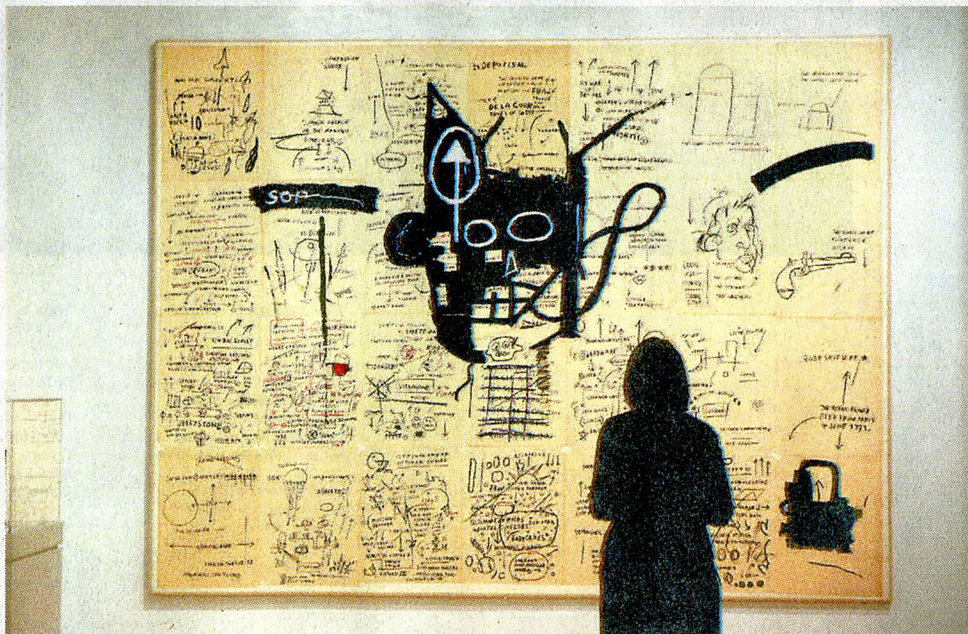


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times

Glimpses Into a Prodigy's Psyche



HIROKO MASUIKE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Language was Jean-Michel Basquiat's first artistic language. The words he deftly spray-painted on the walls and buildings of downtown New York in the late 1970s and early '80s — signing them "SAMO©" — were unlike any other graffiti of the time. They had an arresting presence, a combination of graphic refinement, aural strangeness and compressed meaning that made you stop and ponder. Their themes, rhythms and even their letters also formed the foundation for the paintings that would soon fix Basquiat prominently in the still understudied history of the medium in 1980s New York.

ROBERTA SMITH
ART REVIEW

This point is driven home by "Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks," an engaging if slightly esoteric exhibition opening on Friday at the Brooklyn Museum that is built around 160 pages from eight notebooks in the collection of Larry Warsh of New York. The show holds no startling revelations — the notebooks are

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Jean-Michel Basquiat Works on canvas, left, and notebook drawings are among the pieces by this young, self-taught artist on view at the Brooklyn Museum.

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“unknown” only in the most literal sense that they have never been exhibited before. But they confirm the centrality of language and hand lettering to Basquiat’s art in new detail, furthering the understanding of his phenomenal achievement.

Basquiat’s reputation never suffered the eclipse that befell some ’80s painters. His talent was too undeniable, his art too accessible and — for better and worse — his story, as a young, black, self-taught prodigy, too inspiring, despite its tragic end. Since his death at 27 from a drug overdose in 1988, his originality has only become clearer. Basquiat was a better artist than many of his peers. In addition, his genius brought a welcome alternative to the predominant whiteness of Western art history. His work speaks of blackness in proud, insistent, imaginative ways, touching repeatedly on the achievements of African-American culture and the ordeals of African-American life that are both part of the national psyche.

The Brooklyn show has been organized by Dieter Buchhart, an independent curator and Basquiat specialist working with Tricia Laughlin Bloom, a curator at the museum until December. It is beautifully arranged in a white-on-white design of slightly angled walls. The notebook drawings, displayed in long rows in low-slung vitrines or on the walls, are supplemented by about 30 other works: drawings of several kinds (including a fabulous one involving a triangle filled with words and symbols, 10 feet across) and a handful of works on canvas that demonstrate how language was carried over into painting. Basquiat began by collaging canvases with scores of drawings or color photocopies of them and then adding larger images, like the black mask-skull on an untitled work from 1982-83, a griot surrounded by a swarm of words.

Mr. Warsh, working with Gerard Basquiat, the artist’s father, disassembled the eight notebooks here in the early ’90s to make them easier to see. In some



ways it is a shocking decision — although conservators at the Brooklyn Museum say the notebooks can be reassembled. But Basquiat himself rarely wrote or drew on the backs of the pages, as if he considered them autonomous artworks from the start. And this show gives us the chance to see if we agree.

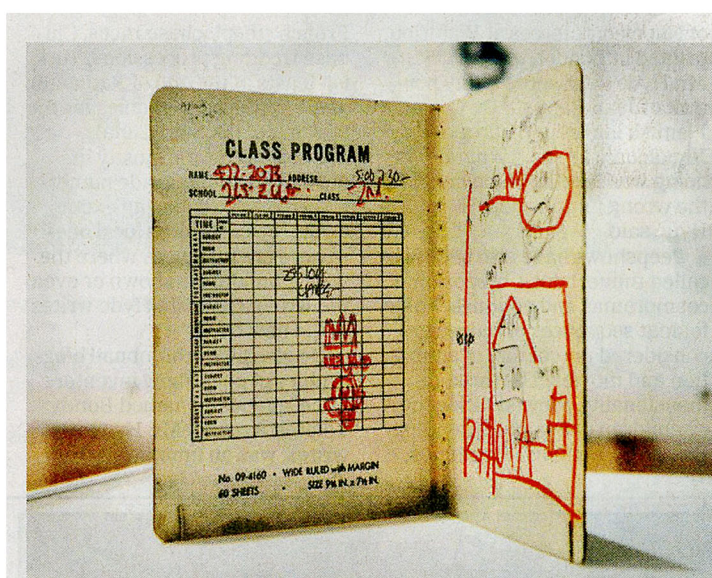
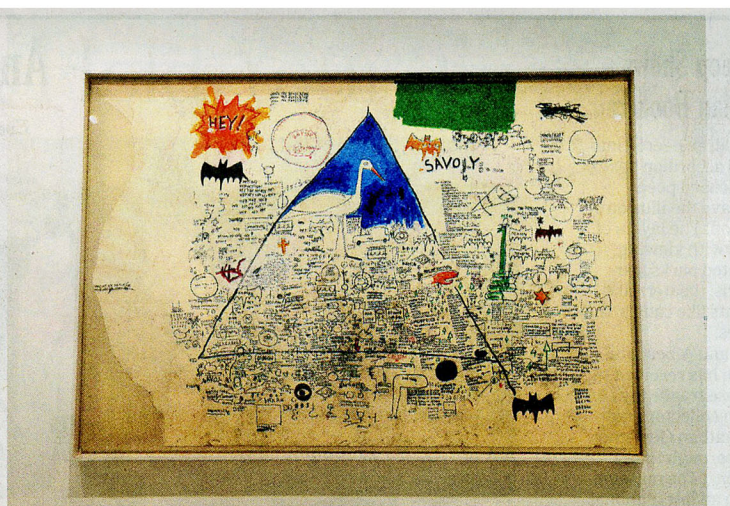
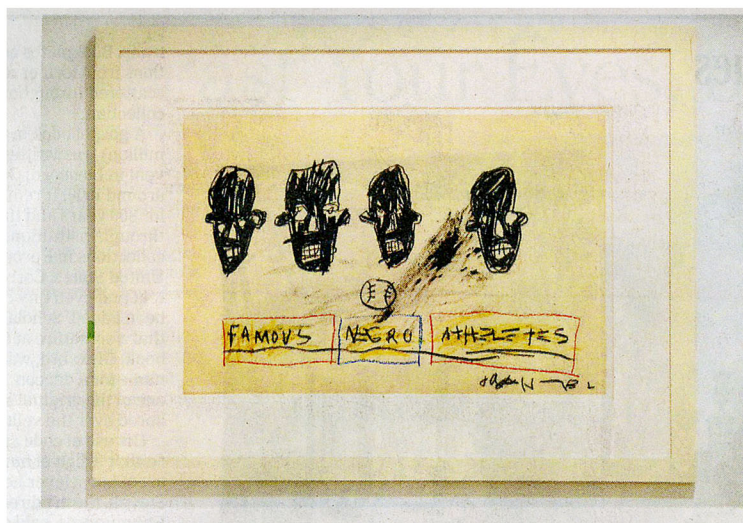
Basquiat comes across here as an omnivorous listener, a connoisseur of sounds of all kinds — blues and jazz, radio jingles and new reports — and of words as things in themselves, or at least as images. His lettering often has an emboldening, transformative force. You notice this early in the show in a drawing that simply announces “Mark Twain” in slightly unruly letters, affirming the writer as an implacable fact of American consciousness with a simplicity that presages Twitter. A copyright sign, remaining from the SAMO days, also appropriates Twain.

Not all the notebook pages have this force. Sometimes the writing seems slightly crabbed or

is too small to hold the page. And the long stretches of so many small pieces of paper can become tedious, making the show feel at times like a temple for Basquiat buffs who want to fetishize his every scrawl and doodle. It doesn’t help that only a few of the supplementary drawings are really great, most notably “Melville,” a suite of nine sheets on which Basquiat copied the table of contents of “Moby-Dick” in blocky script, suggesting a kind of found poem.

The show could have used an area for visitors to sit and study the catalog — there’s space for it. Virtually a show in portable form, this publication reproduces everything on view in color, with some of the notebook pages near actual size. It helps even to browse the catalog in the discreet gift shop at the show’s conclusion. The essays don’t add much new thought about Basquiat, although Mr. Buchhart’s description of him as a concrete poet is amplifying; even more so is Christopher Stackhouse’s perceptive if wordy analogy between

“Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks” is on view through Aug. 23 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park; 718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM 2015 THE ESTATE OF JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT/ADAGP, PARIS/ARS, NEW YORK; HIROKO MASUIKE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Basquiat and the African-American proto-beat poet Bob Kaufman (1927-86), and Ms. Laughlin Bloom's focused catalog entries are especially helpful.

At its best, the installation creates the feeling of being inside the artist's head, with words and experiences ricocheting off all surfaces and then exploding onto paper and canvas at ever greater, more declarative scale. We study crossed out words, watch a phrase contract or expand from one page to another, or enjoy the odd drawing, suspended between lettering and hieroglyph. The well-known Basquiat phrase "famous Negro athletes" — later the

title of a painting — appears on a page with an assured notation of three faces; hanging above is a large, more developed oil stick drawing, with four.

There are personal notes: shopping lists, names, phone numbers and bits of verbatim conversation. "Gavin: You must try the pig ears (Fabulous!)"

The invented word "leapsickness," at the top of a page, conjures an occupational hazard of a prodigy — who left home at 17 — facing rapidly rising fame. A diaristic note about his girlfriend suggests that he was constantly learning: "Suzane explained the film to me." The omitted "n" in

Notebook pages, which have never been exhibited, and art by Jean-Michel Basquiat, who died at 27 of a drug overdose, are on view.

Suzanne speeds things up and slows us down.

As for poetry, there are six words that tersely evoke life at its most basic and even violent, crossed out but still legible on one of the first pages in the show. They are accented by a misspelling that is its own kind of violation: "thier dogs/thier harpoons/thier wives." One imagines the ever-curious Basquiat distilling the memory of a vintage photograph of Inuits or perhaps a diorama at the American Museum of Natural History. His few words resonate with actions, relationships and responsibilities: to feed, clothe and perpetuate the species in a culture beyond the industrialized world. It echoes Basquiat's more frequent references to Native Americans, another marginalized group, often with the image of a tepee.

In the end, this sparkling exhibition traces the perpetuation essential to Basquiat's art: the progress from lettering to hieroglyphs to images whose very infrastructures still echo with letter forms. If you look closely, his spiky, angular faces, skulls and figures intimate letters piled one on the other, until alphabet morphs into motif.