Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Jean-Michel Basquiat (Brooklyn 1960 - New York 1988)

Untitled

Wax crayon on paper.
317 x 444 mm. (12 1/2 x 17 1/2 in.)

Datable to 1981, the year in which Basquiat moved from the street to the studio, the present sheet is an impressive and vibrant example of the artist's draughtsmanship at the onset of his rise to fame. The skull was a particularly favourite motif of the artist's, and appears often in both paintings and drawings, often accompanied by words and combinations of letters and numbers. As Robert Storr has noted of Basquiat's imagery, 'Heads, often skulls, chant his words. Or rather inhale and exhale them through gritted teeth, as if sucking in the variously dense or diffuse atmosphere they create, only to cough it out again in great gusts.' The crown drawn in red at the upper right is another motif Basquiat used extensively from around 1982 onwards, and is a legacy of his days as a graffiti artist; this 'personalized, even trademark, image of a three-pointed crown…often accompanied a figure but occasionally appeared on its own throughout the remainder of the artist's career.' The symbol of a heart with a cross also appears in several other works by Basquiat, such as the painted triptych Speaks for Itself of 1982 in the Mugrabi collection.

The curator and critic Robert Storr has written of Basquiat's drawings that, 'Scarred, torn and trampled, much of his work on paper bears the direct imprint of his urgency. Drawing, for him, was something you did rather than something done, an activity rather than a medium. The seemingly throw-away sheets that carpeted his studio might appear little more than warm-ups for painting, except that the artist, a shrewd connoisseur of his own off-hand and under foot inventions did not in fact throw them away, but instead kept the best for constant reference and re-use. Or, kept them because they were, quite simply, indestructibly vivid.'

Provenance:

Sidney Janis Gallery, New York
Ruth Hart, New York
Private collection, Europe
James Goodman Gallery, New York
Irina Hochman, New York
Max Lang, New York, in 1998.

Exhibitions

London, Black Rat Gallery, Now's the Time, 2010.

Artist description:

Jean-Michel Basquiat was born in December 1960 to a Puerto Rican mother and a Haitian father, and from an early age displayed a talent for drawing, an activity he maintained throughout his youth. In the late 1970's he began working as a graffiti artist, and also designed and sold handmade t-shirts and painted postcards. Within a few months Basquiat had begun to make his mark in the downtown art and music world of the day, centred around the East Village, and by the end of 1980 had taken up painting. His first dealer was Annina Nosei, at whose gallery he participated in a group exhibition in 1981. The one-man show that followed a year later was a huge success with critics and collectors, and was followed later that year by shows at the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles and with the Zurich dealer Bruno Bischofsberger, who became the artist's dealer.

Very quickly Basquiat's paintings, which found their inspiration in Black and urban culture, became highly sought-after. The youngest artist to be included in Documenta VII, held in 1982 in Kassel in Germany, Basquiat was given one-man gallery shows in Rotterdam, Los Angeles, Zurich and Tokyo over the next few months. (He was also one of the youngest artists ever to be included in the Whitney Museum Biennial in 1983.) It was also at around this time he met Andy Warhol, who over the next four years became a close friend, mentor and sometime collaborator. A steady stream of gallery exhibitions in America and Europe, as well as his first museum shows in Edinburgh and London in 1984 and in California in 1985, continued to raise Basquiat's profile to almost stratospheric heights. At the same time, however, his drug use became more excessive, and his health started to deteriorate. The death of Warhol in 1987 was a serious blow to the young artist, who became more and more reclusive over the coming months. Basquiat died of a heroin overdose in August 1988, at the age of twenty-seven. His artistic career lasted about nine years, and in that time he produced around a thousand paintings.

Basquiat was a compulsive draughtsman, and produced many hundreds of drawings over the course of his brief career. Indeed, the artist may be said to have been at heart a draughtsman, and his paintings, while resonant with vibrant colour, find their embodiment in line. As one scholar has noted, 'Basquiat understood color like few others and used it with unbridled temerity, but he was essentially a draftsman…In fact, his paintings are drawn as much as painted. Areas of color are scribbled in impatiently, while most everything else in described with quick, confident, linear strokes…If Basquiat had the facility to deploy the power of color, that did not mean that he also needed to spend a lot of time getting it on canvas; he wanted to be drawing.' The artist also developed a habit of integrating his drawings into his painted work; photocopying them and gluing the sheets onto his canvases, and then painting over and around them. Replete with signs, symbols, words, numbers and codes, Basquiat's drawings were a fundamental part of his artistic process.

It is arguably in his drawings that the creative intensity of Basquiat's artistic temperament can best be seen. As the art dealer Enrico Navarra has pointed out, 'Basquiat's works on paper, a separate and distinct part of his work, have a very moving spontaneity and deep intimacy. The themes which were dear to him – autobiographical memories, Black heroes, comic book characters, cartoon characters, anatomical plates, graffiti, money, racism, death, etc. – are employed in a manner that is more striking [and] true-to-life in his works on paper.' The range of references in Basquiat's drawings, as in his paintings, often included motifs sourced from Greek and Roman, African, Aztec and Hispanic cultures.