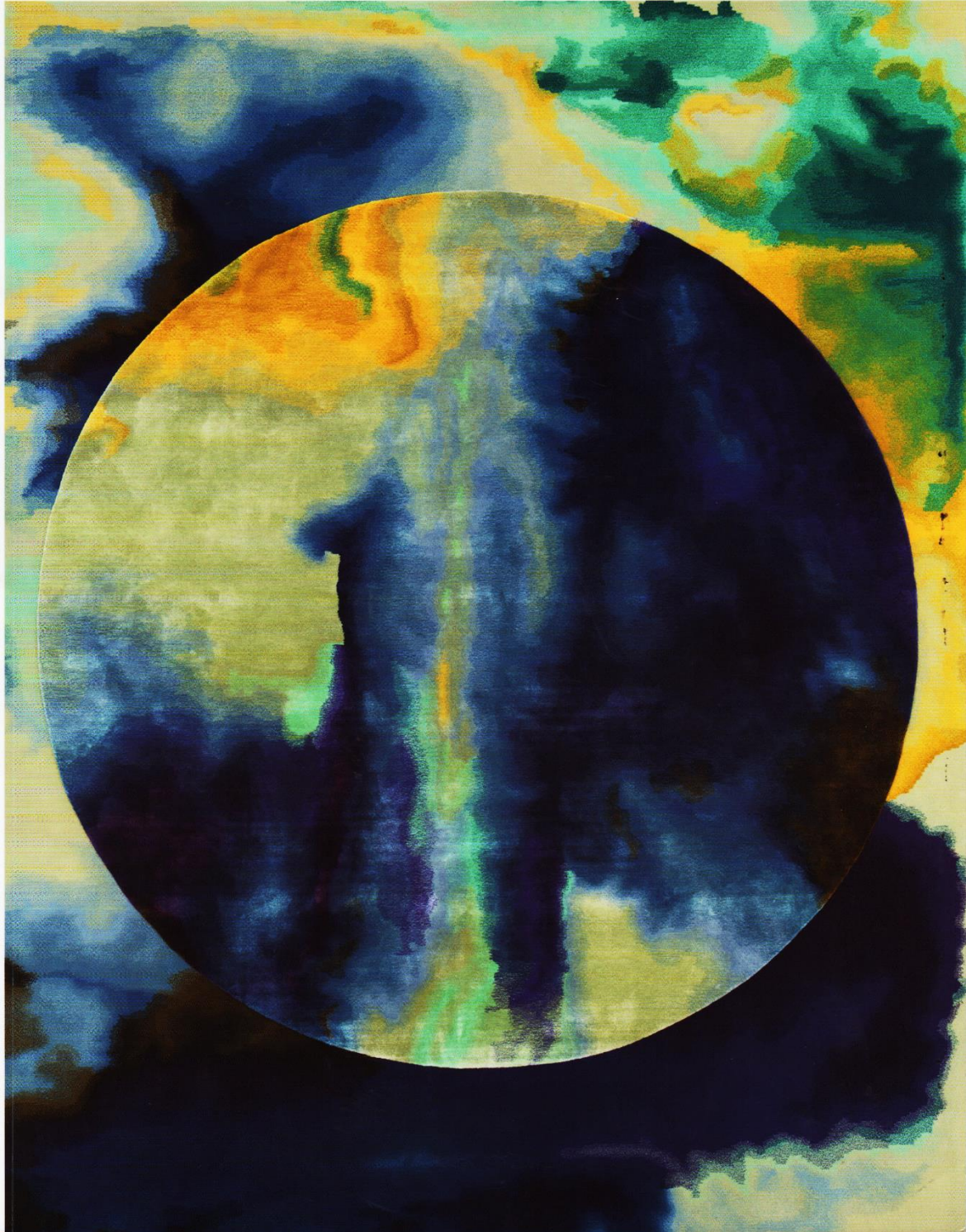



Summer 2016

THE PENINSULA

Summer 2016







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WORDS

TEXT: COCO MARETT

IMAGES: ©THE ESTATE OF JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT/ LICENSED BY ARTESTAR, NEW YORK

PORTRAIT: ROLAND HAGENBERG

More commonly, artists use art to express what words often cannot. But in the case of the late Jean-Michel Basquiat, words actually became the art itself. The Peninsula speaks with Dr. Dieter Buchhart, who recently curated the exhibition 'Words Are All We Have: Paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat' at New York's Nahmad Contemporary.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, Moses and the Egyptians, 1982
Acrylic and oilstick on canvas, 73 x 54 in (185 x 137 cm)

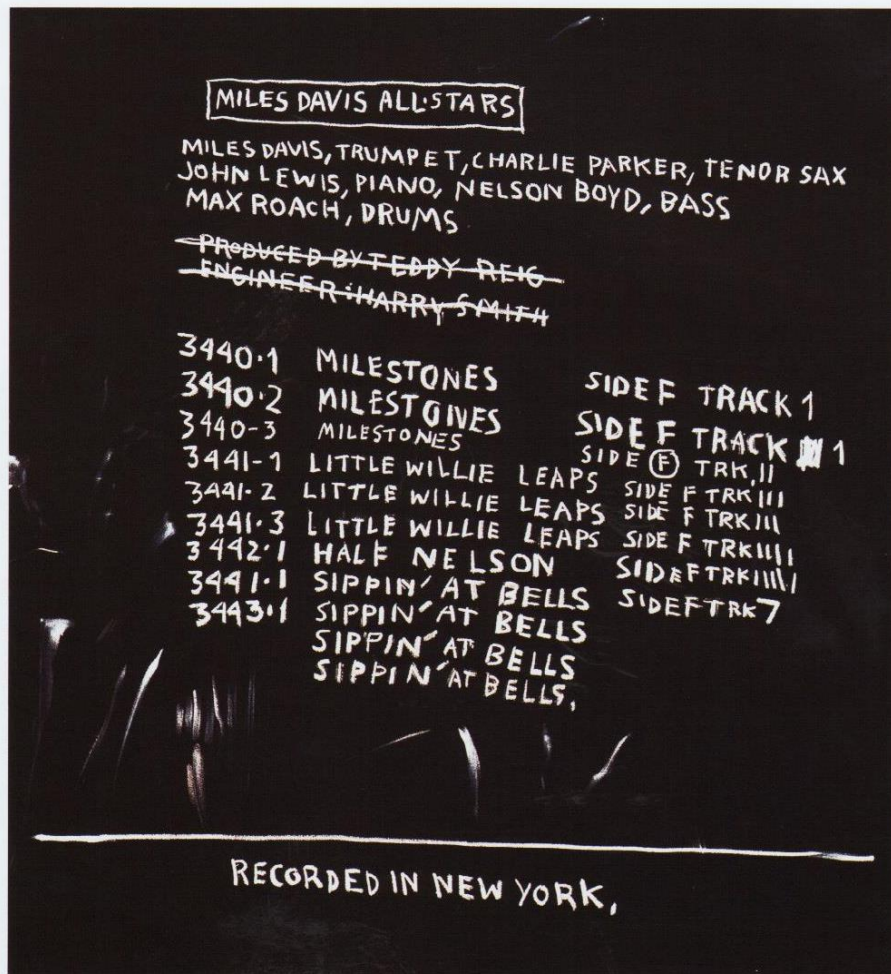
“If you read the canvases out loud to yourself, the repetition, the rhythm, you can hear Jean-Michel thinking,” hip-hop forerunner Fab 5 Freddy once aptly said about his friend and collaborator, artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Nahmad Contemporary in New York recently hosted ‘Words Are All We Have: Paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat’, an exhibition organised by curator and pre-eminent Basquiat scholar, Dr. Dieter Buchhart. The exhibition highlighted the artist’s innovative incorporation of literature and music in his work, and featured a collection of some of Basquiat’s most groundbreaking works – all of which included his iconic combination of words, signs and pictograms.

Combining fragments of literature, music, poetry, and science, the language in Basquiat’s work is in fact a language of its own; one so unique to the artist, but which spoke to – and continues to speak to – people all over the world.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, Now's the Time, 1985
Acrylic and oilstick on wood, 92 1/2 diameter (235 cm)



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Discography II*, 1983
Acrylic and oilstick on canvas, 66 x 60 in (167.5 x 152.5 cm)

The Peninsula(TP): What is it about Basquiat's work that resonates so strongly with you?

Dieter Buchhart(DB): Jean-Michel Basquiat was radical, both in his life and work. He was a pioneering artist and in fact a key figure in the art of the second half of the 20th Century – and he remains one in the present. Rich with symbolic meaning, both irate and complex, the works of Basquiat took the art scene of the 1980s by storm – first in New York and then in Europe, and subsequently, the rest of the world. The 'Post-Modern culture' of the 1970s and 1980s was strikingly expressed in his oeuvre. In 1982 he became one of the youngest participants of 'The Documenta' and a vital precursor to the 'Junge Wilde' (wild youth), as well as playing a major role the art of the 90s and contemporary artistic practice. He produced around 1,000 paintings and more than 2,000 drawings in less than a decade; a comprehensive oeuvre bristling with intensity and autonomy.

TP: Tell us about the exhibition 'Words Are All We Have'....

DB: The exhibition positions Basquiat as a pioneer in the use of literary and musical antecedents to cross-pollinate his own artistic practice. He used words like brushstrokes and like weapons; his inimitable line was "ready for battle, carried out sharp as knives, injurious". One of

Gerard Basquiat's statements about his son applies here: "Jean-Michel was very bright, very social and very politically oriented. He didn't have to politicise through a microphone. The works possess messages and speak for themselves." In our show we demonstrate for the first time the major importance of words, numbers, and phrases in his art. This distinguished him from Neo-Expressionists like David Salle or Julian Schnabel. All his work circulated around the words and the lines. We exhibited masterpieces such as 'Now's the Time', 'Discography', 'Eroica I and II' and 'Moses and the Egyptians' from the Guggenheim collection. It was a very impressive museum quality show which shed new light on his main artistic practice. In our comprehensive book published at Hatje Cantz, authors such as Greg Tate, Jordana Moore Saggese, Christian Campbell and Thomas Sayers Ellis contributed with their newest ideas and research. This show was a milestone in the discussion of Basquiat and his importance in the arts.

TP: How did you select the works for this exhibition?

DB: In our selection we focused on masterpieces that strikingly demonstrate the exhibition's focus on Basquiat's use of words, letters, signs and symbols.

TP: What roles do literature and music play in the use of language in Basquiat's artwork?

DB: Though most often identified within the formal and stylistic discourse of Neo-Expressionism, Basquiat's semantically complex paintings place him firmly within the conceptual trajectory of the Beat generation of writers and the rise of hip-hop and jazz. William Burrough's "cut-up" technique of rearranging existing text to produce new narratives, as well as the sampling technique championed by rappers such as Fab 5 Freddy, provided the artist with a rich model for assemblage and improvisation. Basquiat capitalised on the malleability of words to synthesise his own unique visual language, which art historian Robert Storr termed 'Eye-Rap', a form of painted hip-hop with "startling visual syncopation."

Similarly to the hip-hop techniques of sampling and scratching, Basquiat tested letters and words both for their sounds and their constellations of meaning, trying out word mutations and permutations, and he crossed out words in his notebooks and oilstick drawings, and placed actual scratches on his paintings.

In Basquiat's works, letters and words seem to speak a rhythm. This use of language is reminiscent of sound poetry, with its emphasis on pure rhythm and repetition, as exemplified in Kurt Schwitters's 'Ursonate' (1922–32), an incantatory poem-sonata consisting of vocalisations instead of musical notes. Basquiat's work also has close connections with concrete poetry, which creates its effects through the arrangement of letters or words in patterns or forms.

Basquiat's drawings almost challenge the viewer to rap them aloud. His paintings, with their combination of pentimento, acrylic paint, oil sticks, and collage, create a form of painted hip-hop, with fragments of text playing a critical role as samples. And throughout his work, the artist's intense critique of contemporary culture parallels hip-hop's subject matter.

Basquiat's interest in music ran deep, and in works like 'Discography', he referred explicitly to music and pieces of music. In

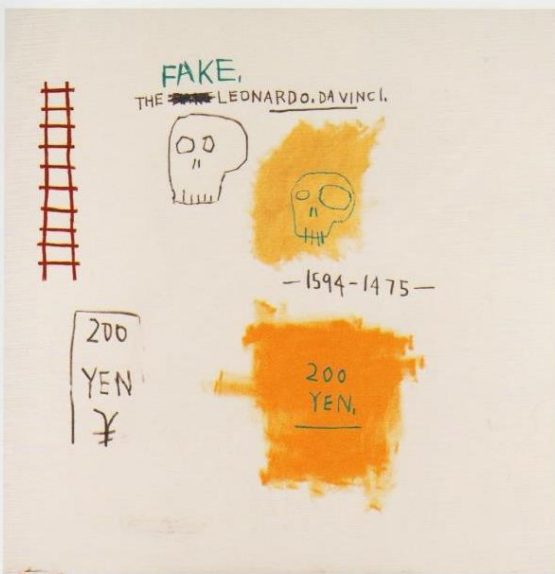
1982–83, he even produced a rap record with Fab 5 Freddy, Toxic, and Rammellzee, and worked in several clubs in Manhattan as a DJ. As a musician, Basquiat played in the band Gray with Michael Holman, Vincent Gallo, and DJ High Priest. The band Gray distanced itself from a conventional understanding of music, for it was expected of the band members that they not be musicians. In this way, Basquiat's music production paralleled his art, especially in his notebooks, in its inclusion of the everyday, as well as chance and the unpredictable.

TP: What do you hope people took away from the 'Words Are All We Have' exhibition?

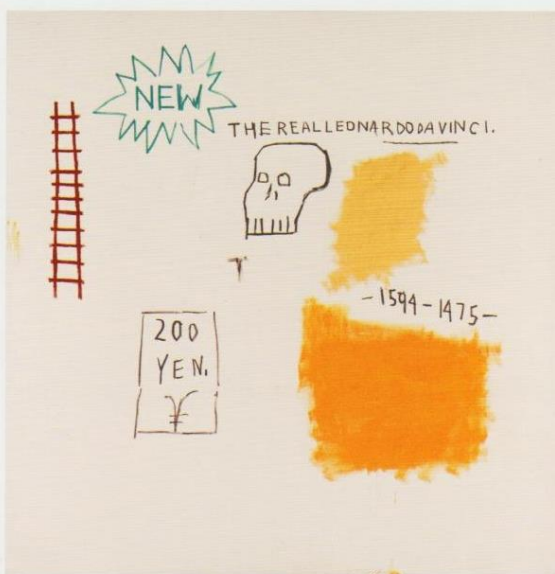
DB: I hope that this show provided new insights and presented the audience with a different view on Basquiat's oeuvre. The show established that it was in painting, more than any other medium, that his imagery and textual quotations achieved the truest amalgamation, one that was able to dissolve the boundaries between the visual and verbal arts. Basquiat's unprecedented approach to painting reconceptualised pictorial tradition, collapsing image and text to communicate the complexity of contemporary existence.

TP: Given that you have been an expert on Basquiat's work for so many years, is it possible to learn more about his work?

DB: The life and work of Jean-Michel Basquiat have fascinated millions of people far beyond the boundaries of the art community, and have turned him into a major figure whose influence continues to have a manifold effect on us right up to the present day – even for the youngest people. Given the richness and vastness of Basquiat's work, I am sure that there is a lot more to learn about his artistic manifesto. We still learn more about artists whose works have been around for hundreds of years, so I am certain that there are many more aspects about Basquiat's oeuvre that can be researched in yet more depth.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, Fake, 1983
Acrylic and oilstick on canvas, 84 1/4 x 84 1/4 in (214 x 214 cm)



Jean-Michel Basquiat, New, 1983
Acrylic and oilstick on canvas, 84 1/4 x 84 1/4 in (214 x 214 cm)