
Black and White

All Over

*Jean-
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knew in
his veins
that for
black
culture to
survive in
America
it had to
manage
neither to
be assim-
ilated by
nor to as-
similate
white
culture*

Francesco
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Poetry and

Desolation Painting

A biography of Charlie Parker, inscribed to me in return for a catalogue of a great collection of calligraphy in Chinese painting, was practically the last exchange I had with Jean-Michel Basquiat.

On that same occasion, we admired the typographic complexities of Dr. Dee's mercurial Relation of Some Spirits . . . and the quixotically haunting images of Athanasius Kircher's Mundus subterraneus. Word configurations, figures "speaking in tongues," metascientific images of the unseen (such as the hidden anatomy of the earth's entrails), the extreme refinements of a 4,000-year-old tradition of writing, as well as the "hieroglyphs" of the late English Renaissance and their philology of magic—it all seemed to interest Basquiat. This enormous hunger to absorb from the Western and Eastern past (without, however, the least inclination to be himself absorbed) existed alongside Basquiat's natural immersion in the Afro-American spiritual traditions of voodoo, santería and candomblé and in the living mythology of American Pop and its music, particularly the blues and its jazz derivations but also rock, for which he wrote lyrics (his collection of records was immense). A dominant trait, though, among these and other passions and "influences," even the more specifically artistic ones, was Basquiat's sense of rebelliousness

and freedom, with regard to the central as well as marginal forms and components of our culture. He could use and marvel at anything he thought he could learn from. And, rather unexpectedly, under the guise (or should one say protection?) of a "difficult character," a disposition both shy and singularly proud, there was a raw receptivity, as if all he came into contact with really touched him, often painfully.

It is generally believed that death puts art into perspective, that an artist's disappearance from the scene of the world allows the world to reach a deeper understanding and a more balanced judgment of his work. Even in this respect the case of Jean-Michel Basquiat may very well prove to be an exception, at least for some time to come. While he was still alive, the conflicting elements of the artist's persona provided an indispensable, if paradoxical, key to the vital intentions and artistic urgency of his work. But the paintings themselves contain many traces of Basquiat's deep personal involvement and of his strongest preferences with regard to his elders (Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly and Andy Warhol), providing threads to guide us in exploring and retracing his unique and extraordinary art.

It is only in writing these notes that I realize how difficult it is to describe Basquiat's paintings as representa-

tional objects. Just when we think we have seized something essential about them, the essence evaporates. The paintings seem to slip away right and left, despite their remarkable compositional strength—a centripetal tension between all the elements that seems to owe more to a conceptual and poetic toughness than to Basquiat's obvious gift for formal harmony.

Take the triptych Catharsis. It is dominated by the word "FORTEZZA" (strength) and a big open hand drawn in red in the central panel. A closed left fist on the left panel and the words "LEFT PAW" on the right panel balance each other on a diagonal axis; on the other diagonal, a half-open hand pointing down in the shape of an industrial tool acts as a pendant for two weights labeled "250 LBS" at either end of a bar resting on one of Basquiat's topical crowns. Three waves of black paint invade "raw" brown canvases on which graphic and word images traced in various colours dance before our eyes so that none of them can hold our attention for long. The central panel, in a much lighter brown and connected to the right panel by plain, visible hinges, radiates light.

This is one of the many paintings by Basquiat in which verbal and graphic anatomical description is prominent.

What is absent, though, is the familiar skull/self-portrait, the severed "mannequin head" (which completely takes over another extraordinary canvas, Untitled (Skull), like a sort of gigantic diorama in an Aztec quartz-crystal calavera). Here, the body is indicated instead by the words "LIVER" and "SPLEEN" at the centre, from which vaguely anatomical lines flow down toward a spiral motif (the intestines, perhaps) at the bottom of the panel. Other images figure prominently on the left panel, whose background is predominantly black: an atomic diagram with the word "RADIUM" written beneath it and partly effaced; a picture "window" with a subway-type graffiti-painted square in its centre, like a picture on the wall that is also effaced (graffiti on graffiti, or graffiti versus graffiti) by jagged lines overflowing into most of the blank portion of the panel. At the bottom, a mauve inset contains an inscription in capital letters that, except for the letter "A," have been obliterated by blotches of gold paint. On the right panel, the brown canvas rising conspicuously over the intrusion of blackness is largely taken up by the word "ARM" and images relating to it; a narrative element creeps in with the enigmatic inscription "SUICIDE ATTEMPT" over a dotted line marking the wrist.

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There is a deceptive side to Basquiat's images. They belong to the honoured American tradition of simplification; they are at once Pop, Minimal and Conceptual. The very early works, rarely seen, attest to these multiple roots. Quite clearly, this is fragmented imagery, imagery that is fragmented from the start. After 100 years of aesthetic perception being dismembered in the West, through the decomposition of light and colour, volume and shape, movement and speed, and, finally, through the dissociation of content and referent (as in Surrealism), we had arrived at the American abstract image (seldom truly abstract), in which everything was brought back to the "thing" itself. Rauschenberg showed us that this "thing" was also the image in its casual everyday occurrence (the image on the wall); Jasper Johns "romantically" pointed to the fact that both "paint" and "image" coincided with "painting." Warhol made the crucial discovery that it was not just the painting of images that had changed, but also the image itself: the image had become a ghostly protagonist, not a made object but a shadow with a life of its own. Paradoxically, the "fetish" of

old had in some way been resuscitated; the given images (images trouvées) were now like bodies at once dead and alive—lifeless and yet capturing a life instant.

In Basquiat's figures, this Warholian image of "life back from the dead" (a zombie-like cast transforming the features of the living into instant ancestral commemorations) takes on a distinctly new form, "feeling" and content. Like so many ancient and primitive paintings on rock walls, it becomes both a silhouette and an X-ray. The silhouette of a half-spooky, half-humorous black figure that appeared years ago on many New York walls, particularly at street corners in run-down neighborhoods, was not the work of SAMO, Basquiat's original street-roaming alter ego, but it might easily have been. Like SAMO'S early public markings and images on canvas, paper and wood, it conveyed a striking sense of isolation (and, of course, loneliness), shamelessly displayed as a defacing so as to append something almost sinister to a vulnerability that became in itself a shield.

In this, too, and it is essential, Basquiat had a way of being central in the marginal, both inside

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and out. To some extent, of course, this is an eminently American condition. De Kooning said he sometimes felt that "an American artist must feel like a baseball player or something—a member of a team writing American history." (Both Basquiat and George Condo have painted "portraits" of the "great America ball player.") We are at the antipodes of Broadway Boogie Woogie, which even Salvador Dalí grudgingly admired, yet something of that capacity for extremity—extreme interiority through extreme objectivity—resurfaces in Basquiat's flat icons, which are far removed from the age-old issue of figuration versus abstraction. It was once again de Kooning who bluntly stated the problem: "It's really absurd to make an image, like a human image, with paint today, when you think about it, since we have this problem of doing or not doing. But then all of a sudden it was even more absurd not to do it." De Kooning, who never painted a "word," said that he always "liked the word in painting," the label, the name of the thing, and he also remarked that "one could spend one's life having this desire to be in and outside at the same time." But he still related to body space, the space enclosed, as he said, within his own arms wrapped around him-

self. A flat silhouette, however, is neither in nor out. Like a hieratic icon, it suggests another plane, a different dimension, in which the comic strip borders on the immateriality of the spirit world. The body, constantly evoked, becomes an idea, a fleeting trace without substance, all light and shadow. Like the maker of the image, it is both inside and out.

The graffiti in public toilets and other hidden or secluded places are a form of writing that says "in secret" things that cannot be said openly. Like the physiological functions that are performed in some of those same places, these graffiti are a form of relief: they are an emptying out of accumulated words from which one wants to be unburdened. Their fabrications on sexual and scatological themes belong only superficially to the realm of cryptic communication. Addressed to an Unknown Reader, they are more a way of giving vent to a form of artistic expression ("talk"), and in this they are closer to the solitary satisfactions of masturbation (of which Oscar Wilde once said that it allowed one to keep better company). The curiosity with which one reads these "messages" is in turn voyeuristic; it is like watching somebody engaged

in very private acts.

Then there are the signs that sprawl over open walls, railroad and subway cars, signs that want to be seen by the greatest possible number of people, signs that aggressively impose themselves on everybody. Yet these too are "hidden" because they are often illegible, cryptic, undecipherable signatures, engrams of a presence without a name, figures only recognizable by "those in the know," in fact, public gestures stemming from totally suppressed identities, names that cannot be read.

Yet SAMO is something else again. In the intricate, cryptographic, idiosyncratically anonymous and ubiquitous web of multicoloured sprayed "signs," SAMO not only attests to the existence of a persona, an individual presence (as do the graffiti surreptitiously, beneath its disguise), but also affirms the existence of a personality, an incipient expressive, therefore artistic, personality, irrepressible in that it cannot repress itself. SAMO is the affirmation of an identity that manifests itself both as signature (the artist's imprint, like the "R. Mutt" on Duchamp's Fountain) and as self-image, or rather as the image of an iconic self (just as SAMO and "R. Mutt" are iconic signatures.)

Graffiti need a "wall," and the wall is what American art rediscovered. Rauschenberg, with Twombly and Johns, made it possible once again (perhaps for the last time) to build an art of walls, as in Pompeii. This is an art that does not decorate the wall but recreates it. The wall, this support for picture windows (fake windows, pretending to open onto outer or inner worlds, already dismissed by Duchamp's Fresh Widow), now becomes the picture. "In fact, the wall becomes the piece, and the 'piece' is a piece of wall." Hence this American wall is not, after all, like a Roman wall with its marble and fresco covers, a wall that acted as a support for a colourful wrap, a decoration. The Rauschenberg wall that Basquiat partially adopted (through Warhol) and flattened out is "transparent" and structurally totally irrelevant, like the "curtain walls" of American architecture. As such, it is not a wall that one might inscribe or scratch (the word "graffiti" comes from a verb meaning "to scratch"), despite the importance of words in Rauschenberg's paintings. This wall is only for preexisting imprints, or images of words that have a supporting surface even before they are transposed onto the curtain wall. It is also certainly from Rauschenberg that Basquiat derived his use of "collage," or

rather, one should say, of "pasting on."

In Pompeii, the paintings seem to make a real, sustaining wall an illusion, a rhythmic surface (as Saint Clair Cemin once said). Rauschenberg, by contrast, made up illusions—complex surfaces that look like walls. We have come full circle, from the falseness of real walls to the reality of false walls. It is to this new wall that the graffiti are grafted, both as image and as word. In the process, the external urban wrapping is brought indoors, and the surface of the city is turned inside out.

Words, lists of words, sentences, expressions, at times almost telling a story, at others undoing found stories—it is as if words were to Basquiat what images from the past have been to so many other painters: basic, primary material. These words are like disconnected images repêchées, fragments of our linguistic heritage, isolated and distanced as if they did not really belong to us—or at least not any more—and had to be discovered again in a sort of realphabetization through which the paintings, or images and figures form a new spelling book of the world. There is a small dose of post-Surrealist, post-Conceptual word-play in all this, but Basquiat's "found words" are, for the most part,

really found; they are discovered. They seem to belong to a magical view of language in which the physical image of the word, like a spell, can bring things into being and also make them intelligible, can "mean" something and also actually evoke it. In short, it is a sort of depiction, through painting, of language as poetry.

Basquiat's resolutely "artistic" meta-graffiti, his deliberate and artificial transpositions of "primary," ostensibly unschooled graphic gestures into an idiosyncratic and strongly defined formal idiom, also represent a further expansion of the boundaries of "art" and, conversely, the bringing to bear on art of the first radically new "aesthetic" gesture since Pollock's: a sort of Action painting whose starting elements are clusters of primary images and word images right off the brush rather than drips of primary colour right out of the can. This carefully cultivated spontaneity (as in some of the musical and verbal compositions of John Cage) of a "primitivism" variously orchestrated through recurring but only apparently redundant themes and variations, strongly contributes to keeping most of Basquiat's paintings on a tensely vibrating key, like the impossibly

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impossibly protracted high note of a jazz trumpet. Looking at them when they were first painted, one might have wondered which would break first, the music or the player. Pollock's and Basquiat's "accidental" deaths were, in that sense, not just a coincidence.

Actually, one might interpret the words and phrases in Basquiat's paintings as Yasushi Inoue described his own poetic notes: "They are not so much poetry as small boxes in which poetry is locked up. . . . If some magic spell were cast upon them, real poems would emerge." Inoue goes on to say, modestly and rather unjustly, that he is "a poet who has never succeeded in discovering the spell." Basquiat's words on canvas exert a spell on us as if they were poetry pent up inside vibrating boxes, like the tiny, black, eerily buzzing box a burly Asian patron, in Luis Buñuel's *Belle de jour*, produces for the heroine as an erotic prop. But they are also like revealed mysteries, or, better yet, "suspicions" of poetry (René Ricard wrote that there are no unsolved mysteries, only suspicions), emerging from our ever more chaotic forests of language, images and history. There is a sort of innocent, joyful perversity that once more is wholly American:

"O God—Only Lucifer could be as mean and I am Lucifer and I am not that mean, in fact, Lucifer Goes to Heaven."

It was at a Ray Charles concert in the gigantic Houston Astrodome, almost twenty years ago, that I was first struck by the existence of a diffuse and distinctive black American visual aesthetic, which is not as apparent in the urban settings of the Northeast. Practically all the men there, and many of the women too, were dressed in custom-made clothes. The materials themselves—not to mention the combinations—looked as if they had been woven expressly for each particular outfit. I don't know that I ever witnessed a more astounding display of the affirmation of individual originality within a common cultural idiom. It had something of the extravagance and modish refinement one imagines to have existed at the court of Versailles in the eighteenth century. Some of that same "Southern" phantasmagoria can also be found in many of Basquiat's canvases and works on paper. Yet despite the "wildness" of the imagery this aspect is not dominant, partly on account of the

“Jean-Michel Basquiat was, in that sense, an innovator: he summed up the work of two whole (white) artistic generations while introducing a racially and culturally “marginal” blackness into the “mainstream” of Western art/”

of the extraordinary instinct by which Basquiat's colours and shapes always seem to balance each other in what invariably becomes a very savant composition.

It is not clear how much actual Haitian and Puerto Rican culture Jean-Michel Basquiat was able to absorb in his early youth, but it is apparent from the work, just as it was explicit in the man, that he strongly identified with his black roots. His successful connection with the "mainstream" of Western art, though it certainly caused him extremely complex and, in an American context, perhaps insurmountable existential and psychological problems, in no way severed him from the primary cultural and ethnic sources of his experiences. I have mentioned the homage to both Abstract Expressionism and Pop art that is implicit in the extraordinary formal mastery Basquiat was able to achieve at a fantastically early age. His use of words, however, belongs more to the oral traditions of Afro-American cultures—the ecstatic invocations of Voodoo worshippers; the inflamed and inflaming spiritual rhetoric of Baptist preachers with their rousing, recurring, rhythmic juxtapositions of ethical, cosmological and practical tenets; and, of course, now, black rap—than to the sophisticated nominalist games of avant-garde

art, from Duchamp to Johns and Warhol, from Marcel Broodthaers to Joseph Kosuth, and many others. In Basquiat's paintings words have a "concreteness" that seems immune to trendy semiological games. Russian avant-garde artists had also touched on that quality once, but the concreteness of their painted words was a sort of formal materialism. Basquiat's concepts and verbal images are presented as poetic but essentially non-written discoveries. Or rather, they are evocations, epiphanies of words whose written form is used as a visual discovery of an oral content. Instead of the separation between the written and the oral that exists in Duchamp's puns, in Basquiat's work there is a sort of newfound conjunction between the word and its concrete or ideal referent; it is a gestural conjunction, not a logical/semantic one, and as such, once more, it owes a debt to Pollock. I see this performative aspect of language in Basquiat's painting as a strikingly "black" component of his art, and this is perhaps what allowed Afro-American culture—at a time when American art was finally receptive to it, and even needed it—to make a crucial and indelible contribution to Western painting. "Basquiat knew in his veins, in his blood, in all of his being, that for black culture to survive at this stage—in America, but ultimately also in the world at large—it

had to manage neither to be assimilated by nor to assimilate white culture (as was once considered desirable). "The secret was not to resist white culture in order to preserve the purity of its own heritage (as had been first necessary, then fashionable) but to both comprehend and transcend white culture by learning and appropriating both its achievements (its crowning, in Basquiat's imagery) and its disintegration (its dismembered skeletons—in and out of closets).

It was in the precarious balance between being the latest important representative of a great white tradition and the first to make a significant black contribution to it, in this tension between an end and a beginning, that Jean-Michel Basquiat conducted his meteoric career. There are indications that he was conscious of the tragic impossibility of his position. And that, together with the love and envy of the gods, may be why he had to leave us so soon. *C*

This text originally appeared in *Jean-Michel Basquiat*: 21 October to 25 November 1989 (New York: Vrej Baghoomian, 1989).

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