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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Inner Demons, Exorcised With Paint 'Jean-Michel Basquiat' at the Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea

By Ken Johnson



The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat/ADAGP, Paris, ARS, New York 2013, Gagosian Gallery

"Eyes and Eggs," by Jean-Michel Basquiat, from 1983.

It is not true that only the good die young, but Jean-Michel Basquiat did at 27 in 1988. He was not only good; at his best he was one of the most original artists of his generation. If that sounds like an extravagant claim, you might have a look at the high-quality selection of 59 of his paintings at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea. There is not a lot of art from the '80s that feels this alive today.

At a casual glance Basquiat's paintings look as if they'd been made by a brilliant, autodidactic schizophrenic driven to download his inner demons, obsessions and fantastical ideas by whatever means possible. He worked rapidly with brushes, oil-stick markers, spray paint and other implements on small sheets of paper; roughly cobbled constructions of found boards and stretched fabric; an old wooden door; and large, professionally made canvases. You can imagine the creative persona Basquiat's art conjures, muttering and

chortling to himself while compulsively improvising his chartlike compositions of cartoon images, glyphic signs and enigmatic word lists.

An exuberant, comical spirit prevails. Made on a big, white painter's drop cloth with sneaker prints on it, "Eyes and Eggs" affectionately portrays a black short-order cook in a white cap with the name "Joe" on his white shirt holding a frying pan containing a pair of fried eggs whose red yolks rhyme with his goggle eyes. Offbeat humor and something stranger frequently converge, as in "Onion Gum," wherein a little man holding a long dangling snake in each hand stands on a giant blue head with scary, masklike features. Hand printed several times here and there on the surrounding yellow surface are the words "Onion gum makes your mouth taste like onions," a puzzling reference to the prank candy product advertised in old comic books.

But there is a lot of rage too, which concentrates most conspicuously in the recurring, scary-funny figure of a skeletal black man with wild dreadlocks, hollow eyes, grimacing teeth and bony extremities. One of the most impressive instances is "Untitled (Two Heads on Gold)," a double portrait of this explosive character on a canvas more than 10 feet wide rendered in teal, gold, black and white. It calls to mind Francis Bacon's so-called "screaming pope" paintings. As Bacon reacted to the horrors of war and its hypocritical perpetrators in Europe, Basquiat responded to the tragically absurd calamity of racism in America.

Another similarity is that both figures remain relatively immobilized, as if paralyzed by existential angst. Basquiat's — a black Everyman and a self-portrait — is not an active revolutionary like a Black Panther but a man prevented from becoming all that he wants by pervasive, irrational prejudice and driven insane because of it. Racism makes people crazy. This dimension hooks up neatly with the frenetic outsiderlike style.

Contrary to the first impression of urban primitivism a more considered view finds that Basquiat was nothing if not sophisticated. He toyed with primitivist tropes rhythmically the way jazz musicians play with standards. He made that connection himself; the names of famous jazz players turn up in many of his works. A simulated Charlie Parker record over eight feet tall, clumsily cut from plywood, painted black and with the label drawn in thin, chalklike lines, is a funny, heartfelt homage to that great saxophonist.

For all its bristling fury Basquiat's art remains engaging and likable. It is not overbearing, withholding or offensive but visually generous, materially sumptuous and entertaining. There is an eager-to-please vulnerability that gives it a bittersweet emotional complexity.

Naturally it is hard to look at Basquiat's art without ruminating on his similarly complicated brief life. Raised in a middle-class family, he dropped out of high school, left home as a teenager and became anonymously famous for writing gnomic graffiti on downtown walls,

like the word “Samo” — meaning “same old” — and “pay for soup, build a fort, set that on fire.”

He started painting around 1980 and suddenly achieved rock-star status at a time when the art market was booming as never before. Dealers and collectors showered him with more money than he knew what to do with, enabling him to indulge his ultimately fatal appetite for addictive drugs.

Five years before he died Basquiat described his plight with eerie prescience in “Obnoxious Liberals.” The left half of that picture illustrates the penultimate moment in the story of Samson: A black man shorn of his dreadlocks pushes out with muscular, manacled arms against classical white columns to either side. In the center a shouting man in a black top hat and priestly collar holds aloft a fist full of arrows — the critic, no doubt. To the right a squat figure in a big cowboy hat and polka-dot boxers with a face painted gold is probably a collector. But all three figures also can be said to personify aspects of the artist himself: his often irreconcilably conflicting desires for freedom, honor and material rewards.

In the end Basquiat was unable to escape or transcend the gilded trap of his own success. He didn't have time to grow up. He died, the system lived on, and his art still feeds the beast. Last year one of his paintings sold at auction for \$16.3 million.

“Jean-Michel Basquiat” continues through April 6 at the Gagosian Gallery, 555 West 24th Street, Chelsea; (212) 741-1111, gagosian.com.