

Jean-Michel Basquiat: An Analysis of Nine Paintings

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Jean-Michel Basquiat's incendiary career and rise to fame during the 1980s was unprecedented in the world of art. Even more exceptional, he is the only black painter to have achieved such mystic celebrity status. The former graffiti sprayer whose art is inextricable from the backdrop of New York City streets penetrated the global art scene with unparalleled quickness. His work arrested the attention of big-shot art dealers such as Bruno Bischofberger, Mary Boone, and Anina Nosei, while captivating a vast audience ranging from vagabonds to high society. His paintings are often compared to primitive tribal drawings and to kindergarten scribbles, but these comparisons are meant to underscore the works' raw innocence and tone of authenticity akin to the primitivism of Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Cy Twombly or, perhaps, even that of the infant mind. Be that as it may, there is nothing juvenile about the communicative power of Basquiat's work. His paintings depict the physical and the abstract to express themes as varied as drug abuse, bigotry, jazz, capitalism, and mortality. What seem to be the most pervasive throughout his paintings are themes of racial and socioeconomic inequality and the degradation of life that accompanies this. After examining several key paintings from Basquiat's brief but illustrious career, the emphasis on specific visual and textual imagery within and among these paintings coalesces as a marked—and often scathing—social commentary. There is an immediate message in each of Basquiat's paintings despite (or perhaps because of) their seemingly spontaneous, aleatory composition.

Placing Jean-Michel Basquiat's work within its social context, the paintings provide a lens through which to view urban beauty and decay, and the social injustices that lurk within.

The following analysis seeks to discuss nine of Basquiat's paintings in groups of three, organized based on the works' interrelatedness and their connections in themes and imagery. The first group includes the paintings *Untitled*, *Jim Crow* and *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta*. These paintings depict racially charged themes and portray parallel imagery to underscore these themes. The second group contains *Per Capita*, *Zydeco* and *Eye-Africa*. These works express themes of capitalism, economic inequality, and exploitation. The third and final group covers perhaps the most chilling and abstract paintings of Basquiat's repertoire: *K*, *La Colombal*, and *Riding With Death*. These works seem to grapple with spiritual or existential issues in modern urban society with imagery that suggests that these issues are rooted in ethnic or racial distress. These particular paintings may offer some insight into Basquiat's tragically brief and troubled life. All of these paintings depict a wide variety of text and image, of theme and meaning. There are also parallelisms in their composition, including color scheme, technique, characters and subjects that present common forms among the works. This compilation of artwork may reveal a spiritual despair that responds to 1980s American culture and consumerism in much the same way that the silk-screens of Andy Warhol do. However, the racial undercurrents and pointed sarcasm in Basquiat's works set this young artist on a different paradigm than his neo-expressionist or avant-garde contemporaries.

What is immediately striking about *Untitled* (Fig. 1) is its stark and minimalist design. Painted almost entirely in three bland colors: black, white, and dark blue, the mood is one of gloom. The painting depicts a prisoner flanked by two uniformed men, presumably police officers, as the hats and the star badge assert. The contrast between the prisoner and the officers is direct: the prisoner is black; the officers are white, thus the racial overtones are clear. Faceless white cops have arrested and imprisoned a black man. Also, one notices what appears to be a halo above the prisoner's head. The halo, a reference to Christian iconography and Italian Renaissance art, is a common symbol in Basquiat's works, one he generally reserved for the portrayal of black characters, and this symbol signifies the martyred status of the prisoner. Additionally, the word LOANS is visible in the background, scrawled on what appears to be a rectangular minimalist representation of a city building. This likely refers to the loan offices that are commonly found near city police stations, where quick bail money can be borrowed. The LOANS sign acts as an environmental marker, a reference point meant to indicate the physical or geographical context of the scene, in this case a distinctly urban environment. It is not unlikely that Basquiat witnessed such a scene in New York during his lifetime, and it is known that he was no stranger to discrimination and racial profiling himself, having frequently complained about being unable to hail a taxicab in New York on account of his race. It is apparent that *Untitled* is an exhibition of police discrimination and the mistreatment of black individuals in the city, and this exhibitionism is common in Basquiat's art. Along these lines, the longtime director of the Modern Art Museum in Lugano, Switzerland, Rudy Chiappini writes in a foreword to Jean-Michel Basquiat,

“[Basquiat] uses blackness [as] grounds for diversity and for rebellion...by turning into spectacle the stimuli offered by the modern city, using its spaces to shout out the anguish and existential confusion of an entire generation.”¹

Jim Crow (Fig. 2) offers another fairly clear social statement. As in *Untitled*, Basquiat includes textual and pictorial markers as visual topography to establish a physical, and often familiar context. It is painted on wood that has the appearance of a whitewashed wall of a house or barn, an aesthetic common and familiar in the American Deep South. Listed are various rivers (HUDSON RIVER, OHIO RIVER, THAMES RIVER, etc.) but scrawled repeatedly is MISSISSIPPI, and prominently in the center is a black skeletal figure that stands beneath an arch and sign labeled JIM CROW. The allusion to the American South is solidified by these multiple symbols. The whitewashed wood is significant because of its pointed effect of regionalism, but furthermore, it harks back to a graffiti artist's intent. Basquiat began his art career spray-painting his tag SAMO© on subway cars and SoHo buildings², along with bewilderingly pithy slogans like “SAMO AS AN ANTI-ART FORM” and “THE WHOLE LIVERY LINE BOW LIKE THIS WITH THE BIG MONEY ALL CRUSHED INTO THESE FEET”³. Many of these taglines seemed to mock the New York avant-garde scene, especially the nearly incestuous New York art world, which Basquiat would ironically enter and conquer shortly after his graffiti heyday. Moreover, much of this street art lampooned consumer culture as well, and the copyright symbol so organically attached to SAMO is likely commenting on the forms of ownership in

¹ Chiappini, Rudy. “Foreword.” *Jean-Michel Basquiat*. ed. Rudy Chiappini. Milan: Skira, 2005, p. 11.

² Kawachi, Taka. “Chronology.” *King for a Decade: Jean-Michel Basquiat*. ed. Taka Kawachi. Kyoto: Korinsha Press, 1997.

³ *Downtown 81*. Dir. Edo Bertoglio. 1981. DVD. Maripol. Written by Glenn O'Brien.

public spaces, pointing out the ridiculousness of corporate logos and their omnipresence in the city.

Undeniably Basquiat's street art background played a role in his artistic development and style, therefore there is something about drawing on a wall or the side of a building that is essential to many of Basquiat's paintings, including *Jim Crow*. In "The Perennial Shadow of Art in Basquiat's Brief Life", the Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva writes that, "these graffiti are an answer, the attempt to take back the urban space and its codes, to self-manage them. Self-management proceeds by completely overturning the standards" to regain "individual character" and "personal ownership", in essence, freedom⁴. According to Oliva, graffiti may be viewed as rebellion against ruling class ownership of the city, its spaces, and marketplaces. He also asserts that the "contexts for graffiti" are "urban"; they "are the Bronxes, the American periphery", phenomena communicating "the American urban" and "multiracial" reality. Oliva's claim is valid, especially in light of the inferred purpose in Basquiat's graffiti, but one need not limit this rebellion to the urban context, however prevalent this reference is in Basquiat's art. *Jim Crow* creates a perceptible rural impression in its Deep South imagery, meanwhile insisting its graffiti aesthetic by appearing to be painted quickly and aggressively on a wall or the side of a house. Perhaps the graffiti philosophy originates in the urban environment, but the "American periphery" extends beyond the city limits, and the Deep South certainly qualifies to carry this term, if only historically speaking. This is an area populated primarily by marginalized citizens, mostly African-Americans,

⁴ Oliva, Achille Bonito. "The Perennial Shadow of Art in Basquiat's Brief Life." Jean-Michel Basquiat. ed. Rudy Chiappini. Milan: Skira, 2005, p. 16-20.

who were oppressed, by de facto discrimination and Jim Crow legislation, to an arguably far worse degree than their urban counterparts. It is reasonable to argue that this painting seeks to point out and overturn certain “standards”. If this painting is taken to be a subtle reference to graffiti art, it is possible to use Oliva’s precept to interpret this as a black reclamation of the South and its culture.

Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta (Fig. 3) shares numerous characteristics with *Jim Crow*, most notably the almost palpable southern scenery. The context and regionalism of the Deep South pervades in this painting similarly to that of *Jim Crow*, in that there are various textual markers of this regional context that are quickly noticeable. For instance, we see MARK TWAIN scrawled three times in the upper left corner, and COTTON ORIGIN OF PA—the scrap is purposely cut-off: what word is PA beginning to spell? PAIN, perhaps? NEGROES is scrawled three times in an almost identical manner to MARK TWAIN, and MISSISSIPPI is written repeatedly in the right limit of the painting—this is in direct relation to *Jim Crow*, or rather *Jim Crow*, having been painted three years after this piece, may be directly referential to this textual marker. All of these images work to build a recognizable iconographic context of the South.

The title of the piece is written beneath what is presumably the head of an African-American man, which is labeled FIG 23. This technique of labeling and codifying images is idiosyncratic in Basquiat’s work; he often copied lists from science and anatomy textbooks and almanacs onto his paintings, and he is known to have been inspired by Leonardo da Vinci’s anatomical sketches. The FIG 23 label in this painting is a parody of this artistic, pseudo-scientific idiom. It seems Basquiat is

ironically asserting a scientific truism, that this black man, known only as FIG 23, this undiscovered genius, can be found listed in a textbook like some phenomenon of science or some medical condition. The metaphor is at once subtle and bold, for the repression of genius in oppressed areas such as the Jim Crow South can only be speculated, but it would certainly be a social phenomenon and a malignant cultural condition.

Another striking feature of this piece is animal and bestial imagery. We see the head of a cow, a rat labeled EL RATON, a cow's udder with UDDER written underneath. This could be viewed as yet another example of Basquiat's scientific or anatomical sketches, but something sharper and more ironic is developing with this imagery. The cow is a recurring image in the painting, as is the UDDER, which is crude and almost offensive to our senses. In conjunction with the cow and udder, the seemingly out-of-place PER LB. 49 ¢ propels the animal imagery into a completely new paradigm. Through the painting's allusions to the South of Mark Twain's era and the COTTON context, a reference to slavery may be implied. Before the Civil War, slaves were bought and sold like pieces of meat or livestock or any other consumer product for that matter. It is plausible that Basquiat is playing with this theme in the PER LB. 49¢ and the animal imagery. The cow or livestock trope is reminiscent of another painting of Basquiat's entitled *Loin* (Fig. 4), in which the "LOIN" has been cut from the backside of a black cow, a cut of meat likely to be sold at a butcher's shop or market. This is the type of morose sarcasm that vividly permeates Basquiat's paintings, a quality that enriches his art in an often-confounding way. Basquiat's ability to capture and convey a particular contextual

environment with the combination of text, image and color is evident in all three of these paintings that comprise the first group of this analysis. The scenery sets the stage for the tragedy occurring in the foreground, which are, in the case of these three dramatic works, the afflictions of marginalized and oppressed peoples. In “Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Word and the Image”, Luciano Caprile writes, “[Basquiat’s] blackness, in addition to explaining his role as an outcast...provided him with an extraordinary narrative element to extrapolate from the myths and the rites of origin and put [it] on display, as a visual profanation and an existential declaration.”⁵ *Untitled, Jim Crow* and *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta* are the displays, for they illustrate the mythic realities of Basquiat’s racial history and condition.

The following three works, which include *Per Capita*, *Zydeco* and *Eye-Africa* contain not only racial imagery but also references to capitalism and the American market economy. Dollar signs, Latin phrases, such as *E Pluribus*, that appear on American currency, corporate logos and allusions to mundane items and consumer products work together in juxtaposition to racially-charged effigies. What results is an iconographic commentary on wealth and the distribution of wealth.

Per Capita (Fig. 5) is a collage of text and image with a scrawled list of U.S. states in alphabetical order with their respective per capita incomes. Immediately, one notices the vast disparity in incomes among different states. This reference, which once again exemplifies Basquiat’s almanac-like listing convention, sets the tone for the painting’s subject matter, in that some form of inequality is being

⁵ Caprile, Luciano. “Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Word and the Image.” *Jean-Michel Basquiat*. ed. Rudy Chiappini. Milan: Skira, 2005, p. 118.

expressed, in this case economic or opportunistic. The main character or focal point is the prominent sanctified black figure in the left-center of the canvas that wears EVERLAST boxing shorts. Images of black athletes are omnipresent icons in Basquiat's works. They refer to individuals whom Basquiat adored and respected, individuals who made up his pantheon of black heroes. Included in this frequently referenced group of black athletes are Mohammed Ali, Sugar Ray Robinson, and Joe Louis, among many others. It is likely that this haloed figure is referential in this common vein. Also, it is obvious that these figures were heroes to Basquiat because of their pervasiveness in his works and their often mythical or comic-book hero portrayals, but it seems as if this figure is shed in a negative light, or better yet, a tragic light, particularly in juxtaposition with the economic symbols. It may refer to the exploitation of African-Americans via the sports and entertainment industry. This assumption is bolstered by another painting by Basquiat with similar imagery and character portrayal titled *St. Joe Louis Surrounded by Snakes* (Fig. 6). In this 1982 painting, a haloed boxer not unlike the one depicted in *Per Capita* is surrounded by greedy trainers and managers, represented by ominous floating faces hovering behind Joe Louis, who eventually left Louis financially ruined by misleading and taking advantage of his fame and fortune.

The halo that sits atop the head of the anonymous boxer in *Per Capita* also rests on Joe Louis in *St. Joe Louis...* and similarly on the anonymous prisoner in the aforementioned *Untitled*. In Christian iconography the halo symbolizes piety and more importantly a sanctified or martyred status. One can infer that these black figures that are so common in Basquiat's paintings, besides being saints in his mind,

have martyred themselves or have been destroyed because of the sins of others. In the case of *St. Joe Louis Surrounded by Snakes* and *Per Capita*, the sin is greed. In addition to discussing the inherent street art quality of Basquiat's art, Achille Oliva states, "Basquiat introduced into his visual epic such black heroes as Malcolm X and Charlie Parker, Jesse Owens and Billie Holiday; black heroes whose presence evoked the mournful history of minorities segregated in ghettos and perhaps exploited by a false sense of Yankee pride."⁶ The "mournful history" and "exploitation" of black athletes is most certainly a pronounced implication in *Per Capita*. Some anecdotal evidence from Justin Thyme, a friend and former band-mate of Basquiat's, may also strengthen this interpretation. Thyme states in an interview by Taka Kawachi that, "[Basquiat] painted many black sports heroes, but that was one of his jokes. In fact, he was putting down sports."⁷ However, the torch that the black boxer wields in *Per Capita* adds a confounding factor to this conclusion. Typically, one would interpret a torch as a symbol of defiance, victory, leadership, and light, so Basquiat remains pointedly ambivalent as to whether the black athlete is a hero and guiding light, or a mascot and tool for others' manipulation.

Zydeco (Fig. 7) is another image-laden, visually stimulating painting that may offer a commentary on manipulation and exploitation. The title refers to the genre of American folk music originating from Louisiana Creole culture. In the center panel of this three-paneled piece, Basquiat has painted a black accordion player—the accordion is an essential instrument in most Zydeco music.

⁶ Oliva, Achille Bonito. p. 20.

⁷ Kawachi, Taka. "Gray+Interview." *King for a Decade: Jean-Michel Basquiat*. ed. Taka Kawachi. Kyoto: Korinsha Press, 1997, p. 12.

The painting is full of seemingly trivial objects, like the ICEBOX and FREEZER, the BOX CAMERA, the MICROPHONE, and the homage to WESTINGHOUSE. The pick-ax and wood tropes, reinforced by crossed-out text PICK AX and WOOD, construct an allusion to manual labor, which pervades in a similar manner in *Eye-Africa* (Fig. 8) as well. Crossing out text was yet another characteristic technique of Basquiat's, who asserted, "I cross out words so you will see them more: the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them."⁸ Besides drawing the viewer's attention to these words and their images, the fact that these words are crossed-out may suggest that these tools for manual labor are no longer necessary and no longer the required employment for a black individual. This motif works to comment on the blighted history of African-Americans in the South and perhaps comment on a triumph over that condition, a triumph that has materialized in the form of music or the professional musician. Basquiat had great respect for black musicians, especially jazz musicians like Charlie Parker and Billie Holiday, in fact Justin Thyme declares, "He loved Charlie Parker very much." The Zydeco musician could be homage to his artistic heroes, but it is not without a sense of tragic irony. The corporate logos like WESTINGHOUSE and VITAPHONE intimate that this accordionist still works for someone else's benefit, in a similar way to the Joe Louis or the black athlete predicament. Like *Per Capita* and the cryptic messages of SAMO©, *Zydeco* mocks an American system, that of corporate omnipotence, while deriding the entertainment and art world as well. The right-hand panel, which is seemingly irrelevant to the other two panels, begins to take on a deeper significance

⁸ Kawachi, Taka, p. 97.

in light of this interpretation. The reference to the EARLY SOUND FILM, produced by Vitaphone's pioneering sound-on-disc system⁹, alludes to the synchronized sound or "talking picture" films of the early 20th century. This reference may assume a racial and exploitative connotation as well. Early American films dealt heavily with plots inspired by minstrelsy and blackface acting, a tradition that was terribly racially exaggerated and degrading. In fact, the first ever "talkie" was *The Jazz Singer*, produced in 1927, which was based on a minstrel play titled *Robinson Crusoe, Jr.*, and starred Al Jolson, the famous blackface actor of the 1920s and 30s¹⁰. In this context, one sees the Zydeco accordionist as an exploited black musician, whose music reaches an audience only on the wings of corporations and white faces.

Eye-Africa is a far more direct commentary on exploitation, in this instance in a historical context, although the historical context itself can be viewed as metaphoric. The painting is fairly simple and straightforward in a minimalist way, in that there are few characters or subjects at play. But that is not to say the piece lacks gravity or significance as a result; its implication is made all the more remarkable by its simplicity. There is a conspicuous interaction of light and dark imagery: the background is a solid black, and the images are white, brown or green. The EYE in the left-hand limit of the canvas is white, the image of the diamond is white, and on the drawing of the African continent, South Africa—labeled with an S—or perhaps all of southern Africa, is outlined in white. This is possibly a reference to South Africa's apartheid system, in that like the white EYE and diamond, the S is under white control. It is plausible to interpret this painting as a comment on the

⁹ <http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/belknap/exhibit2002/vitaphone.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.jolson.org/>

exploitation of Africa's resources by European colonial powers, for the EYE is in the left or western limit of the painting, as if it were representing the European continent. Richard D. Marshall, the former curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, writes in "Jean-Michel Basquiat: Speaking in Tongues" that, "Basquiat is keenly aware of the historical and contemporary manipulation and misuse of natural and human resources that benefit few, and continuously lead to the subjugation and exploitation of many, invariably minority groups."¹¹ It is apparent that Basquiat is demonstrating this awareness in *Eye-Africa*. The painting brings to mind the Belgian Congo of King Leopold and the Dutch diamond monopoly, just a couple of the many European colonial ventures that have penetrated Africa since the late 19th century.

The focal point of the painting is the brown pickaxe in the center that separates the EYE and the diamond from the African continent. This image is immediately reminiscent of the pickaxe in *Zydeco*, and likely similarly symbolizes manual labor. The pickaxe is painted brown, in contrast to the white EYE and diamond, which distinguishes it from the white characters of the piece. Historically, the African people were the laborers in European endeavors, whether it be the Congolese forced to strip rubber trees or the South African diamond and gold miners, the pickaxe represents the hard labor of blacks. The pickaxe is not only historically symbolic but also formally symbolic; in other words, it stands tall and ominous in the middle of the painting like some phallic structure, constructing a plausible "rape of Africa" motif. This is not far-fetched because one notices that on

¹¹ Marshall, Richard D. "Jean-Michel Basquiat: Speaking in Tongues." *Jean-Michel Basquiat*. ed. Rudy Chiappini. Milan: Skira, 2005, p. 58.

the African continent the majority of it is painted green and brown in a topographical or geographical fashion, but the southern region (S) appears vacated or chipped away from the rest of the continent, as if it were once filled but the pickaxe stripped it of its contents and left it empty and desolate—as if the land were raped. Yet another formal or structural interpretation of the pickaxe is that it acts as a balance or scale for the two halves of the painting. Beneath the points of either blade of the axe hang the white diamond and the African continent. This establishes a somewhat different narrative than the rape; it appears that the extracted diamond has balanced the scale in the perspective of the EYE. Perhaps the EYE is weighing options, costs versus benefits, which would fit nicely into the attitudes of *Per Capita*, *Zydeco*, and of course SAMO©. Or maybe the diamond, as a microcosm of natural resources, is the one thing that puts Africa on the map, so to speak, or in the eyes of the EYE, Africa's significance rests solely on the diamond.

The final three paintings are far more difficult to analyze than the first two groups. They do not contain very apparent racial or ethnic themes, rather, they are more emotionally or psychologically evocative. They seem to contain a great deal of darkness and suffering on a far more personal or spiritual level. In some instances this suffering may be linked to an ethnic or racial disposition of inadequacy or inferiority, but it also reflects a lifestyle unrelated to terms of black and white, a lifestyle of self-fulfilled prophecies fulfilled almost spitefully. These next three works illustrate a condition of living fast and dying faster.

Basquiat is known to have been a frequent drug user; he habitually did cocaine and heroin, often in combination with one another in the form of “speed-

balls". His habits were apparent and well known. In "The Andy Warhol Diaries," Andy Warhol, who was a close friend and artistic collaborator of Basquiat's, writes, "Jean-Michel came in and painted right on top of the beautiful painting that [Francesco] Clemente did. There was lots of blank space on it that he could've painted on, he was just being mean. And he was in slow motion so I guess he was on heroin. He'd bend over to fix his shoelace and he'd be in that position for five minutes."¹² Basquiat, despite assurances to friends and family that he was quitting drugs indefinitely, died of an overdose of cocaine and heroin in 1988 at the age of 27¹³. His painting, *K*, (Fig. 9) is likely a reference to the urban drug problem. *K*, or SEPARATION OF THE K, may refer to ketamine (Special K), or more likely to a kilogram as a unit of weights and measures of drugs. The balance or scale in the lower left corner reinforces this interpretation. The most prominent image in the painting is the white, green and red facial image on the left-hand side. We cannot be sure of what it is representative of, but it looks more beastly than human, or maybe it is a combination of both features. This is plausible considering the repetition of AOPKHES throughout the painting, which is likely referring to ancient Egyptian culture, a motif that Basquiat frequently constructed through the use of hieroglyphic and petroglyphic images in his works. The red, white and green figure in *K* has petroglyphic features in its half man half beast assembly, like a sphinx or a Minotaur. There may or may not be any significance or relationship between this imagery and the drug context, other than perhaps the drugs turn man into beast.

The drug context is reinforced by DISEASE CULTURE and the lightning rod

¹² Kawachi, Taka. p. 109.

¹³ Kawachi, Taka. "Chronology." p. 168.

that appears to stab the heart of the petroglyph. This jolt to the heart is either keeping the petroglyph alive or destroying it, an unclear dichotomy in the painting; however, the image is frightening and almost menacing, conveying a great amount of pain and distress. The gold (ORO) and dollar signs may also relate to the drug or DISEASE CULTURE context. As in *Per Capita*, *Zydeco* and *Eye-Africa*, monetary symbols perpetuate a harmful system; in the context of *K*, money perpetuates the DISEASE CULTURE of drug abuse. Even so, the ORO, the crown and the dollar signs are common throughout many of Basquiat's paintings, and in some works the gold paint and the ORO text do not appear to be thematically significant but rather simply decorative forms. In his famous matter-of-fact tone, Basquiat once said, "I was writing gold on all this stuff and I made all this money right afterwards."¹⁴ This statement may point to the purposelessness or the misleading nature of these symbols; then again, he was never one to reveal much about his paintings, so his statement should also be regarded with a few grains of salt.

La Colomba (Fig. 10), like *K*, conveys a striking mood of despair and suffering. The contrast of light and dark, or black and white, plays a major role in this piece. This may imply a duality of some kind especially in combination with the two-headed figure that takes up most of the canvas; we will call this figure the protagonist. The protagonist clearly has two opposing halves. The left side displays the face, the external features of the head, while the right side appears to depict the *inside* of the head, in other words the inner workings of the protagonist's mind. Like many of Basquiat's paintings of heads, this dichotomy or contrast between the

¹⁴ Kawachi, Taka. p. 137.

external or the appearance and the internal is evident. The entire left panel evokes pain: the face is stretched and frozen in an expression of terror with its wide eyes and gaping mouth. Also, the left arm (from the viewer's perspective) is incomplete and looks as though it has been amputated so that only a small stub remains. There are aggressive brushstrokes and splotches of red paint that have been left to drip down the canvas, and this red paint stands out on the amputated arm, evocative of blood. All of these characteristics that appear in the left panel point to torment and distress.

The right panel, in addition to showing the inside of the protagonist's head—visible are undulating lines reminiscent of veins or neurons and small clips of montage images that may represent memories or visual brain data—expresses the other side of the coin. While the left panel is dominated by pain and torture, the right panel offers some hope to the protagonist's situation. The fact that this side contains the workings of the mind, so to speak, suggests that the protagonist is calculating and unraveling his condition, trying to arrive at some solution. More importantly, the right arm, this one being in tact, wields a large, prominent white flag. This image likely bears the title of the painting, *La Colomba*, which in Italian means "the dove". The meaning of the flag or the dove is rather ambiguous. If we interpret the image as a white dove, the symbol of peace, the right panel assumes a positive tone, perhaps one of victory and wellbeing. The green vine-like illustration that juxtaposes *la colomba* would certainly reinforce the positive dove interpretation, being arguably representative of an olive branch, another symbol of peace that is typically used in conjunction with the dove. The dove or flag in *La*

Colomba brings to mind the torch from *Per Capita*. It is wielded in the same fashion by the anonymous boxer as by the protagonist of *La Colomba*. Because of this similarity, the ambivalence of the symbol is more striking; the torch was the single positive factor in *Per Capita*, representing some kind of saving grace or guiding light, but it was overshadowed by negative imagery. If we understand the white *la colomba* image as representing a white flag, on the other hand, the symbol of defeat and collapse, the painting takes on a far more negative, even fatalistic attitude. It is difficult to know for certain, because Basquiat often calculated this confounding ambiguity; even the title may be misleading us from the painting's true identity. Does *La Colomba* symbolize a coming to terms with the unknown trauma or despair of the protagonist? Or does it demonstrate a quite surrender to the hopelessness of the situation?

Although the meaning remains unclear, the dichotomy is all too evident. The two opposing halves and their two conflicting characters reveal the anguish of the protagonist. In "The Defining Years: Notes on Five Key Works", gallery owner Fred Hoffman writes,

Many of the dualities suggested in his work evolve out of the recognition of his predicament as a young black man in a white art world...I became acutely aware of the extent of Basquiat's concern for incorporating the dichotomy of black and white into both the content and the strategies of his artistic production. A primary example is the artist's fraught self-transformation from black to white in the untitled silkscreen on canvas of 1983: in the original artwork, the artist depicted a black head set on top of a ground of texts and images; but the silkscreen reverses the positive imagery and texts, turning everything originally in black into white, and everything white into black.¹⁵

¹⁵ Hoffman, Fred. "The Defining Years: Notes on Five Key Works." *Basquiat*. ed. Marc Mayer. New York: Merril Publishers Limited, 2005, p. 130.

Hoffman is not referring directly to *La Colomba* in this excerpt, but he includes this reference in his analysis of *La Colomba* asserting that this evaluation is readily applicable to it because of the suggested dualities in the painting. One can only infer so much about the artist and his personal motivation for a work's composition, but Hoffman's view of Basquiat's "predicament" is convincing. Hoffman also compares *La Colomba* to Pablo Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror*, which depicts a similar mirror-image dichotomy, in Picasso's case, of youth and aging. But Hoffman fails to recognize another interesting common thread between *La Colomba* and Picasso, arguably a more obvious connection; that *La Colomba* may refer to Picasso's famous *Dove of Peace*. Whether intentional or arbitrary, the allusions are self-evident.

It seems appropriate to end this analysis with *Riding With Death* (Fig. 11), because it sums up Basquiat's lifestyle and philosophy quite well. He died young and tragically because of his self-destructive habits, and what is most chilling about this is that it almost seems like he knew he would meet this fate all along. *Riding With Death* is one of Basquiat's last paintings before his death in August 1988. The difference between this late piece and those discussed earlier is remarkable. It is rather atypical in comparison to the rest of Basquiat's repertoire, because its simplicity, perhaps only approached by *Eye-Africa*, is a definitive feature. The rather solid background and straightforward separation of subjects or characters is immediately noticeable, but unlike *Eye-Africa*, the painting is extremely refined. What does remain in a typical Basquiat fashion is the tribal or primitive aesthetic. The black figure riding the skeletal Death looks very much like a petroglyph or tribal etching, and the brownish background could pass as the stone wall of a cave, once

again harking back to the whitewashed wall of *Jim Crow* and Basquiat's graffiti history. This painting is deeply personal, and I believe it to be a confession or realization of Basquiat's habits, because of its refined and calculated nature, and because his death followed so quickly after its completion. The Death skeleton has brown and black oil marks in its mouth, as if it has taken a bite out of the man who rides him and continues to chew on a part of him. The painting is eerily prophetic, as if it predicted Basquiat's unfortunate death. The simplicity and gravity of the piece asserts the artist's development and mastery of his form, and its uncommonly refined form supposes some kind of sudden moment of clarity. Michael Holman, another friend and former band mate of Basquiat's said, "He...kept saying he would die at the age of twenty-seven. You know, it's the same age that Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison and Janis Joplin died. He also said 'I just want to live life like James Dean.' Live fast and die young, I suppose."¹⁶ This anecdote and this painting suggest a self-fulfilled prophecy, and *Riding With Death* takes on that much more gravity and artistic power.

After analyzing these nine incredible paintings, similarities reveal themselves and build upon one another creating a narrative and a meaning that pervades throughout. These works span Basquiat's entire painting career, demonstrating the lasting quality and significance of these themes in the eyes of the artist, asserting that discrimination, exploitation and inequity were not fleeting whims but timeless issues that plagued the conscience of this most mysterious painter. One sees that blackness plays a central role in the content of his work, despite Basquiat's

¹⁶ Kawachi, Taka. p. 11.

assurances like, “I don’t even know if I want to be called a black painter, I just want to be me,” and “I don’t know if the fact that I’m black has something to do with my success. I don’t believe that I should be compared to black artists but rather all artists.”¹⁷ That said, his work is filled with the absurdity of social injustices, and he was never afraid of pointing it out and hiding it at the same time. These nine paintings, only a small portion of Basquiat’s prolific repertoire, serve as an indicative sample of the artist’s skill, his wit, his rage, and his ability to laugh at the ugliness and the folly of his world in a distinctive gallows humor of color, text and image. The trauma of his urban existence, his drug abuse, his upbringing in a multiracial family, his witnessing of injustice both in history and the everyday, and his condition as a lone black painter in a white art world speaks in these paintings with unquestionable intensity. Nonetheless, it is essential to remain skeptical and hesitant in deep analysis of Basquiat’s art, if for no other reason than he was a skilled trickster who enjoyed misleading and puzzling his audience. Marc Mayer, the director of the National Gallery of Canada, puts it best in his essay “Basquiat in History”,

I can’t help feeling that a painstaking analysis of Basquiat’s symbols and signs is a trap that lures us away from the abstract and oneiric purpose of these pictures. They are not sending us coded messages to decipher iconologically, so much as confusing and disarming us at once with their discursive sleight of hand. And, as we see in his practice of silk-screening and photocopying his copywork drawings, Basquiat used them interchangeably like recycled decorative units in his compositions, following a logic more formal than iconographic...he painted a calculated incoherence, calibrating the mystery of what such apparently meaning-laden pictures might ultimately mean...[He] speaks articulately while dodging the full impact of clarity like a

¹⁷ Kawachi, Taka. p. 43.

matador.¹⁸

These analyses stand only as suggestions and implications, while the true meaning of these paintings, if there be such a thing, remain on the canvas in every brushstroke, every photomontage and every scribble, snickering and sobbing at once, crying out the oppression of a people, the pain of a person and the legacy of an artist.

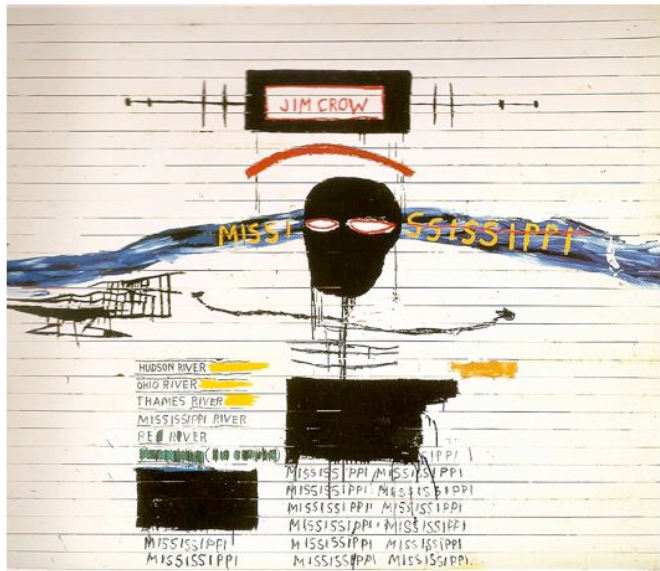
¹⁸ Marc Mayer, "Basquiat in History." Basquiat. ed. Marc Mayer, New York: Merril Publishers Limited, 2005, p. 50.

APPENDIX



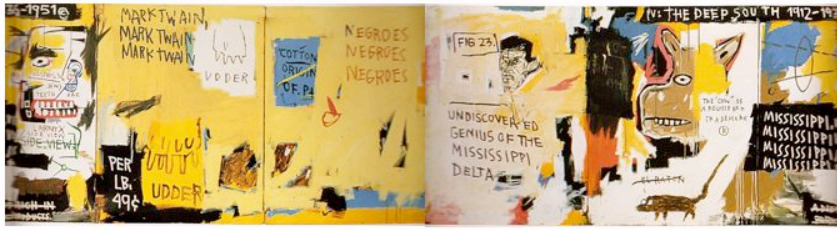
Untitled
(1981)
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
128.5 x 223.5 cm

Figure 1



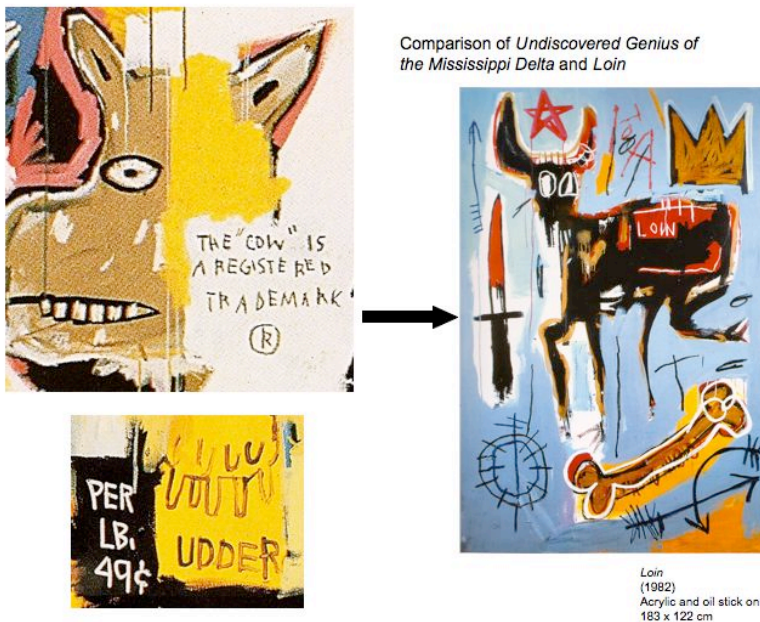
Jim Crow
(1986)
Acrylic and oil stick on wood
206 x 244 cm

Figure 2



Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta
 (1983)
 Acrylic, oil stick, and paper collage on canvas, five panels
 121.9 x 467.4 cm

Figure 3



Comparison of *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta* and *Loin*

Loin
 (1982)
 Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
 183 x 122 cm

Figure 4

Comparison of *Per Capita* and *St. Joe Louis Surrounded by Snakes*



Figure 5

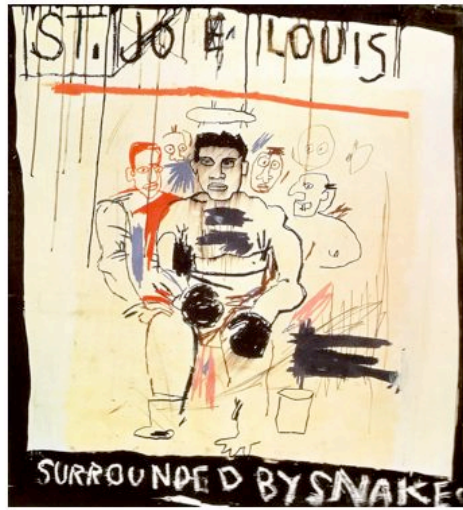


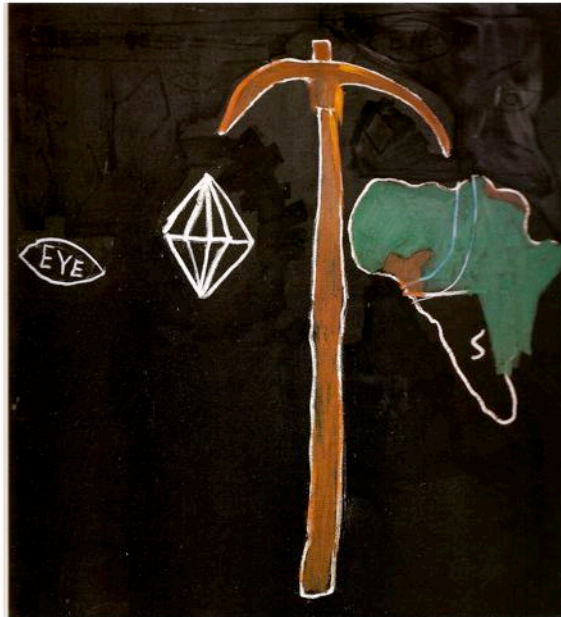
Figure 6

St. Joe Louis Surrounded by Snakes
(1982)
Acrylic, oil stick, and paper collage on canvas
101.5 x 101.5 cm



Figure 7

Zydeco
(1984)
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas, three panels
218.5 x 518 cm



Eye-Africa
(1984)
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
167.5 x 152.5 cm

Figure 8



K
(1982)
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas,
two panels
163 x 156 cm

Figure 9



La Colomba
(1983)
Acrylic, oil stick and photocopy montage
on canvas, two panels
183 x 366 cm

Figure 10



Riding With Death
(1988)
Acrylic and oil stick
on canvas
249 x 289.5 cm

Figure 11

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