Untitled (skull), 1982
Graffiti art as we have come to understand it is the gallery version of graffiti found in the environment, particularly in and on the New York subway trains. wrought mostly by young, untrained male artists, it is characterized by exuberant, often Day-Glo color, usually applied with a spray can, and highly stylized words and names of the artist, known as "tags."

Jean Michel Basquiat never painted the subway trains, but his tag "Samo," his crowns and his copyright signs were well-known from exterior walls in lower Manhattan by the time he made his art world debut in the 1980 Times Square Show, which brought him national attention along with Keith Haring and others.

An immediate success, Basquiat has continued to impress other artists and professionals in the field with his distinctive and sophisticated iconography of symbols that includes skulls, bones, scrawled words, crowns, stick figures and abstract pictorial marks. He finds his images in the mass media, textbooks, famous paintings, ancient cultures and religions, successfully borrowing them in brightly colored canvases that reflect the cultural and ethnic richness of New York. As critic Jeffrey Deitch observed, Basquiat "vacuums up cultural fallout and spits it out on stretched canvas."

Basquiat's paintings are often multpaneled and may contain drawings collaged onto the surface, as in Ski Lift. The skull-like heads against the dark backgrounds of the two left panels of Ski Lift recall the black skulls in Jake Berthot's drawings, recently seen in MATRIX, but whereas Berthot's skulls refer to the refined anatomical sketches of Renaissance masters, Basquiat's are more akin to mock-terrifying Halloween masks.

Another multi-image work, Untitled (1984), revolves around the theme of evolution. The words "chimpazee" and "neanderthal" appear alongside a frontal view of a white skull with large yellow eye sockets. Basquiat seems preoccupied with the word "teeth," here written below the skull and partially painted over but, in other portraits, often printed in place of a mouth.

Pyro is an even more complex work in which Basquiat juxtaposes disparate imagery ranging from the dominant Mayan head and torso to animals, stick figures, rockets, a skyscraper and a pagoda. The title may refer to rocket fire; the red and orange color reinforces the explosive imagery. Using an associative technique similar to the psychic automatism of the Surrealists, Basquiat moves spontaneously from image to word to image, imparting a sense of immediacy to the paintings. Scale relationships are arbitrary and forms often overlap, reminding one of the helterskelter arrangement of prehistoric drawings on cave walls, put there by early man as he tried to control his environment through the rendering of magical signs.

Untitled (skull) and Untitled (fish) are powerful examples of single-image work. In the former, Basquiat depicts a three-quarter view of a disembodied head/skull. The multitude of colors within the head, along with indications of cranial fissures and myriad other markings and scratchings, suggest the turmoil of the mind, further implied by the indecipherable letters at the top of the canvas.

Untitled (fish) is one of Basquiat's most poetic paintings. The fish, a Christian symbol for Christ, swims in an aqueous ground of pale pinks and greens. Its internal linear structure is echoed by the red arrow below, which serves as a reminder of Christ's fate.

Basquiat resists the label "graffiti artist" and, stylistically, his works have little resemblance to the spray-painted cartoon imagery and bubble letters of graffiti artists such as Daze and Crash who made their initial reputations as subway painters. Although he had no formal art training apart from a class in high school, Basquiat successfully made the transition from the streets to galleries and museums because he had assimilated much of the vocabulary of modern art by hanging around New York's School of Visual Arts (while Haring was a student there) and by visiting museums. Basquiat's work has art historical precedents that include Jean Dubuffet's "Art Brut," a style that found its sources in objects produced by those isolated from the professional art world--children, the insane and the untutored, as well as in Cy Twombly's elegant scrawlings, and Pop Art, a movement that legitimatized pop culture as subject-matter.

Basquiat was born in Brooklyn, New York, where he attended public schools. He dropped out of high school in eleventh grade and, at the age of twenty-four, has already achieved international acclaim. After its presentation in Berkeley, the exhibition will be shown at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art and the University Art Museum, UC Santa Barbara.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX:


2. Untitled (skull), 1982, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 81-1/2" x 79-1/2". Lent by Elythie and Eli Broad, Los Angeles.

3. Ski Lift, 1984, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 72" x 120". Lent by Larry Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles.


5. Untitled, 1984, oil and mixed media on canvas, 72" x 96". Lent by Douglas S. Cramer, Los Angeles.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Annina Nosei Gallery, NY, '81, '82; Emilio Mazzoli Gallery, Modena, Italy, '81; Larry Gagosian Gallery, L.A., '82; Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich, '82, '83; Mary Boone Gallery, NY, '84; The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland, '84 (traveled; catalogue).

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under exhibitions):


Deitch, Jeffrey. "Jean Michel Basquiat," Flash Art (Milan), May '82.

Pincus-Witten, Robert. Los Angeles Times, July 16, '82.


Clarke, John R. "Up Against the Wall, Transavanguardia," Arts, Dec. '82.

DeAk, Edit and Diego Cortez. "Baby Talk," Flash Art (Milan), May '82.


Selected group exhibitions:

New York, Times Square Show, '80; P.S. I, NY, New York, New Wave, '81; Aurelian Walls, Rome, Avantgarde and Transavantgarde '68 to '77, '82; Kassel, W. Germany, Documenta 7, '82 (catalogue); Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, Biennale, '83 (catalogue); Sidney Janis Gallery, NY, Post Graffiti, '82; Musee d'Art Contemporain, Montreal, Canada, New Art, '84.

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