

WORDS ARE ALL WE HAVE: PAINTINGS BY JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT
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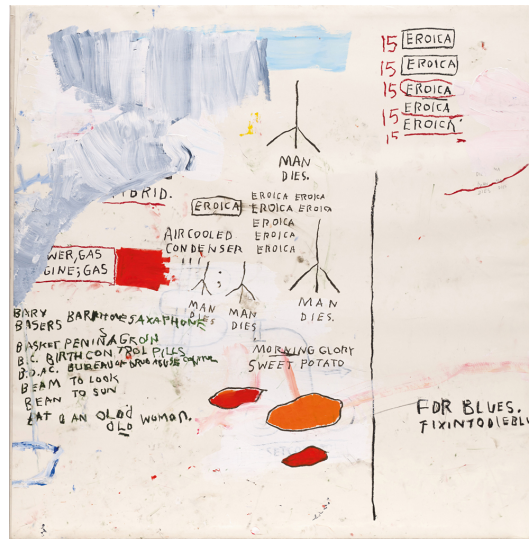
FORBES

Lifestyle

By ALINA COHEN

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A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Party Crasher (Kind Of): Basquiat at Nahmad Contemporary



Jean-Michel Basquiat, Eroica I, 1988.
Acrylic and oilstick on paper mounted on canvas
90 1/2 x 88 3/4 in (230 x 225.5 cm)

Nicola Erni Collection, Courtesy Hamiltons Gallery. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat / Licensed by Artestar, New York.

Jean-Michel Basquiat's former band mate, Michael Holman, compared the dead artist to both a spiritual leader and a comic book hero when I recently spoke to him by phone. "I saw Jean very early on as a realized being," he said. "Like a Dalai Lama...He was somehow superhuman." Holman launched into an explanation of kryptonite and mused over what Basquiat's was. He settled on his friend's sensitivity to slights and the idea that others would prejudice him, particularly based on his race. Of course, another superstar of the 1980s—heroin—led to Basquiat's real downfall in 1988 when he was just 27. In 2016, the name "Basquiat" conjures an ineffable sense of cool and recalls a fetishized era of New York City history.

Holman, whose website lists him as a filmmaker, artist, writer, and musician, remembered the first time he met Basquiat. The artist had arrived early (and not exactly invited) to the now-famous 1979 Canal Zone Party intended to bridge the uptown hip hop

and downtown art scenes. As Holman tells it, Basquiat insisted on creating an artwork, though only the “Fabulous 5” graffiti artists were slated to make pieces. Basquiat signed his signature, “SAMO.”

“It was like oh my god, you’re SAMO,” Holman said. “This guy is the person we’d all been seeing for years...writing these really brilliant poems and snatches of poems or thoughts or automatic writing ideas on the walls all over SoHo.” Holman enthusiastically remembered his favorites: “A PIN DROPS LIKE A PUNGENT ODOR;” “PAY FOR SOUP / BUILD A FORT / SET THAT ON FIRE.” Basquiat’s pioneering use of language, in part, made him famous.

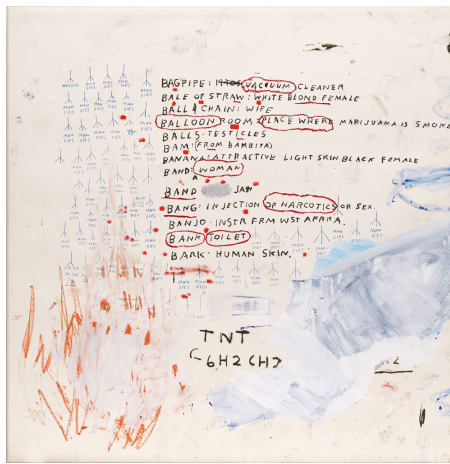
An exhibition, [*Words are All We Have*](#), at the Upper East Side gallery Nahmad Contemporary, focuses on this component of his work. The curator, Dr. Dieter Buchhart, who organized last summer’s *Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks* at The Brooklyn Museum, wrote his doctoral dissertation on Norwegian artist Edvard Munch and has since become a renowned Basquiat scholar. Both artists, he suggests, uniquely captured the zeitgeist of their eras—Munch eternalized the uncertainty and existential dread of Europe in the 1880s, Basquiat the exhilarating possibilities for art, music, and social critique in New York a century later.



*Curator and writer in front of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Untitled (Hand Anatomy), 1982
Acrylic oilstick and paper collage on canvas mounted on tied wood supports
60 x 60 in (152.5 x 152.5 cm)*

Private Collection. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat / Licensed by Artestar, New York.

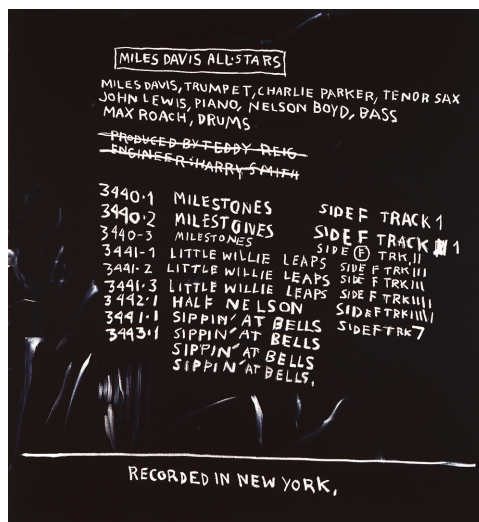
Basquiat’s singular aesthetic emerges through his bold, assertive, and simple letters. He wrote in all capital letters with such a consistent look that you can now download Basquiat fonts. Buchhart compared the artist’s words to both brushstrokes and genetics as he led me on a tour of the exhibition just before it opened. “It’s in the DNA of his works,” he said. He noted a sense of rhythm and musicality, appropriate for an artist who played in a band and referred to such musicians (MILES DAVIS, MAX ROACH) and instruments (BAGPIPE, SAXAPHONE) in his paintings. Buchhart, like Holman, spoke about Basquiat with a certain amount of reverence. If the gregarious Holman sounds like he’s giving a sales pitch for something that doesn’t really need to be sold (just look at Basquiat’s auction prices), Buchhart sounds like a refined European academic totally taken with his subject.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Eroica II*, 1988
 Acrylic and oilstick on paper mounted on canvas
 90 1/2 x 88 3/4 in (230 x 225.5 cm)
 Nicola Erni Collection, Courtesy Hamiltons Gallery.
 © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat / Licensed by Artstar, New York.

Basquiat aggressively branded many of his words in a way that would make a patent lawyer shudder. “It’s kind of hijacking,” Buchhart said. “It’s making it his.” He pointed to *Untitled (Hand Anatomy)* from 1982. Basquiat added a copyright sign after “HANDS AND FEET.” In an untitled work from 1987, he wrote just three words on a gray canvas: “BRAZIL,” “POLICE,” and “THINK.” He copyrighted the first two and added a trademark sign after last one. “All mine!” Basquiat seems to say as he acquires body parts, an entire country, an institution that thwarted him and his African American contemporaries, and a path to knowledge—all with just a few marks on canvas.

Many of the works on view feature wild amalgamations of words and symbols, like maps meant to get you lost. “[William] Burroughs was a great influence for him. Burroughs said the words surrounding him are like a big cut up,” said Buchhart. The poet and novelist famously cut up and rearranged text. “Basquiat takes from everywhere surrounding him. From the television, book, philosophy, the lexica...and copies and pastes.” What might at first seem like a headache-inducing jumble “opens up the space for different interpretations. And that’s the polymorph idea of postmodernism. You don’t give one meaning but several. And you find your own.”



Jean-Michel Basquiat *Discography II*, 1983 Acrylic and oilstick on canvas 66 x 60 in
 Private Collection, Courtesy Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Switzerland. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat / Licensed by Artstar, New York.

Buchhart stopped in front of the 1983 triptych, *Five Fish Species*. In the first panel, he pointed to a bullet and the wording “BURROUGH’S BULLET ©” and “MOTHERFUCKN SKULLBONE.” The year 1951 is scrawled in the corner of the first and third panels. Buchhart puzzled out a certain inner logic to the work. Burroughs accidentally shot his wife while playing William Tell. That was 1951, which was also a big year for Charlie Parker, one of Basquiat’s big heroes whose name reappears elsewhere in the Nahmad Contemporary show. Eventually, Buchhart reluctantly stopped trying to make sense of it all, the Basquiat interpretation rabbit hole still beckoning.

Burroughs, Parker, and the year 1951—the ghosts of New York’s past haunt *Five Fish Species* and other works in the show, recalling eras that the artist himself missed, from the jazz age to the Beat generation.



Jean-Michel Basquiat Now's the Time, 1985 Acrylic and oilstick on wood 92 1/2 diameter (235 cm)
Private Collection, Courtesy The Brant Foundation, Greenwich, CT. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat / Licensed by Artestar, New York.

“You wanna know the truth?” Holman said at the end of our conversation. “I’m 61 years old. I’m in good shape and all that, but you know, it would be great to be 21. But if it meant being 21 now, I would not trade my life and what I lived through for youth. It wouldn’t be worth it. That’s like, no question at all.”

At Nahmad Contemporary, Basquiat’s work transports viewers back to a world of hip-hop, graffiti, and great underground parties. It’ll fuel nostalgia for New Yorkers who experienced the era and envy for millennials who wish they had.

Words are All We Have is on view at Nahmad Contemporary until June 18.

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/alinacohen/2016/06/15/a-portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-party-crasher-kind-of-basquiat-at-nahmad-contemporary/#2960ebbb6e95>