

BASQUIAT PRO AND CON

The following comments about the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat were made by art critic Robert Hughes in his book "American Visions."

"The only thing the market liked better than a hot young artist was a dead hot young artist, and it got one in Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose working life of about nine years was truncated by a heroin overdose at the age of twenty-seven. His career, both actual and posthumous, appealed to a cluster of toxic vulgarities. First, the racist idea of the black as *naif* or rhythmic innocent, and of the black artist as "instinctual," someone outside "mainstream" culture and therefore not to be rated in its terms: a wild pet for the recently cultivated collector. Second, a fetish about the freshness of youth, blooming among the discos of the East Side scene. Third, guilt and political correctness, which made curators and collectors nervous about judging the work of any black artist who could be presented as a "victim." Fourth, art-investment mania. And last, the audience's goggling appetite for self-destructive talent: Jackson Pollock, Montgomery Clift. All this gunk rolled into a sticky ball around Basquiat's tiny talent and produced a reputation.

"Basquiat's career was incubated by the short-lived graffiti movement, which started on the streets and subway cars in the early 1970s, peaked, fell out of view, began all over again in the 1980s, peaked again, and finally receded, leaving Basquiat and the amusingly facile Keith Haring as its only memorable exponents. Unlike Haring, however, Basquiat never tagged the subways. The son of middle-class Brooklyn parents, he had a precocious success with his paintings from the start. The key was not that they were "primitive," but that they were so arty. Stylistically, they were pastiches of older artists he admired: Cy Twombly, Jean Dubuffet. Having no art training, he never tried to deal with the real world through drawing; he could only scribble and jot, rehearsing his own stereotypes, his pictorial nouns for "face" or "body" over and over again. Consequently, though Basquiat's images look quite vivid and sharp at first sight, and though from time to time he could bring off an intriguing passage of spiky marks or a brisk clash of blaring color, the work quickly settles into the visual monotony of arid over-styling. Its relentless fortissimo is wearisome. Critics made much of Basquiat's use of sources: vagrant code-symbols, quotes from Leonardo da Vinci, or *Gray's Anatomy*, African bushman art or Egyptian murals. But these were so scattered, so lacking in plastic force or conceptual interest, that they seem mere browsing - homeless representation.

"The claims made for Basquiat were absurd and already seem like period pieces. 'Since slavery and oppression under white supremacy are visible subtexts in Basquiat's work,' intoned one essayist in the catalog to his posthumous retrospective at the Whitney Museum, 'he is as close to Goya as American painting has ever produced.' Another extolled his 'punishing regime of self-abuse' as part of 'the disciplines imposed by the principle of inverse asceticism to which he was so resolutely committed.' Inverse asceticism, apparently, is PC-speak for addiction. There was much more in, so to speak, this vein. But the effort to promote Basquiat into an all-purpose

inflatable martyr-figure, the Little Black Rimbaud of American painting, remains unconvincing."

Note: This essay was written by your instructor for his personal website

A Failure to Feel:

How Critic Robert Hughes Stands in a Cultural

Blind Spot in Relation to the Work of Jean-Michel Basquiat

by John Seed

Mark Harden of the "Artchive" tells me that many people visiting his site have taken issue with the comments about Jean-Michel Basquiat made by critic Robert Hughes. These comments, excerpted from the book and PBS series *American Visions*, detail Mr. Hughes's response to what he calls the "absurd" claims that have been made for the late artist's work.

I would like to take this opportunity to go on record as one of those making absurd claims. My sense is that Basquiat is one of the most important -- and subversive -- artists of the late 20th century.

First of all, before I speak to emotionally and intellectually charged issues, I want to identify myself. I am a 53 year old white male who grew up in an affluent California community and am a father of three daughters, one of whom is trans-racially adopted. I teach art and art history at a community college, and I use Robert Hughes's excellent book *The Shock of the New* as my class textbook for Modernism.

I knew Jean-Michel in 1983 when I was working for the Larry Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles. My job was to assist the artist, and I built the canvasses for his 1983 Gagosian show. I also got to know Jean a bit while driving him around town and speaking with him at the gallery and at his studio.

In the spirit of honesty, I should also mention that Jean did not like me, and would not have considered me a friend. I also came to dislike him when he insisted on taking back a painting I had bought from the Gagosian Gallery and after he made a portrait of me entitled "White Sambo Gringo". Finally, I have always liked Jean's work, even though I did not like him personally.

That said, let me tell you how I think Mr. Hughes has missed the boat.

In his book *Shock of the New* Mr. Hughes makes a very strong case for Modern Art and Modern Artists. He makes the point that many Modernists were "exiles," whether from French Bourgeois culture, from Nazi persecution or from the genocide in Armenia.

Yes, Modernists also had "victim credentials."

Hughes constantly and patiently explains that Modernism, and Expressionism in particular took inner experiences and turned them public. More important, he also speaks of the way that Avant-Garde art stretched and permanently altered cultural notions of what could be expressed in art, and how.

Knowing the values that Robert Hughes appreciates in Modernism, it is a surprise to me that he cannot make out the same features in the work of Basquiat, who I would guess that critics might call a Post-Modernist. Jean, who did not go to college or to art school would not have had much respect for either label. The only category he cared about was a noncategory: he made it very clear to me that he was *not* a graffiti artist.

In my opinion, Jean-Michel was clearly an exile, although not literally. His parents were immigrants (from Haiti and Puerto Rico) but Jean's "exile" did not have to do with passports or visas. He was exiled in his own mind, by drugs, by paranoia, by racism (real and imagined) and by the numbing pressure of American culture.

Phoebe Hoban, in her book "Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art," does not come across as a lover of Jean's art, but she does get one thing very right: the idea that Jean's art portrays a "fragmented" experience. The way I understand Hoban's point is that she views Jean living in a state of hyper-stimulation induced by drugs, television, and American material fantasies. It's a place where young people got trapped in the Reagan era, and where they still get trapped now.

It is not where Mr. Hughes came from, and even with his fine imagination he cannot go there.

Mr. Hughes can appreciate the accomplishments of a "naive" Modernist like Henri Rousseau: after all, he was a Surrealist deep down and Picasso liked his work. All that Hughes sees in the self-taught technique of Basquiat is an artist who could "scribble and jot." Sounds like Cy Twombly to me.

When he says that Jean's work was guilty of a "relentless fortissimo" his adjectives are from the wrong century. Van Gogh's color was fortissimo. Basquiat's art is at the volume of a 100 amp boombox, turned all the way up. Speaking of Van Gogh, wasn't he an addict too?

Hughes can appreciate the ironic sensibility of Andy Warhol, a gay virgin, but the same critic turns Victorian when confronted with the work of a black artist who rejected the middle-class values of his accountant father and chose the streets.

The "obnoxious liberals" (a phrase from a Basquiat painting) who first noticed Jean's art were in a sense like parents who try to understand their children but who patronize and alienate them as they do so. Mr. Hughes has gotten into a similar muddle with Basquiat. Hughes is looking at Jean and his work from the exact cultural blind spot that Basquiat described-- loved to describe-- in his paintings and drawings. Hughes is a highly educated white man who has mastered language as a weapon. He is one of the folks that Jean set out to alternately ignore, confuse, and repudiate.

Yes, Jean must have been hell for his teachers.

His language was a weapon too, but it is a lingo that derives its power from fragmentation, poetry and a countercultural appropriation of Western history. Mr. Hughes, you would think, should be better equipped to recognize the subversion of language: that is one of the aspects of Dadaism. As a critic, Hughes has written about Dada the way that a musician trained in classical music would understand Schoenberg: he senses what has been reordered and understands how the systems have mutated.

When it comes to Basquiat, I think Mr. Hughes has not been able to find a coherent set of cultural references to get his critical bearings. This is a problem, as neither Jean nor his work, nor his life for that matter was ever whole.

Speaking of fragments, here are some words and phrases that I think describe Jean:

Arrogant, poetic, paranoid, hypersexual, sensitive, conflicted, scared, brilliant, emotionally naked, victimized, a victimizer, manipulated, a manipulator, blind and visionary. No wonder he was called "The Black Picasso."

Basquiat, who was closer to Snoop Doggy Dogg than Bach, was from a street tradition that is arrogant and confident enough that it doesn't need to respond directly to any cultural tradition or set of rules. Jean, like the boxers he idolized, could knock you flat with one quick well placed jab.

His drawings (often lists of words) are a sort of "Cliff Notes" from Hell for a Western Civilization class that has never been taught. Each word in each Basquiat painting or drawing pummels the Western Tradition into empty jargon. In Basquiat's work, Roman emperors, Leonardo da Vinci, and Saturday morning cartoon characters are all footnotes in the same history.

No wonder people, especially academics and critics, get touchy discussing Basquiat.

Basquiat worked in resonant fragments, and anyone who tries to fit the pieces together in a neat design will be disappointed and frustrated in the end. Basquiat's work is *not* like Picasso's cubism, a shattered mirror of real experience. It is, however, like Picasso's most deeply felt work, subversive and shamanistic.

By referring to Basquiat as a "Shaman" I really risk patronizing him, but I need to do it anyway. If a Shaman is, as Joseph Campbell states, an individual who has survived overwhelming psychological experiences, that would be Jean. I don't want to call him a Shaman and call up images of primitive cultures, voodoo, and gris-gris. I need the term to point out that he was a priest of his own religion, and a person who lived a powerful inner life.

By mentioning religion, I need to add another fragment to my list of words and phrases that describe Jean: Saint. Now you may ask, how can a former hustler and drug addict be a Saint in any religion? The answer is that his art has spoken to people in ways that touched them where no other artist ever has. In fact, the people who have been touched are people who might otherwise never care about art at all. And yes, many of those affected, in my experience, are not white.

Another reason Mr. Hughes doesn't get Basquiat is that he may not fathom the deep emotional response that others have to this work. It is not a rational attachment, but something deeper. Race, as the O.J. Simpson trial taught us, is still electric and divisive in hidden ways. Basquiat admired Warhol and Pop Art, but he could never see the world from such a detached place. Why? Plain and simple: because he was black.

Black heroes have been appearing in American popular culture, sports, and politics for many decades now, but Jean is truly the first black hero of high culture to cross over into popular culture. Of course, Romare Bearden made some handsome collages, James Baldwin wrote some powerful books, and that Hendrix fellow played a decent guitar. But it was Jean who hit a home run in the lily white art world, and it went right out of the park into the streets. If you tell me that Politically Correct folks helped spread the word about Jean, I will agree with you and suggest that this should not be held against the dead artist. They were, after all, the first ones interested in Basquiat when he was still alive.

If you tell me that touching a mass audience in a powerful way is not a critical achievement, I will tell you that you are an elitist, as so many Modern artists and critics of Modern art have been. As you can imagine, I don't mean elitist in any positive sense.

If you tell me that you like Jackson Pollock but not Basquiat, I will tell you that Pollock affected a dozen artists in New York, while Basquiat spoke to hundreds of thousands of young people.

If you tell me that as a white man, I can't fully appreciate Basquiat, I will tell you that you are probably right, but I will ask you to give me credit for trying.

If you tell me that it is odd that I like Jean's work but disliked the man, I will tell you that Van Gogh must have been pretty hard to be around too.

Mr. Hughes: Basquiat seems to have done many of the things that the Modernist heroes did. He invented a unique artistic vocabulary and language. He described a potent inner experience that a previously untapped audience could relate to in a universal sense. He stretched and ventilated the boundaries of art. May I say, respectfully, that Basquiat's achievements may be invisible to you because you are not someone he spoke to. Not speaking to people in the art world was a bad but self-protective habit of Jean's.

That's why he came to his opening at Gagosian Gallery stoned and with his walkman turned all the way up. He let his paintings speak for him. He also let the hypesters speak for him, and that is part of the problem that all of us who care about his work are still dealing with. Something that Mr. Hughes and I might agree on is that we are still wading through all the hyperbole, trying to find the real artist. Yes, hype was a big part of Jean's career.

Hype is nothing new in the art world. I recently read how Georgia O'Keeffe's husband, Alfred Stieglitz fraudulently claimed to the press in the late 1920s that he had sold a group of her small paintings for \$25,000, a staggering sum at the time. It turns out that this claim was totally fraudulent, and that Stieglitz was lying. Clearly, it was a lie that helped to launch O'Keeffe's career, but I have never heard it suggested by Hughes or anyone else that Georgia O'Keeffe's art should be taken less seriously because her early career was marked by fraud.

Let's hope that over time all the distractions will fade, and we can look at Jean's work directly. My belief is that many viewers have already been affected by doing so. For others of us, it may take an effort to confront Jean's painful truths.

I would definitely recommend that Robert Hughes and I both make the effort to take off the rose-colored glasses that come with our education in regards to Western culture.

After all, we are both white men who were trained to use language as a weapon. I think Basquiat has surpassed us both.