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ART & DESIGN

How to Look at a Basquiat

It's not every day that New York has two Basquiat exhibitions. At "Art and Objecthood," decoding the basics: his materials, iconography and unmistakable line.

Installation view of "Art and Objecthood" at Nahmad Contemporary, one of two major shows of Jean-Michel Basquiat's dazzling art. From left: "Pork," 1981; "Untitled (1960 Yellow Door)," 1985; "Ass," 1984; and "Untitled (The Door)," 1984.Credit...Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York

By Will Heinrich
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It's not everyday that New Yorkers can choose between two concurrent exhibitions of work by Jean-Michel Basquiat. "King Pleasure," an immersive experience designed by the architect David Adjaye and curated by the artist's sisters Lisane Basquiat and Jeanine Heriveaux, includes a recreation of Jean-Michel's childhood bedroom and his studio and charges $35 admission. "Art and Objecthood," curated by the art historian Dieter Buchhart at Nahmad Contemporary, gathers an extraordinary trove of paintings Basquiat made on doors, windows and a refrigerator.

Though "King Pleasure" includes a number of never-before-seen pieces, too, its emphasis is distinctly on the artist's life, so I've focused on the Nahmad show, whose sparse staging give you a better chance of engaging with the work itself. But you should keep his biographical basics in mind.

Young and ambitious, Basquiat shot straight into the center of the New York art world when he was barely out of his teens, showing with some of the country's most influential gallerists, haunting nightclubs with Andy Warhol, and producing a staggering quantity of art work before dying of a heroin overdose, at the age of 27, in 1988. In 2017, one of his paintings sold for more than $110 million, the highest price ever paid at auction for a work by an American artist.

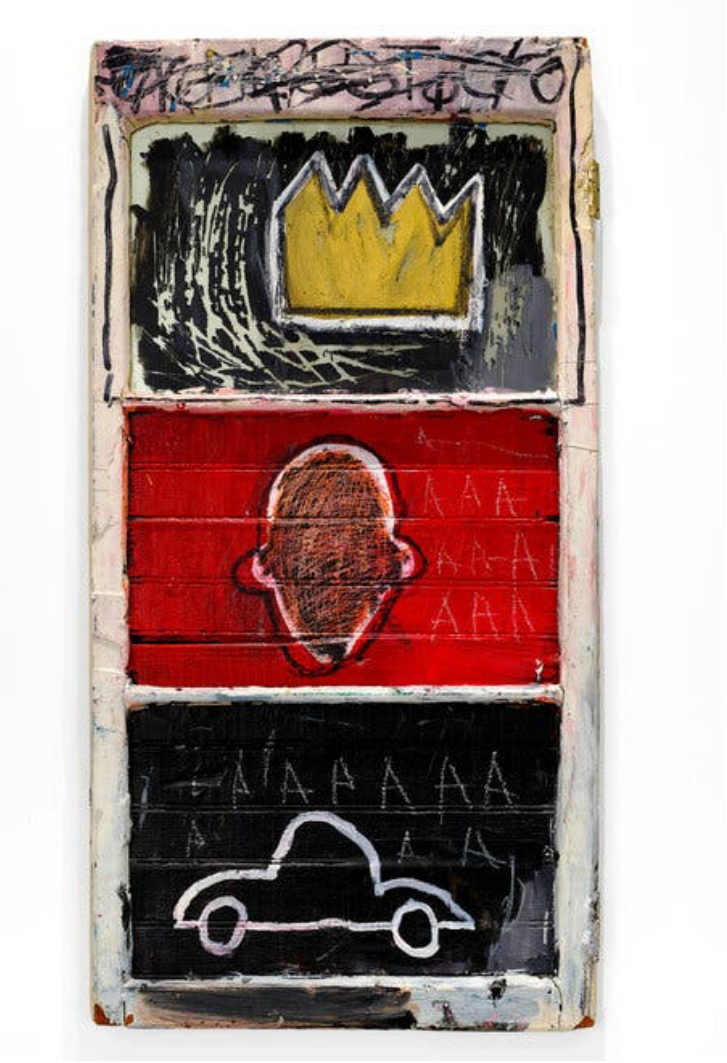
He was also the Brooklyn-born son of a Haitian father and Boricua mother, and though his family wasn't poor, he spent a few lean years on his own before he started selling work. When he did hit the artistic big time, he was one of the few Black faces there — and issues of race and class, complicated by his own extreme experience, are all over his work.

Jean-Michel Basquiat's "Untitled (Refrigerator)," (1981). In the artist's hands, it wavers between appliance and found surface on which to draw.Credit...Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York

Materials

Like most artists, Basquiat drew as a child, famously copying anatomical drawings from "Gray's Anatomy" while recuperating from a car accident. His first real foray into the adult art world, though, was via the graffiti tag SAMO, which he and his high school friend Al Diaz posted up around SoHo and the School of Visual Arts. Before continuing on to canvas, Basquiat used "found materials" like discarded cardboard and paper or construction debris. In part this was born of necessity — canvas costs money, while broken windows were there for the taking in downtown Manhattan in the 1970s.

But Basquiat's use of found materials was also, as the painted windows, doors and sections of wooden fencing in "Art and Objecthood" make clear, a daring artistic strategy that reverberated through even his more conventional efforts. Unlike ready-mades, the manufactured goods that Marcel Duchamp exhibited as art in the early years of the 20th century, Basquiat's found objects aren't exactly sculpture. They're surfaces for him to paint on. But because they are, also, recognizable objects in their own right, they have a beguiling sort of ambiguity. You can't quite see "Untitled (Refrigerator)" (1981) as only an appliance, or only a surface to draw on — the longer you look, the more it seems to waver between both categories. And once you're primed for that sort of ambiguity, you start to see it everywhere. In another context, "Multiflavors" (1982), a royal-blue canvas on exposed wooden stretchers, might just look like a painting. Here, it's a very peculiar object, too.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, "Minor Success" (1980). Pared-down graffiti techniques and pointed assertions of dignity and individuality.Credit...Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York

Iconography

Basquiat didn't spend long writing graffiti, but he used its techniques throughout his career. The graffiti writer's pared-down repertoire of easy-to-recognize signs can be as effective on a gallery wall as they are on the side of a building, and one of his favorites — a simple, icon-like crown — shows up on the first piece in "Art and Objecthood," a white wooden cabinet door titled "Minor Success" (1980). Beneath it are a face without features and a cartoonish sports car.

“If you ask 10 people” about the crown, says Buchhart, the curator, “they’ll tell you 10 different meanings.” He goes on to cite Basquiat’s often-quoted remark that his artistic subjects — musicians, athletes, artists — were “royalty, heroism and the streets,” and the way the crown serves to emphasize images or works particularly special to the artist.

Essentially, though, the crown claims a figurative mantle of royalty for the artist himself, for the figure he’s depicting, or both — Basquiat’s faces and bodies often read at least partially as self-portraits. But it’s also more nuanced than that, particularly as wielded by a young Black artist intent on making himself a celebrity. You have to ask what kind of social context required him to make such pointed assertions of dignity. Is it one in which Black faces struggle to be recognized as individuals? Or one in which status comes from the possession of material objects like a fancy car?

Jean-Michel Basquiat, "Multiflavors" (1982). A painting on canvas demonstrates the unique quality of Basquiat’s writing.Credit...Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York

Writing/Drawing

Another aspect of graffiti that Basquiat kept hold of was the use of writing for visual effect. In many earlier collages and works on paper, a deluge of all-caps writing fills every available square inch. But you can’t read from beginning to end and expect to find an argument. What you get instead is a cloud of loose associations more similar to a picture, in the way you read it, than to ordinary prose or even poetry.

This quality is amplified by the way Basquiat mixes drawing and writing together. If you look back at “Multiflavors,” you’ll find that it has a three-pointed yellow crown in the middle and a cloud of red and yellow circles to one side, and that the white, yellow and pink writing, arranged over blocks of black and blue, forms a striking composition. When you come to read it, you find a group of what appear to be references to advertisements or restaurant signs, phrases like “cheap food” and “HACKED CHICKEN WITH MULTIFLAVORS.” You can’t definitively say whether it’s satire or poetry, angry or exuberant or funny. But it could almost be all of them.

Composition

One thing in particular that’s easier to see in “Art and Objecthood” than in the overwhelming visual cacophony of “King Pleasure” is how conservatively Basquiat organized the elements of his paintings. The sheer profusion of marks can be misleading, but if you recognize the scratches and scrawls of “Minor Success,” for example, as providing a texture rather than so many pieces of separate information, you’ll see that the arrangement of crown, face and car couldn’t be more straightforward. A squat little refrigerator is adorned with a burst of letters and a face in “Untitled (Refrigerator),” but they stop just short of the handle, letting the mostly blank lower section balance their effect. And even when every mark really does carry the same weight, as in an intricately painted yellow door, Basquiat keeps careful control of shape and color to create an overall effect of harmony and stability that balances the frantic energy of his lines.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, “Untitled” (1982). His line “shivers like someone naked in a snowstorm.”Credit...
Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York

Line

The most stunning piece in “Art and Objecthood” may be an untitled painting from 1982 — the year the artist himself claimed to have “made the best paintings ever.” Done in acrylic and enamel on a packing blanket mounted on exposed wooden stretchers, it shows a Black face with white features and a blood-red skull marked with little black dashes like watermelon seeds.

It's a searing portrait of the psychic toll of racism: Even as slurs and insulting tropes leave him bloody and exposed, the figure wears a "white" expression to get along. It's another stately composition, too, balancing a dense figure on one side with empty space on the other and underlining both for emphasis. And it's as good a place as any to study what may be the single most distinctive feature of Basquiat's work — his line.

The line that describes this skull shivers like someone naked in a snowstorm. It makes a break in the jaw, uneven eyebrows, a bump on the crown of the skull. It doesn't leave anything unclear; the drawing is as easy to read as a geometric diagram. But this shakiness does transmit extra information. It lends the figure a particular kind of intensity, making the eyes squint and the teeth gnash, and it gives a similar intensity to the art work as a whole, evoking the tension and energy that must have gone into making it. At the same time, it gives you a sense, more vivid than any mere biography, of the personality of the man who drew it — manic and melancholy, electric, incandescent.

Jean-Michel Basquiat: Art and Objecthood

Through June 11, Nahmad Contemporary, 980 Madison Avenue, third floor, 646-449-9118; nahmadcontemporary.com.

Will Heinrich writes about new developments in contemporary art, and has previously been a critic for The New Yorker and The New York Observer. His first novel, "The King's Evil," won a PEN/Robert Bingham Fellowship; his most recent novel, "The Pearls," was published in 2019. @willvheinrich