

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



‘Basquiat and the Bayou,’ the No. 1 Prospect.3 art festival stop in New Orleans

Doug MacCash



Franklin Sirmans, artistic director, Prospect.3 international art festival in New Orleans (Photo by Doug MacCash / NOLA.com / The Times-Picayune)

Though he died at age 27 in 1988, artist Jean-Michel Basquiat remains among the brightest of American art stars. For a short time, he was a street artist in New York’s burgeoning 1970s graffiti scene. His tag, SAMO, became a graffiti icon.

Not long after, Basquiat climbed to the highest rungs of the rarified Manhattan art world, eventually even collaborating on paintings with pop legend Andy Warhol. His celebrity was almost unparalleled among visual artists. His expressionist paintings now hang in museums across the globe and sell for tens of millions. Reebok recently released a line of athletic shoes decorated with Basquiat images.

A suite of nine of Basquiat’s artworks based on Southern themes has been assembled for the first time ever on the Ogden Museum of Southern Art’s fifth floor. The exhibit, “Basquiat and the Bayou,” is certain to be the most popular stop during the Prospect.3 art festival that opens Oct. 25 and continues through Jan. 25, 2015.

Franklin Sirmans, the artistic director of Prospect.3, has studied Basquiat for years. During a visit to the Ogden on Saturday (Oct. 18), Sirmans explained the amazing persistence of the artist’s popularity. Basquiat, as part of the New York graffiti and club scene in the 1970s and ‘80s, became a link to the beginnings of hip-hop culture, Sirmans said. The artist’s use of so many spontaneously painted words and phrases in his expressionistic, politically charged works

parallels the rise of rap. (Fab 5 Freddy, an early hip-hop pioneer, also was a key figure in New York's graffiti scene at the time.)

“In many ways, Basquiat is looked upon as a poet, as a rapper in some ways, as someone who has been attached to the beginnings of hip-hop in New York City,” Sirmans said. “He’s someone who has been shouted out recently by immensely popular musical recording artists, so there is this almost new popularity in the last four or five years that comes directly from his relationship to music and the way that certain performers use him as someone to look up to, something to aspire to. ... You’ll have people like Jay-Z, like Swizz Beatz, like Kanye West who are talking about the paintings, actually talking about the work that was created.”

In his 2013 song “Picasso Baby,” Jay-Z invokes three art legends, plus the ritzy Swiss art fair, Art Basel:

“It ain’t hard to tell
I’m the new Jean-Michel
Surrounded by Warhols
My whole team ball
Twin Bugattis outside the Art Basel
I just wanna live life colossal
Spray everything like SAMO
Though I won’t scratch the Lambo
What’s it gonna to take
For me to go
For y’all to see
I’m the modern-day Pablo
Picasso baby”

Hip-hop artist Swizz Beatz turned to visual art when he painted a portrait of Basquiat on the hood of a car. He sold the artwork to Jay-Z, who is known to friends as Hov or Hova. Here’s Swizz’s recollection of the artistic tribute in his 2008 song, “That Oprah”:

“Bill Gates, Steve Jobs
iPhones, Microsoft
My paper is very long, your paper is very soft
I am a big BOSS
Boy, get lost
My new Basquiat
Hov know what that cost”

In his song “That’s My B---h,” Kanye West seems to toy with the pronunciation of Basquiat, as he instructs a paramour in the finer things:

“It ain’t safe in the city, watch the throne
She said I care more about them Baquiones
Basquiat’s, she learning the new word is yacht
Blew the world up soon as I hit the club with her
Too Short called, told me I fell in love with her.”

There are other reasons for the tenacity of Basquiat's appeal, Sirmans points out. As the years have gone by, scholars have had more time to seriously consider the content of Basquiat's work. There have been more public exhibitions. And the prices of his work have continued to rise, which always sparks the public imagination.

Over the past quarter century, Basquiat's fame hasn't just held steady, Sirmans said: "[T]he sort of mythology has grown immensely."

An association with music is fundamental to that mythology.

In the final months of his life, before he died of a drug overdose, Basquiat visited New Orleans in order attend Jazz Fest. Some of his paintings are focused on Southern musical traditions.

The painting devoted to Louis Armstrong will be especially resonant to New Orleanians; it's like a map, with wide blue oceans of paint surrounding yellow jazz musicians, who float like continents. Armstrong's face, in Zulu parade makeup, smiles Cheshire cat-like near the center of the work. The image reminds us how very strange it must be for non-New Orleanians to encounter images of African-Americans wearing black face paint.

While Basquiat was from Brooklyn, his father was Haitian. His mother was Puerto Rican.

A colorful accordion player dominates the mural-sized painting emblazoned with the word "Zydeco." The fact that the huge painting is predominantly green may indicate Basquiat's discovery that the hard-driving, electrified music comes from a rural milieu.

Finally, there's a painting of a horned demon named Nxu, who represents a guardian of doorways and crossroads, the symbolic juncture of "life on earth and the afterlife," Sirmans said. Though the beast holds a pair of spears, not a guitar, it's not too much of a stretch to imagine that the painting has something to do with the mythological bargain that legendary bluesman Robert Johnson is said to have made with the devil at a Mississippi crossroads at midnight.

Basquiat's depiction of the demon is agitated in the extreme. The thrashing, leering creature seems to be beset by a swarm of watching eyes. Perhaps the painting has something to do with the unspoken bargain that Basquiat — like Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Tupac Shakur and others — made with fame and fortune. Basquiat painted the devil the year he died.

"He also happened to have made a painting within a year of this painting called 'Riding with Death,'" Sirmans said. "We like our artists to have a story in some ways. Vincent van Gogh is a quite popular story, and this idea of an artist being somewhat tortured, that they cannot perhaps go on, is something that is fascinating."

It is difficult to consider Basquiat without being aware of his transcendent celebrity, but by exhibiting a set of paintings that address the culture of the Southern region, we're forced to dig a bit deeper into the tragic young man's thoughts.

We art lovers are grateful that Sirmans and Prospect.3 have brought that opportunity to 925 Camp St. Note: Admission to the Ogden is \$10, free on Thursdays.