biography is fundamental to the interpretation of his work, which is as much about the elaboration of an aesthetic identity within a worn out cultural vocabulary as it is "about" anything else. This paper will offer an introduction to Basquiat's life, and an analysis of three characteristics of "Famous Moon King" relevant to much of Basquiat's work—the mythic representation of the body, the use of language (street poetics) as a site of both resistance and cynicism, and a commentary on commodification, both as

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[1] Ricard, René. "The Radiant Child." *Artforum* vol. XX, no. 4 (Dec 1981), pg. 35-43

[2] As dealer Annina Nosei refers to him in Schnabel's film.

alienating social phenomenon and empowering act of artistic self-creation. Finally, this paper will discuss Basquiat's controversial legacy, his portrayal in Julian Schnabel's biopic, and the significance of his life to understanding the place of "art" in a world of ideas and people for sale.

Born in Brooklyn to a Haitian father and Puerto Rican mother in 1960, Jean-Michel Basquiat's childhood was middle-class and troubled. Taken out of the prestigious St. Anne's school in 1971, he attended various public schools in Brooklyn, an Episcopalian school in Puerto Rico, and the alternative City-as-School high school until he dropped out at the end of his junior year. After several attempts to run away, he left home for good in 1978, living and working in an emerging hip hop and graffiti culture, tagging trains and selling painted postcards on the street. His tag, SAMO ("same old shit"), frequently underlay witty aphorisms (as in the iconic PAY FOR SOUP / BUILD A FORT / SET IT ON FIRE). He worked within an emerging hip-hop scene (visual and musical) fascinated with Black identity and with the legacies of soul and bebop musicians—several of Basquiat's works pay homage to icons of bebop like Charlie Parker.[3] Ricard's article, some gallery showings (alongside the likes of Street Art icon Keith Haring—who is suspiciously absent from Schnabel's film), and the mentorship of Andy Warhol helped launch Basquiat to superstardom. Andy Warhol, superficial and elusive King of Pop Art, served as a mentor and collaborated with the young Basquiat. Basquiat capitalized on fame quickly, but predatory dealers and an out of control social life marred by significant drug use also worn him down. By as early as 1984, his drug use and paranoia (fueled in part by the very real removal of unfinished canvases from his studio and home by greedy dealers) already worried his friends and diminished his productivity.[4] He died of a heroine overdose in 1988, at the age of 27.

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[3] Davies, Jonelle A. "Basquiat" in *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2008, pg. 150.

[4] Marshall, Richard. *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, New York: Abrams / Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992, pg. 245.

Once his artistic career had been launched, Basquiat's work became associated not only with the graffiti scene of bombers and taggers but also with a Neo-Expressionist style espoused by artists like Julian Schnabel and Francesco Clemente. These artists reacted to the gravitas and sterility of Conceptual Art and the socially disconnected froideur of Minimalism.[5] The Neo-Expressionists found inspiration in the representational paranoia of German Expressionists and the spiritual automatism of Abstract Expressionism. The interplay between exuberance and menace, the blending of the supernatural with social critique in Basquiat's work resonates with Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's famous street scenes (fig. 4). Pseudo-representational calligraphic works by Jakson Pollock, such as the "Stenographic Figure" (fig. 5), also bear a striking resemblance to the symbolic and humanoid figures in Basquiat's work. Basquiat's conceptual and aphoristic use of language can be traced back to both the work of Pop Artists like Warhol and to the eclecticism of hip hop culture: "like an emcee, Basquiat filled his art pieces with vernacular language, repeated images, and chanted words in list form, crossing out words and letters [...] to create a rhythm."[6] Basquiat also made certain cultural symbols of the African Diaspora his own, such as the voodoo gris-gris, traditional masks, and other ethnographic sources. "Famous Moon King" uses the imagery of Zimbabwean cave paintings[7], but its representational multiplicity evades simple glorification, homage, or parody. As Ricard implies, his works, including "Famous Moon King," sometimes take on the appearance of vast painterly heaps of cultural refuse, scraps woven together by a subjective associative logic impenetrable to the viewer. The accumulation of layers is composed of faces and body parts emerging from the void behind the canvas, of "silver" coins, and ritualistic abstract figures (fig. 2 and 3). Accumulation, transformation, enchantment, and multiplicity seem to govern Basquiat's eclectic aesthetic.

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[5] "Neo-Expressionism" Guggenheim Collection Online. 30 Apr. 2011 http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/show-full/movement/?search=Neo-Expressionism

[6] *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora*, pg. 150

[7] Emmerling, Leonhard. *Jean-Michel Basquiat: 1960-1988*. Cologne: Taschen, 2003, pg. 88.

The most prominent figures in "Famous Moon King" toe the line between the human, the animal, and the spiritual/supernatural. Their insides and outsides coincide on a single plane of supernatural vision—lungs, skulls, and snarling teeth are all rendered in lighter outlines over the dark silhouetted shapes of their bodies. The figures conjure violence in their aggressive faces, but it remains unclear whether they are figures of menace or protection, curses or charms. Their ambiguous forms endow them with a sacred quality, removed them from the profane everyday. Their mask-like faces seem to point towards the dangerous impenetrability of identity, an alienating game of hiding behind ritualistic. The words "FAMOUS MOON KING" label a hermaphroditic reclining figure, which appears to be ejaculating and to also have breasts (fig. 2). His large beaked bird face designates him as a sacred figure, one that draws together binary oppositions between the human and the animal, transcending rational divisions of the world. Other faces, anatomical parts penetrate the canvas, some more representational—as in the face in the top left corner expressing pathos with its wide, unaligned eyes, and open, vulnerable mouth. Outlined cartoonish figures are isolated within cars, rockets, boats, planes, pointing towards a magical interaction with modernity. Basquiat often portrayed violent archetypes like boxers and approached themes of poverty and exploitation through a magical and childish use of ALL CAPS scrawl and appropriated images.

Emerging from the graffiti scene, Basquiat was versed in the radical potential of language to transform the surface it marked. Graffiti threatens social control and hegemonic language. But tagging itself can become emptied of content, a self-conscious form of self-branding without real critical purpose. Basquiat's work seems conscious of the overuse and emptied-out, malleable content of language in a mediated age. His aphoristic language is less expressive than evocative and provocative, enacting witty failures to communicate. Basquiat used the tag "SAMO" (same old shit), a badge of anonymity and cynicism as much as of individual self-expression. But he also pointed to the symbolic weight of language by using signifiers to replace what they signify, as in the overlaying of the word "eye" over an image

of an eye (fig. 3). Morphological shorthand replaces representational forms, pointing to the image's functioning according to symbolic conventions. There's an effect of rewriting and reclaiming in "Famous Moon King," which resembles a palimpsest of graffiti-like markings. Childish doodles come head to head with absurdly arcane and incongruous words like EKPYROSIS—an ancient Greek word signifying the destruction of the cosmos (fig. 2). Elusive symbols seem to conform to an instinct of mark making more primal than any desire for communication. In his essay "Primitive Art," Georges Bataille identifies "transformation" and the liberation of "libidinous instincts" as the primary motives behind art-making, motives that remain particularly visible in art free from the limitations of representational realism.[8]

Even before the monetized stakes of the art world helped to shape Basquiat's style, he was working in a medium, graffiti, which paradoxically resists and re-enacts mass-produced packaging and commodification. As Ricard put it: "Bomb style packages itself. At its purest, it's a Tag, a perfect auto-logo, not the artists' names but their trademarks. [...] Here was, as much as it was predicated on commercial art of the past, the commercial art of the future."[9] But in the postmodern late capitalist world, this kind of self-branding, the artist for sale as much as his/her art, seems like a necessary game to play. The artist commenting on commodification inevitably commodifies himself, Warhol here acting as the classic paradigm for the postmodern artist-brand. Ricard remarked: "I think about how one must become the iconic representation of oneself if one is to outlast the vague definite indifference of the art world." Basquiat's obsession with the © symbol (present in both his tags and his large canvases) identifies a site of ownership that is inevitably contested. You can't copyright a tag, since the very act of graffiti is illegal. This paradoxical statement points to the inherent absurdity of any intellectual or artistic "property." What does it mean to own images and words? "Where do you get your words?" a reporter asks Basquiat in Julian Schnabel's biopic.

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[8] Bataille, George. "Primitive Art." In *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, ed. Jack D. Flam, Miriam Deutch. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univeristy of California Press, 2003, pg. 228-229.
[9] Ricard, pg. 39.

"Would you ask a musician where he gets his notes? From everywhere," responds the cagey Jean-Michel (Jeffrey Wright). His words may come from "everywhere," but his name alone turned them into "art" worth thousands or even millions of dollars.

Schnabel's film subtly points to the misrepresentation of Basquiat as "ghetto" by the art world, although he also perpetuates the myth by showing him living in a cardboard box in Tompkins Square Park and getting kicked out of diners for finger painting on the table with maple syrup. Schnabel portrays Basquiat as the ultimate artistic free spirit, a "radiant child" corrupted by drugs and greedy dealers but still in touch with a sense of wonder untainted by convention. It still remains unclear to what extent Basquiat was consciously exploiting stereotypes of "blackness" to titillate white audiences, or whether gallery owners pigeonholed him within a "street" style to sell more paintings.

Basquiat's art remains inseparable from the idiosyncratic persona he created and inhabited, but this inseparability may play a fundamental role in the persistence of art in a late capitalist world. What's so bad about selling art? Better to at least make and sell something of beauty, rather than more mass-produced products of alienated factory labor? Ricard seems to think so, making a fairly polemical point about how art needs to be a business, about how the "Van Goghs" of the world are an exception that hide the real truth about the artist's responsibility to get his art out there, to dialogue with his public. Rather than Schnabel's idealistic (even naive and sentimental) parable about the artist as the prince trapped in the tower creating beauty in his profound isolation, or the common assumption that "modern" art has become a "scam" foisted on the public by art world snobs, Ricard provides us with a refreshingly realistic view of art as an "honest way to make a living":

> An object of art is an honest way of making a living, and this is much a different idea from the fancier notion that art is a scam and a rip-off. The bourgeoisie have, after all, made it a scam. But you could never explain to

> someone who uses God's gift to enslave that you have used God's gift to be free.[10]

Freedom and enslavement seem like the right terms with which to approach Jean-Michel Basquiat's short and brilliant life. He burnt himself out with an intensity of vision, a hunger for fame, and a wild generosity too overwhelming to be sustainable, but the legacy he left behind through his art remains a challenging and beautiful gift.

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[10] Ricard, pg. 37.

Figure 1: Jean-Michel Basquiat "Famous Moon King," 1984/85
http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=%2BTpMdyw%2BJT87MkA6fjt5RHEoU34ofQ%3D%3D&userId=hzJA&zoomparams=

Figure 2: "Famous Moon King," detail (upper left corner)

Figure 3: "Famous Moon King," detail (bottom right corner)

Figure 4: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, "Street, Dresden," 1908
http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8D1Cdjk4RDUwLi07eDR1Q3o%3D&userId=hzJA&zoomparams=

Figure 5: Jackson Pollock, "Stenographic Figure," 1942.
http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=8D1Cdjk4RDUwLi07eTxyTnk%3D&userId=hzJA&zoomparams=