



PROFILE

JEAN MICHEL BASQUIAT A Stroke of Genius

Story By: Danielle Burnham

Brooklyn-born artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) first gained notoriety as part of the graffiti duo SAMO©, a pseudonym he and fellow artist Al Diaz spray-painted around Lower Manhattan during the 1970s. The ironic and critical posturing of SAMO© as a kind of corporate brand quickly attracted the attention of the counter-culture press, and, by the time Basquiat and Diaz parted ways in 1980, SAMO© had helped launch the popular perception of graffiti as a new phenomenon in art.

In the meantime, a new movement in fine art were beginning to percolate, as artists of the era began to react to the success of Minimalism. Minimalist art, in defiance of Abstract Expressionism, had favored anonymity over narrative, absconded with metaphors, and replaced human figures with geometric forms. In the late 1970s, these trends gave way to one that echoed the tradition of Abstract Expressionism, as artists

began to embrace the "dramatic" and reintroduce depictions of the human figure. By 1980, these anti-Minimalist stirrings exploded in the triumph of a new movement in art labeled "Neo-Expressionism".

Basquiat's earliest paintings, created after the "death" of SAMO© that same year, earned him almost instant renown. By 1982, he was at the forefront of the art scene, opening 6 solo shows in various cities all over the world and becoming the youngest



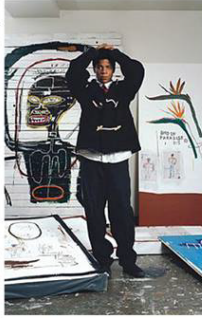
artist to participate in Documenta, an exhibition in Germany that features only the most significant artists of the era.

Much of Basquiat's work reflects the artistic mores of the Neo-Expressionist movement. In his piece *Untitled* (1981), he depicts a figure which, while not representational or "realistic", is not so distorted that it is unrecognizable as a human head. Despite the subject's resemblance to a skull, elements of the content – like the suggestion of sensory receptors along the top – convey that the subject is not an inanimate object, but is in fact alive. Furthermore, the subject of the painting has no origin in traditional iconography, and sets a new precedent in both Basquiat's work and Modern Art at large.

In his piece *Flexible* (1984), Basquiat explores one of his most renowned motifs: the griot, a character from West African folklore described as a nomadic storyteller and philosopher. As in *Untitled*, the figure, which stares back at the viewer blankly, assumes the quali-

ties of being both alive – as conveyed through the diagrammatic rendering of the lungs – and inanimate.

Some of Basquiat's later work, created in collaboration with Andy Warhol, echoes the same anti-establishment sentiment that drove SAMO©. The two artists worked in the manner of "free association", passing a piece back and forth between them, each adding his own new content. In *Arm & Hammer II* (1985), for example, Basquiat responds to Warhol's characteristic use of corporate logos with freehand attempts to "humanize" the piece – almost as an act of defiance.



Much of Basquiat's work expresses his own criticism of the art scene, and in many ways encapsulates the excess and commercialization endemic to 1980s New York City. But, despite the brevity of his career – Basquiat's life was cut short by an overdose when he was only 27 – his work was not only impactful in its own time, but secured his place as a legend among artists of the Modern era. **AN**