



Jean Michel Basquiat, Riding With Death, 1988. Acrylic and oil paintstick on linen, 98 x 114"

Riding with Death

**Jean-Michel Basquiat
at Gagosian Gallery
in New York City**

by Jeanne Wilkinson

In 1988, Jean-Michel Basquiat died of a "speedball" overdose when he was twenty seven, becoming a member of the "27 Club," along with Janis, Jimi, Jim Morrison, Alan "Blind Owl" Wilson of the Canned Heat, Kurt Cobain, and lately Amy Winehouse, just to name a few. Speedballs are usually a mix of heroin (sometimes morphine) and cocaine, a combo that accentuates the positive and eliminates the negative until it's too late and there you are floating away forever on your euphoric high – oops!

So was his death, like Elvis's and Marilyn's, a good career move? He was a prolific artist, and realistically, how many huge canvases scratched up with pithy street prose, plastered over with graffiti-style xeroxes, painted over with broad strokes, etc. etc. can you keep churning out and not get bored to death as an artist (hmmmm) and/or flood your own market? Basquiat's works are manifestly collected and collectible, unlike the huge majority of artists who die and leave behind massive amounts of work "in the collection of the artist," which means that they never got caught up in that big-money vortex which is virtually the only way one can make a living on one's artwork without having to teach or haul or engage in some other tangential occupation that guarantees

you freezing-garret wages.

But Basquiat hit all the right nails on the head and was subsequently sucked into the super-spin cycle, along with his friend Andy Warhol, shown at Gagosian-Chelsea in 2011. The buzz on shows like these is that they're of "museum quality" – I heard it murmured up and down the streets of Chelsea, a group leader praising the show: Museum quality! Must see! But his spiel seemed studded with buzzwords and talking points, phrases quoted so often that people start to believe them. In this show, the paintings are not theme-related or chronological. They're just filling up the super-huge Gagosian space, an arrangement that seems more to the point than any curatorial agenda. (If you want to see what "curation"

means, go to the Brooklyn Museum website where you can find cogent remnants of their excellent 2005 Basquiat retrospective.)

Gagosian is putting on a kind of a haul 'em in, hang'em up roundup bonanza, and don't you worry your pretty little head about them pesky wall labels, 'cuz there ain't none! Jes' come on down and let Jean-Michel give you a great ride! Which he does.

Just as Renaissance perspectival painting is a product of a specific urban environment, so Basquiat's work is a product of a specific urban environment, the latter broken down, stripped of idealism, rampant with a kind of raw randomized jazzy, jumpy, primitivistic power that no Renaissance scholar could have imagined, much less countenanced. I was particularly taken by a large blue and yellow painting called *Untitled (L.A.)*, 67 x 206 inches, an expanse of energy that in spite of being a studio piece seems such a product of the outer world, the subway walls and temporary wooden fences surrounding borderline areas of construction or destruction that are painted on by workmen in random gorgeous colours, unintentional art that is more beautiful sometimes than the most cannily placed strokes. These expanses are a place to play, to be funny, angry, clever, better, worse than all the rest; a place to make your mark, erase it, make it again – the continual fight that the city wages with identity: you are everything, you are nothing, you are everywhere in between.

In spite of his graduation to the studio, Basquiat's work always maintained that city fight-to-the-death feel, that frenetic need to make his mark, SAMO, SAMO, SAMO: the mark of the urban beast. Even the paintings that seem a bit rote, like, "another day, another painting," still have that sense of something both purged and paraded, that swagger of kings and monsters and monster-kings who rule their world but don't do much with it except exist within its endless swirl of stimuli and stuff, helpless as children to

make anything out of it.

Unlike Renaissance artists who denied (or tried to deny) chaos by shaping harmonic and mathematical resonances that make the human seem perfectible and the earth seem comprehensible, Basquiat's world is never progressive and is always in your face. In his city there is no escape into deep space, no respite, no better, no worse, no change, just that same beat, beat, beat that smacks of survival against all odds. But then he makes a painting covered by an empty, endless

silvery gold space, reminiscent of a pre-Renaissance gold-leaf heaven, and floating in the middle is a brown-red figure riding a disintegrating skeleton. The press release alludes to this painting, called *Riding With Death*, as being his last, and I guess, well, there he went, floating off into that serene speedball high, everything cleared away, a clean slate, words and music gone, all quiet on that golden front.

RIP, Jean-Michel, and thanks for all the paintings.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *In Italian*, 1983, acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas with wooden supports and five smaller canvases painted with ink marker, 2 panels: 88 1/2 x 80" overall (224.8 x 203.2 cm). © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat/ADAGP, Paris, ARS, New York, 2013