

October 14, 2017

Anything is all there is

Jean Michel Basquiat, Boom for Real,
Barbican Centre, London



The Irony of the Black Policeman, 1981

The Artist with a Good Suit and No Shoes

Andy Warhol: What do you paint?

Basquiat: Anything.

Warhol: Anything is all there is.

Andy Warhol TV, season 2, episode 9, 1983

Lately I have been thinking a lot about painting. I have been thinking about what I paint, why I paint and who I paint for.

All these disjunctions - the contradictions inherent in being a solitary artist in the studio and being a social artist out in the world - make it difficult to juggle the two identities. On the one hand you have to be as vulnerable as you can be to produce the most truthful work. On the other hand, you have to be immune to the vagaries of the world outside your head and be strong and confident.

Having two one-woman shows on right now in London, accompanied by all the usual anxieties about selling work, talking about subject matter and finally promoting it, has made me very interested in the work and life (unusually inextricable) of mythic painter Jean Michel Basquiat, currently the subject of a major retrospective at London's Barbican Centre.

I know his work well. I like it very much. I always have. I find it energetic, beautiful, provocative, ingenious, thoughtful, knowing, educated, subtle and moving. I see his work in a continuum from Picasso's appropriation in his work of tribal and African art, to the gestural marks in Action Painting and Abstract Expressionism, and to David Hockney's youthful paintings and drawings. Basquiat would have loved stealing from the Louvre, as Picasso is alleged to have done. Instead he "stole" out from under the Upper East side plutocrats who were his collectors, those who simultaneously disparaged him racially and spent colossal amounts of money on this new fêted "genius".

It's a great pity that he fell under Warhol's influence. Andy was a great draughtsman as was Basquiat, but he was a showman, a watcher, a dedicated follower of fashion, an artefact.

Basquiat was not. And yet he emerged from the heated, manic, frantic art world scramble of the NYC disco/rap/hip hop 80's mythologised by Julian Schnabel in his 1996 biopic *Basquiat*. The art world and its dealers, whom he scathingly called "administrators and merchants", ate him up and spat him out very young, dead from heroin at the infamous age of 27. Born to Haitian Puerto Rican parents, he was educated in jazz and classical music at home, and New York's museums were part of his childhood. From his Flatbush Brooklyn beginnings he then became the anonymous street artist living hand to mouth on the Lower East Side, and famous for his ubiquitous tag Samo® (same old shit). This tagging was a mixture of performance, conceptual art and Dada.

His later life of drugs, dissipation and huge wealth betrayed his early existence as a street guerrilla artist. When he died tens of thousands of dollars in cash were found stashed around his apartment. In May 2017, one of his paintings fetched \$98 million at auction in New York.

Robin Richmond