

The Racial Disparities and Influences on Art and Social Culture Through the Work of Jean-Michel Basquiat

Student Name
Department

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Abstract

The work of Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988), a graffiti artist turned fine artist, has been resurfacing in today's day-to-day life through contemporary fashion, pop culture, and socio-culture attitudes. For almost ten years Basquiat was known by his graffiti tag name, SAMO, a name that appeared throughout New York City during the mid-1970s. Not only was the artist represented through street culture, but also the "black" content and tension that was saturated throughout his artwork. The artist struggled with self-identity, being born to a Haitian father, first-generation Puerto Rican mother and living an upper-middle class lifestyle. Despite his socio-economic placement within society, he still found himself on the borders of being considered a "black" man within the population. This research examines Basquiat's self-identity within the intersections of Afro-American and Afro-Latino identities and relates his artwork to the socio-cultural issues he experienced in view of the black community. This paper analyzes several of his works and places them against societal perceptions of the black community as well as against the artist's perspectives and his portrayal of this marginalized group within American culture.

Description of Research

Throughout New York City in the 1970s racial tensions were still fairly evident following recent events from past political leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Although it is assumed that large metropolitan areas such as Manhattan may not have the high tensions of racial discord due to the increased volumes of diversity, there was constant strain between certain minority groups. Artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat used this tension to inform his artwork like in his 1981 painting *Irony of a Negro Policeman*. I will be analyzing this piece and its scholarly interpretations regarding violence and tenuous relationships between the city's police and related municipal policies towards the minority community, specifically those of color. I intend on using examples from Richard Schur's article, "Post-Soul Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Art," to support my idea that specific pieces of Basquiat's were racially influenced.

My research will also include the discussion of Basquiat's beginnings within graffiti and government policies restricting illegal street art. I will be relating issues such as the, "stop and frisk" movement that took place within New York City that may have been an influence on the painting *Irony of a Negro Policeman*. As a contrasting work by another African-American artist concerned with representation and identity, I will study Kerry James Marshall's work currently on exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. *Untitled (policeman)* will be primarily used as a comparative piece to Basquiat's work. I will also be reaching out to the Met Museum's social media manager, Kimberly Drew, to interview her about the influence of Basquiat's work within the current day black community and also - on pop culture. Drew also writes a blog devoted to the work of black contemporary art and may offer more insight about the struggles black artists face.

With the funding of an undergraduate research grant, I will be able to travel throughout New York City to see the artwork of Jean-Michel Basquiat as well as be able to visit various places

he lived and worked to help gain an understanding behind the meaning of his paintings. My focus will be to see specific artworks in person to gain better knowledge of his work and to analyze the use of materials and the mood of each piece individually, something I am not able to via digital imagery. I plan to include a detailed visual analysis of artworks that correlate best with the research I am doing regarding social and racial tensions as in Basquiat's work that reference his generation as well as are relevant to today's society.

Timeline

January 5th: Evening flight into New York

January 6th:

- Visit the MoMA to view Untitled (policeman) and Kerry James Marshall's work
- SoHo Contemporary Art Gallery (waiting for response on specific pieces by Basquiat)

January 7th:

- Whitney Museum of American Art - to see, Hollywood Africans by Basquiat

January 8th: Return to Charlotte

*Replies from Kimberly Drew and SoHo Contemporary Art Gallery

Budget

1. Travel expenses
 - a. Charlotte (traveling from home) to New York City round trip plane ticket: \$200
 - b. MetroCard 7-Day Unlimited Pass: \$31
2. Cost of Food
 - a. \$25 per day
3. Material fees (writing materials, photocopies, etc): \$20
4. Entrance to Museums:
 - a. Whitney Museum of American Art: \$22
 - b. Museum of Modern Art: \$16
 - c. SoHo Contemporary Art Gallery: Free entry

Working Bibliography

- Ahearn, Victoria. "AGO's Jean-Michel Basquiat Exhibit Speaks to Current Race Relations Issues." *Times Colonist*. February 3, 2015. Accessed October 09, 2016. <http://www.timescolonist.com/ago-s-jean-michel-basquiat-exhibit-speaks-to-current-race-relations-issues-1.1751262>.
- Berggruen, Olivier. "The Prints of Jean-Michel Basquiat." *Print Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2009): 28-38. <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/43826046>.
- Schur, Richard. "Post-Soul Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Art." *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 644. <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/25426982>.
- "The History of American Graffiti: From Subway Car to Gallery." PBS. Accessed October 30, 2016. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/art/the-history-of-american-graffiti-from-subway-car-to-gallery/>.
- Whitehead, Jessie L. "Invisibility of Blackness: Visual Responses of Kerry James Marshall." *Art Education* 62, no. 2 (2009): 33-39. <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/27696328>.