

MAY 2009

APRIL 1993: A Day at the Races

Lorraine O'Grady on Basquiat and the Black Art World



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *untitled*, 1981, ink, crayon, and acrylic on paper, from a set of fourteen drawings, 30 x 22" each.

Projecting an endearing combination of self-effacement and plantation cynicism, Shaquille O'Neal, the #1 NBA draft pick, said in a recent TV profile, "I've got three different smiles: the \$1 million smile, the \$2 million smile, and the \$3 million smile." It went beyond playing the game: with a \$40 million contract and limitless prospects for endorsement, O'Neal was a winner. His situation seemed to shed light on the art world's own black-player-of-the-moment. For there is no doubt that the most bizarre aspect of the recent Jean-Michel Basquiat retrospective at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art was its aura of sport. Analysis of the work was put on hold, pending results of two different horse races.

First: could Basquiat's prices hold with this much exposure? Answer: yes. The match race between Basquiat and Julian Schnabel continues. At the big New York and London auctions following the opening, Schnabel's best was \$165,000; a Basquiat made \$228,000. His prices are at 50 or 60 percent of the earlier bull market and steadily rising. His work has become more, rather than less, financially interesting now that its obsessions with colonialism, creolism, and history can be plugged into the market's three-year-old concern with multiculturalism.

Second: Would jamming one hundred pieces together help or hurt his critical reputation? Answer: maybe; the air hasn't cleared. But he certainly wasn't done in. Initially, the gushing catalogue may have been checked by the vitriol of a Robert Hughes. But getting the contending views out, like piercing a boil, seems to have eased the way for tougher thinking. In the end, the gradually changing perceptions of a Roberta Smith, from "savvy imitation" and "illustrational stylishness" (1982) to "roiling, encompassing energy" (1989) and on to "a distinct form of visual speech" and "one of the singular achievements of the 80s" (1992), stand to gain credibility.¹

Still, there was something embarrassing about all the hysteria, including my own. It was an uncomfortable reminder that more was at stake than a game. (At some point between the Greeks and the free-agent clause, sport gave up its pretense to a cultural meaning beyond narco-catharsis.) The barely submerged violence for and against Basquiat was a sign that even the '80s couldn't turn art into basketball. Whatever the post-Modern condition, art was more than a decorative anodyne; it was a locus of values for which we were willing to kill.

Luis Camnitzer has argued that although, in the capitalist context, whatever can be sold as art is art, the market itself knows there's more to it than that. For work to come into existence in the first place requires a communication between artist and viewer. This exchange can be quite disjunct from the art's final consumption; for example, in both film and literature, the preponderance of readers and viewers of *The Color Purple* may have been white, but most would have sensed that the enabling audience, the one addressed by the work, was black.

Nevertheless, Camnitzer continues, control of the art's final context is what determines its destiny and function. Who buys, wins; and the destiny of crossover visual artists is an auction house that will be ruled by white money into eternity. This is a market of stripped-down, absolute values. The secondary market may, at a spiritual level, realize that art is the link between what is known and what needs to become known, but it will not permit divergent values to confuse or upset it. To retain its power to judge the work, it will remain willfully ignorant of nonhegemonic original contexts.

The result is that "peripheral" art can only be absorbed into the market when the politics of that market's values allow for its recognition. Hegemonic artists and critics have first to create appropriate references and spaces for it. As Camnitzer says, this condemns our work to being derivative *avant la lettre*. Whenever "peripheral" art is allowed to exist in a hegemonic context, it is derivative by definition, because it "enters as a consequence, not as an originator." If its originality can't be reduced, the work is too discomfiting and must be ignored.²

The hysteria generated by the Basquiat show, the extremes of ideology and emotions, even among those who said it was a yawn (on boredom, see Freud), came from a sense that this was one of those raw moments when the final context sat in judgment on the original. But the moment proved ineffectual. Faced with naively unresolved comments on graffiti, the '80s, and race, the work held on, if only tenuously.

It was disconcerting: Basquiat's habit of painting canvases that shatter at the edge of the mind appeared to defeat all but the most adventurous of critics. And "neutral" comments on discourse about the show often illustrated Camnitzer's argument. There were heated objections to referencing jazz by writers who seemed not to realize that jazz was not only an art form but a style of black intellectual life, and even well-intentioned calls to substitute formalist analysis for overworked ad hominem arguments were based in Eurocentric assumptions. In dealing with Basquiat's art, there is a fine line between rehearsing the legend and examining the art impulse itself. With precedents still undetermined, it's not just biography to analyze the intersections of the life with art history. But which art history/ies do we mean?

Under the compulsion to find hegemonic origins for him, such as Jean Dubuffet and Cy Twombly, analysis is being strangled. The debate needs air. If Basquiat *did* copy the painters so often mentioned, why *them*? What echoes made their styles appropriable to the experience of a late-twentieth-century black man? And has the black painter Raymond Saunders, whose work resonates with Basquiat's, heard them as well? Quotation in isolation is hardly interesting. Everybody quotes—*vide* Picasso.

Basquiat's biography is fascinating, but discussion of it is so uncomprehending that not even his legend has room to breathe. His romantic notion of jazz life was a quarter-century out of date. Forget his internal resources—what does it mean that he didn't have access to the kind of information that might have saved him? Would knowing the lessons of Bob Thompson, the '60s black painter with eerie parallels to him, have helped him move on? One effect of Basquiat's isolation is not speculation: the thinnest aspect of his art was not lack of training, which is irrelevant, but his separation from the audience that could have enabled and challenged him.

When I saw Jean-Michel's pieces in Annina Nosei's 1981 group show, I was stunned. I knew what I was looking at; and what I didn't know, I sensed. I never had to *translate* Jean-Michel, perhaps because I too came from a Caribbean-American family of a certain class—the dysfunctional kind, where bourgeois properties are viciously enforced and the paternal role model of choice is Kaiser Wilhelm. It was the sort of background that in the first generation of rebellious adolescents, kids no longer Caribbean and not yet American, faced with the inability of whites and blacks alike to perceive their cultural difference but convinced they were smarter than both combined, often produced a style of in-your-face arrogance and suicidal honesty. At their best, these traits sometimes ascended from mere attitude to the subversive and revolutionary.

It was the next-to-last day of the show, a Friday. Out on the street, I made calls from a pay phone. To Linda Bryant, founder of Just Above Midtown, the black not-for-profit where I showed with David Hammons, Fred Wilson, and others. I could tell Linda thought I was crazy: Haitian? From Brooklyn? Only twenty-one? It was too weird; she'd catch up with him later. I hadn't even mentioned graffiti. With the artists I spoke to, disbelief hardened further: on Prince Street? When there are guys out here who've been working thirty years?

It took over a year to find a way. The "Black and White Show" I was curating in the spring of '83, at the Kenkeleba Gallery, was to feature black-and-white work by black and white artists. It would star Jean-Michel, not David Hammons: David was already overexposed in the black art world, though he wasn't to be discovered by the white one for another six years. Of course, I didn't know if Jean-Michel would agree.

He had split with Nosei and was without a gallery. I'd heard the stories about exploitation (the studio in her basement, etc.), but these were less frightening to me than a white friend's tale of late-night calls from Jean-Michel in despair after white patrons had physically recoiled from him. The simplest handshake was a landmine. I knew the art world was about to eat him up before it did, I hoped to connect him to black artists who, picked up in the '60s and then dropped, could give him perspective on its mores in a way his graffiti friends could not. I also wanted to connect *them* to his hunger, his lack of fear. There were some who had stopped reading art magazines because they knew they would not see themselves there.

Keith Haring, a former student of mine, introduced us. I think Jean-Michel agreed to be in the show both because of Keith and because I'd sent him documentation of my performance persona, Mlle. Bourgeoisie Noire, and he'd thought she was great. But when I talked to him about the black art world, he was perplexed; he'd never heard of it. If he came to the opening, he asked, could he meet Amiri Baraka? I thought it could be arranged. He had confirmed that, like others, we learn about ourselves from white media.

In anticipation of the pieces he said he would make for me, I visited his loft on Crosby Street several times. We talked about art, performance, and the places he'd been, especially Rome, and about the need to hold on to his best work, and as we talked, he sat in the middle of a canvas writing with oilstick. "I'm not making paintings," he said, "I'm making tablets." I ransacked my library for books for him. His line, the way he arrayed figures in space, made me settle on Burchard Brentjes' *African Rock Art* and, for an overview, *Prehistoric Art*, by P.M. Grand. But there was an aura in the loft that I'd identified as cocaine paranoia (later I heard the heroin started that summer). I understood my pieces were not forthcoming. Someone told me Basquiat had already mounted his campaign on Mary Boone, that exhibiting in the East Village would not be cool. I replaced him in the show with Richard Hambleton, whose black, spray-painted figures exacerbated urban fear.

“The Black and White Show” came either too late or too soon. The press release spoke of “black-and-white art for a black-and-white time,” “a time when cadmium red costs \$32 a quart wholesale”—which shows how out of it I was. This was the '80s; only black people were getting poorer, only black artists seemed to worry about the price of paint. And the white art media remained the same. For all my exertions, the show got a three-line notice in the *East Village Eye* and a review in the *Woodstock Times*. I had to admit, there were things Jean-Michel knew more about than I.

For Basquiat, of course, it was just another no-show. He couldn't realize a chance had been lost. Except for pieces in “Since the Harlem Renaissance” at Bucknell University in 1984, his work was not shown in an African-American context where he lived; nor did it have to be. Whatever the degree of exploitation, he had been validated by the white gallery system, and in 1983 was included in a Whitney Biennial for which none of Just Above Midtown's artists received studio visits.

By 1986, Just Above Midtown would close, and Linda Bryant would drop out of the art world, leaving much of the black avant-garde in limbo. Looking back, it's easy to see irony and heartbreak in all that's happened since. At the time of “The Black and White Show,” the black avant-garde was about to reach critical mass. But unlike black literature, it couldn't consolidate. Whereas every black writer seemed to have a half-a-dozen Ph.D's to support them, the numbers of black artists appeared to have grown faster than those of teachers, curators, and critics. Advanced black art, while esthetically vibrant, was institutionally fragile. It would shortly enter the mainstream, but in a fragmented way, and with limited means to frame its reception and contest its positioning by hegemony.

We are in a transitional moment, hoping our increased visibility will translate into increased effectiveness. But municipal politics show us that's not how it works. Given a Basquiat retrospective, there's always a horse race, and when black art-historian Judith Wilson says “only black people will monumentalize him,” it's less germane than Judd Tully's comment. “The interest of international collectors in protecting their investment in Basquiat's work will help his viability long-term.”

The 1993 Whitney Biennial will go down as the Multicultural Biennial, but what will have changed? A white curator at a major out-of-town museum told me,

The kinds of things I hear from patrons you wouldn't believe. The attention span at that level of the art world doesn't permit looking at the whole fabric of multicultural art. For many of them, every black artist is a black artist by definition. There aren't artists who are black and bring this in varying degrees to their work. And since they are interested in what's new, they think of the issues black artists raise as something they can only spend so much time on, then they want to go on to the next thing. They're looking for the one typical, quintessential black artist, so then they can say, “I've done it,” and not do any more.

In an odd reversal, Hammons, in less than three years, has become the quintessential black artist for today. Hammons tries to make art in which white people can't see themselves, but may not have reckoned on their seeing themselves in the power to name the trend. He keeps trying not to play the game, but they keep letting him win.

In 1983, when Basquiat was in the Biennial, David had already done some of his best work. That year, he made the first and most magical of his “Higher Goals,” a fifty-five-foot basketball pole erected across from his studio, warning passersby on One hundred and Twenty-first Street not to dribble away their dreams. But ten years later, an accidental Shaquille, he is attempting to restore his equilibrium by instituting changes in the rules. Through absence, he has made himself the sharpest presence of the last two Biennials.

For the Basquiat retrospective, Hammons provided an answer to the unspoken question: was the event a priority for the hegemonic market or for black culture? One thousand people a day went to the show, including two hundred of color, grateful to see themselves. At the opening, Hammons stood outside, watching, occasionally chatting, refusing to go in.

NOTES

1. Roberta Smith, "Mass Productions," *The Village Voice*, 23 March, 1982, p. 84; "Outsiders Who Specialized in Talking Pictures," *New York Times*, 19 November 1989, section 2 p. 35; "Basquiat: Man for his Decade," *New York Times*, 23 October 1992, p. C1 ff.
2. Luis Camnitzer, "Art, Politics and the Evil Eye: *El arte, la politica y el mal de ojo*," *Third Text* 20, Autumn 1992, pp. 69–75.