

JEAN MICHEL BASQUIAT

Untitled

Refusing to title an artwork allows an image or object to stand on its own, without verbal or contextual support. Such an approach hints at how one might consider with clear eyes the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat. An untitled work in oilstick from 1983 contains no image at all—only the artist's signature, the year, and title: *UNTITLED*. A Duchampian gesture of pure artistic declaration, this work makes its critique plain: name is commodity and identity is icon. No title necessary.

Untitled, the first exhibition of Jean-Michel Basquiat's work to be staged in Greece, presents a selection of works on paper that contain an index of the artist's major themes and symbols. Primarily showcasing a young Basquiat on the cusp of acclaim and stardom, *Untitled* demonstrates an artist operating in the interstices between play and critique, ideas and worlds. With works made by the artist when he was as young as 18, *Untitled* captures the period when Basquiat's relationship to language would evolve, becoming more ambitious and visceral once he graduated from the street-famous SAMO tag. The formal concerns of the young artist begin to take shape.

In 1980 and '81, the years in which a majority of the works in *Untitled* are from, we see the now-immortal personal mythology of Basquiat emerge. Skulls and crowns, weapons and fighters proliferate in oilstick and graphite across whatever paper fell in his hands. The freedom paper affords the artist, letting ideas flow quickly and uninhibitedly, belies the weight of his subjects. With expressive gestures and a fractured, intuitive deployment of language, Basquiat constantly points the viewer toward the underlying precarity of both heroism and sovereignty through subtle symbolic association. Signs of exaltation and death, bellicosity and control are never far apart in these works, illustrating the neutralizing forces that underpin the relationship between the individual and society. Elevation necessarily sets the stage for collapse; commodification strips vitality of significance.

In his 1982 portrait of Joe Louis, Basquiat depicts the bust of his frequent subject, a heavyweight boxing champion widely considered the first African-American to become a national hero after his 1938 defeat of German fighter Max Schmeling. Underneath the evocative portrait is the neologism SKEPTISM, an intentional misspelling of the Greek-derived skepticism. In this context, the word serves to question the conditions of Louis's glorification, fraught with the projections of how an African-American is to act amidst a white public. Created the year Basquiat staged his first solo exhibition in NYC and showed at Documenta 7, this portrait can be read as equally historical and autobiographical, a testament to the artist's unique ability to absorb cultural referents into his own highly personal symbology.

Whether boxers or cartoon characters, kings or kids, Basquiat's figures are charged with the weight of the world's contradictions. There are always limits imposed on heroism, and visibility necessarily comes with expectation and exploitation. Yet *Untitled* is a testament to the defiance of prolific expression.

The exhibition space is designed by Kois Associated Architects, who created an environment that amplifies the intensity of Basquiat's work and highlights the exhibition's dialogue with the urban and cultural fabric of Piraeus.

THE INTERMISSION

Polidefkous 37A
18545 Piraeus Greece

+30 210 4131504

info@theintermission.art
www.theintermission.art
@theintermissionart

G A L E R I E ENRICO NAVARRA

75 rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré
75008 Paris

+33 1 45 61 91 91

presse@enriconavarra.com
www.enriconavarra.com
@galerieenriconavarra

Wednesday - Saturday 12:00 - 20:00
