



Jean-Michel Basquiat

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

The Delay of Dying

A Dialogue

Persons: The extraordinarily well-dressed young man and his companion, who privately did not consider himself so. They are Negroes, one darker than the other.

Scenes: A grassy knoll in a public park, a movie theater, a number of cafes.

On a grassy knoll replete with sun-dappled leaves on trees, the extraordinarily well-dressed young man is dressed, as is his wont, in a number of layers – duster, jacket, vest, shirt, tie – and (as is also his wont) appears to be extremely self-contained within the context of his clothing, but is not. His companion, who wears his customary polo shirt, chinos and cardigan, is a pale reflection of the extraordinarily well-dressed young man's apparent self-control.

The extraordinarily well-dressed young man, in a deep and sonorous voice, says, "Dead and rotting things as a viable aesthetic have declared themselves in two fields of American popular culture only: fashion and rock 'n' roll. Each is based on the premise that ephemerality is the standard and, as such, things do not last, let alone the spectacle or event before us, whether it be thrashing guitars or women dressed as models exhibiting themselves as something other than themselves. From the moment these events are over and recede in the memory of the viewer, our thinking about them is a decayed memory, which is one of the appeals of rock music and of fashion: that it dies nearly as it happens. It is within this context, that of the ephemeral moment, that I have been thinking about the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat."

"Yes, yes," said the extraordinarily well-dressed young man's companion, shifting slightly on the knoll, his fingers grazing over one or two blades of the not-too-green grass.

"It is interesting to consider how Basquiat's work does not necessarily tie into standard art practice in this way: by denying commodification," continued the extraordinarily well-dressed young man's companion. "What propels the work into being – decay as process – contradicts what the plastic arts (painting, sculpture, photography) are supposed to do: be fixed objects, bought, sold, unmentioned,



Obnoxious Liberals, 1982, acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas, 68" x 102", collection Eli and Edythe L. Broad, Los Angeles



Untitled (Skull), 1981, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 81½" x 69¼", collection Eli and Edythe L. Broad, Los Angeles

unthought of past the transaction known as acquisition. Acquiring a Basquiat is about the acquisition of something that will change.

“Which is not to say that Basquiat’s works, with their propensity to compose out of scraps monuments to decay, are not works that don’t last, are not fixed. They are. But his works exist in a space distinct from standard art practice – they are not consumable as recognizable commodities because they affront one’s senses much in the way that rock ‘n’ roll does: rudely, marginally, excessively. His work, in a sense, is about the excessive nature of an impolite force: death and how it consumes the body; death and its disregard for the messiness or perfection of one’s life. Death takes us as is. Cocteau advised us to look into the mirror to see death at work. I would advise most viewers of Basquiat’s work to regard it as the process of a life disassembling before our very eyes, the scraps and nasty bits we leave behind, given, by the artist, form, somewhat of a function: to make the debris left here and there in our daily lives matter. Which is where you began.”

“What?” inquired the extraordinarily well-dressed young man, turning first this thought and then another around in his head. While he had been conscious of the sound of his companion’s words, the metaphysics surrounding those words had begun to affect him physically, a fact he did not declare in speech but in action: the removal, first, of a tie and then a vest. As he did so – slowly – the extraordinarily well-dressed young man said, “The body. I am very interested in how Basquiat represents the body in his work, which is representational, a conundrum artists – especially sculptors – have to contend with as an issue at some point, just as they have to contend with the poetics of space, scale. To begin (somewhat) with an essentialist thought: What constitutes a painting’s interest in the body – if the artist has any interest in the body at all? How does he/she ‘see’ it? Further reducing this question, let me add: In looking at form (human) does the painter see gender, race, the essentially boring politics of the new interaction – political correctness – as the form of fascism it is, limiting our knowledge of the touch and feel toward the other, toward anyone, not ourselves?”

“One of the more compelling aspects



Untitled, 1981, acrylic and mixed media, 94" x 60", collection Eli Broad Family Foundation, Santa Monica, Calif.

of Basquiat’s work, which is to say the work of a person who can be regarded as a statistic – Negro, male – is his not bludgeoning to death the ‘meaning’ inherent in those things. He circumvents, not avoids, the strictly representational, and therefore fashionable, by adhering to a number of environs in his mind, such as the belief in self-expression being a compendium of lived experience, observation. The paintings are not literary, solely to be read as something. If it is to be read it must be picked apart line by line, phrase by phrase; the syntax must be dismantled.

“In the aggressive visuality of his

pieces, one is made aware from the titles of the beautification of negative space, of an artist who leans backward toward the non-interpretive. But of course that’s there, too. The interpretive I mean. While Basquiat’s obvious antecedents are present everywhere and nowhere in his work – the creepy spindliness of Eva Hesse; the order of Sol Lewitt, the ‘overall’ effect of Pollock – what these artists do not have and what Basquiat pushes toward is a certain physical weightiness that does not distinguish between the body and mind. The work exists less as a physical metaphor for an idea of suffering, disconnectedness – as, say, in the

case of Eva Hesse – than as a declaration of its involvement, into perpetuity, with the space the universe makes for what he creates, works composed of subjects dilapidated and dead, decaying and moved toward another life (art) – which Basquiat saw as being slightly removed from death.”

The sun began to set. The two young men looked at it.

Scene: The lobby of a movie theater moments after a screening of Rose Hobart, the collage film (tinted blue) that Joseph Cornell metamorphosed into a surreal masterpiece culled from a dead Hollywood B film titled East of Borneo, starring one Rose Hobart.

The extraordinarily well-dressed young man, carrying a walking stick, said, “The labor-intensive amount of work that went into his pieces bears a remarkable similarity to the work and mind of what critics and curators have not pointed out heretofore – the work of Joseph Cornell, the only American artist Basquiat bears any similarity to in terms of process: the days and weeks both artists – Basquiat and Cornell – spent in accumulating age around them.

“From various reports, Cornell would bake pieces of wood and splinter glass to achieve an effect of abandonment – the visual signifiers of solitude, of dreams. Basquiat’s fascination with erosion, the time it takes to acquire the mucked-up look that characterizes much of his work is much more urban, his pieces being signposts of urban life: the crumbling mortar of a post-apocalyptic Pompeii.

“In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs wrote of ‘decaying cities, declining economies and mounting social troubles’ traveling together. What Jacobs also discusses is the extremely civilized quality of the inhabitants of any urban culture: the fact that citizens become, through the excessive pressure of living one on top of the other, denizens with a kind of respect for the environment and the ways in which the environment speaks something of the self. That is why slums should never be described as such, since their inhabitants would not live in such a place.

“I knew Basquiat as a child and young man in Manhattan. Consider the look of that uniform, ‘ideal’ community and the look of the people in certain pieces: people who rightly resist being made ideal



Victor 25448, 1987, acrylic, oil paintstick, wax and crayon on paper mounted on canvas, 72" x 133", courtesy Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York, N.Y.

citizens in ugly buildings that have nothing to do with what is uniform and ugly, people led to believe that they themselves are slums.

“Rotting, messed up, chicken grease splattering on the wall, the funky non-aroma of death infecting each and every stairwell. From all accounts, Basquiat was a citizen of this sort of world, just as he became, by virtue of being an artist, the citizen of other kinds of worlds – the art world for one, in which being a statistic – Negro and male – amounts to other things as well: being thought of, consumed. Perhaps one of Basquiat’s greatest achievements is in finding the metaphors appropriate to deny the art world’s ideas of what he should be.



Melting Point of Ice, 1984, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 86" x 68", collection Eli Broad Family Foundation, Santa Monica, Calif.

Would Basquiat have continued to find the metaphors appropriate to himself?” inquired the extraordinarily well-dressed young man of his companion, who privately did not consider himself so. His companion said, “I think so, yes. We see with one set of eyes; what enlivens the purely optical is illusory, like perspective.”

Scene: One or two cafes.

The extraordinarily well-dressed young man and his companion, who did not consider himself so, sip coffee and a Coke, respectively.

The extraordinarily well-dressed young man, removing his gloves, said, “The thought implicit in Basquiat’s work is the barriers used to live modern life, self-protective, as in ‘Beware of ...’ What one catches on that wire is the sleeve of thought, Basquiat’s thought, which is comprised of a myriad of things: never letting go, disappearing as it happens, history, disregarding ugliness, and the beauty we have in rock ‘n’ roll, America’s only indigenous art form aside from jazz, an amalgam of black and white, high and low, unraveling us with the dream of the miscegenation of thought, unraveling the way we think we live now.”

– Hilton Als

Hilton Als is a writer living in New York, N.Y.

Cover: *Gold Griot*, 1984, oil on wood, 117" x 73", Collection Eli Broad Family Foundation, Santa Monica, Calif.

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