VANITY FAIR

A VANITY FAIR SPECIAL REPORT

"Everyone has three lives: a public life, a private life, and a secret life."
–GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

EDWARD SNOWDEN: PATRIOT OR TRAITOR?

How and Why He Did It. Who Helped. What's Next.

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ELECTRIC DUO
Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat with their collaborative paintings at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in 1985.

FOR THE LOVE OF BASQUIAT

More than 25 years after Jean-Michel Basquiat died of a drug overdose, at 27, his most devoted collectors, Lenore and Herbert Schorr, are sharing their treasures in a show at New York's Acquavella Galleries. Their memories of the artist, a surrogate son, illuminate his struggle to be seen

By INGRID SISCHY

"We were living in Westchester County in the early 80s, and we would come into New York on Saturday mornings, stop at Jean's, and he'd ask us to drive him to pick up some musical equipment that he needed," remembers Lenore Schorr, who, along with her husband, Herbert, qualify as the most devoted early collectors of the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat, who died at 27, in 1988. "Having us drive him was clearly easier for him than his trying to get a taxi, because of the fact that he was black," explains Lenore. "He used to joke that he needed to get Herb a driver's cap, and that he'd buy us a hot dog afterwards."

After he'd lost faith in the art-world establishment, Basquiat even asked Herb, a scientist and self-described "nerd," to take over as his dealer. No fool, Herb, he did not give up his day job. What he did do, though, with Lenore, was build an unparalleled collection of Basquiat's work, some of it bought directly from the artist's studio, all of it clearly chosen

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD DREW/A.P. IMAGES

DRAWING A CROWD

From "Jean-Michel Basquiat Drawing: Work from the Schorr Family Collection," opening at New York's Acquavella Galleries next month. **(1)** *Untitled (Estrella)*, 1985, graphite and colored pencil on paper. **(2)** *Untitled (Just Sour)*, 1982, oil stick on paper. **(3)** Untitled, 1981, acrylic, marker, paper collage, oil, paint stick, and crayon on canvas. **(4)** *Untitled (Boxing Ring)*, 1981, oil stick on paper. **(5)** *Untitled (Bluto Nero)*, 1982, acrylic and oil stick on paper.

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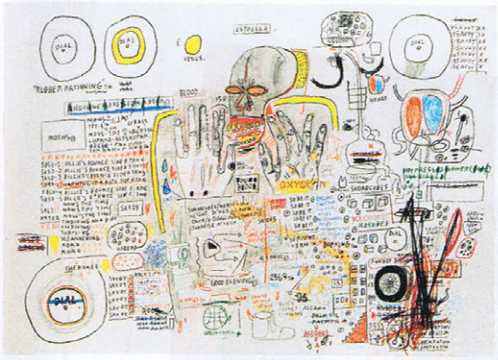

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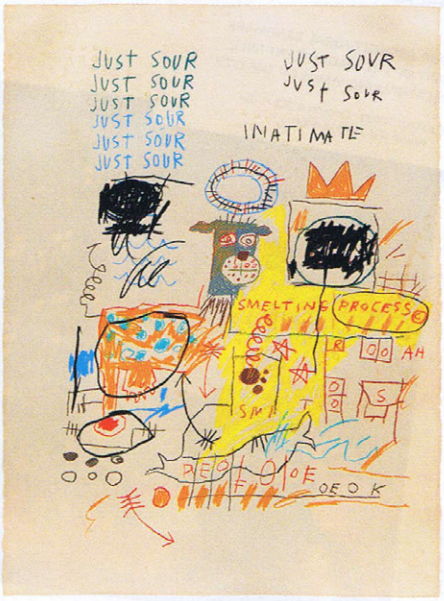

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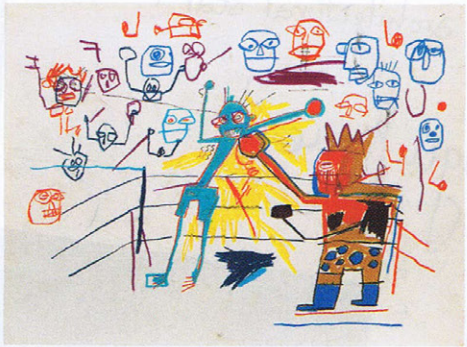

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with eyes that knew what they were looking at.

Talking to the couple 30 years later, one cannot help being moved by the mutual respect and affection that bonded this unlikely trio; they were surrogate parents to a surrogate son, whose relationship with his own parents was complicated and fraught. Basquiat grew up in Brooklyn. His mother, Matilde, was of Puerto Rican descent, and his father, Gerard, an accountant, had originally come from Haiti; they separated when Jean-Michel was seven. The artist spoke only loving words about his mother, who was the first person to take him to museums, but whose emotional fragility landed her in psychiatric institutions. (Having permanently left his father's home at 17, he did not hide their strained relationship.)

Basquiat's most influential mentor was Andy Warhol, whom the young artist sought out, befriended, and collaborated with, much to both men's pride. But the Schorrs provided a safe harbor. Their love affair with the artist started in 1981, after he had decided to reject his famous (among graffiti writers) tag as Samo© (which stood for "same old shit") and become Jean-Michel Basquiat, an artist in the so-called legit art world. Thanks to a dynamic group of shows put on by various collectives, word got out about his prodigious gifts, and the first bite from a gallery came from Annina Nosei, a dealer with sharp antennae for talent. She offered him an exchange: he could use the basement of her

ALL FROM THE SCHORR FAMILY COLLECTION; © THE ESTATE OF JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT/ADAGP, PARIS/ARS, NEW YORK 2014; PHOTOGRAPHS BY KENT PELL

HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS Herbert and Lenore Schorr, in 1989, with Basquiat works at their home in Westchester, New York.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOMMY CARRAWAY/COURTESY OF ART & AUCTION

ground-floor gallery as a studio, and she would sell the work. (Looking back, the zoo-like aspects of the deal are even more blatant. What about "a room of his own," with some light?) One day the Schorrs showed up. Nosei schlepped some Basquiat canvases up from the basement. The couple was curious but not convinced. Nosei said she wanted them to see one other work that she'd been saving for herself. Code for: Here comes the sales pitch, the Schorrs recall, laughing. But the painting, *Poison Oasis,* 1981, won them over, and so did the hauntingly beautiful young man who suddenly appeared. He remained in their lives until heroin stopped his heart, in 1988.

The big news is that, come May 1, the couple will be sharing some of their treasures, in "Jean-Michel Basquiat Drawing: Work from the Schorr Family Collection," at the Acquavella Galleries, in New York, through June 13. Run there, if you can. In Basquiat's hands, drawing is not lower in the hierarchy than painting, but an equally powerful medium, opening up infinite possibilities of self-expression. Whether simple or complex, modestly scaled or ambitiously epic, Basquiat's drawings are the visual expression of pure energy. You can feel his brain and his hand working in concert when you look at the best of them. Indeed, the paintings themselves are powered by Basquiat's electrifying line.

The Acquavella show, driven by Eleanor Acquavella, is being curated by Fred Hoffman, who co-organized the 2005 Basquiat exhibition, which opened at the Brooklyn Museum. It features 22 of the artist's finest drawings, created in the period 1981–86, plus a couple of related paintings. None of the work is for sale. The Schorrs have countless stories about major museums and institutions, including the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art, turning down gifts of Basquiat's work before he died. A wariness toward the artist, shaped by racial politics, played a major part in how he was treated and how his works were received during his lifetime.

From today's perspective, with a black American president in his second term, and an art world vibrant with the successes of a host of extraordinary black artists—Glenn Ligon, Wangechi Mutu, David Hammons, Kara Walker, Mark Bradford, Steve McQueen . . . the list could fill this page—the lonely battle that Basquiat and a few black artists before him waged against both blatant and covert racism seems all the more vivid. The Schorrs don't mince words about the kinds of things they used to hear in championing the young artist. Herb would tell people Basquiat was brilliant. "You mean street-smart?" he'd be asked. "No, I mean brilliant," Herb would reply.

I spoke at Basquiat's memorial, because, as the editor of *Artforum* in the 1980s, I got to know the artist well and commissioned a number of articles that introduced his work to the wider world. One of those articles, from 1981, "The Radiant Child," by the magnificently untamed, recently deceased poet Rene Ricard, the Jean Genet of the art world back then, remains the most perceptive piece on Basquiat written to this day. "How did he come up with the words he puts all over everything," asked Ricard, "his way of making a point without overstating the case, using one or two words he reveals a political acuity, gets the viewer going in the direction he wants, the illusion of the bombed-over wall. . . . What he incorporates into his pictures, whether found or made, is specific and selective. He has a perfect idea of what he's getting across, using everything that collates to his vision. . . . He seems to have become the gutter and his world view very much that of the downtrodden and dispossessed."

These days, when Basquiat's work has become such a commodity, it feels good to be able to see a group of drawings, such as the ones the Schorrs gathered, in a setting where the din of the marketplace will be quiet for once. (The marketplace for Basquiat can also be iffy—unfinished works were strewn around his loft, all the more tempting to pick up, especially when he was out of it. A Christie's online auction of his works owned by a former roommate, who said they were gifts, was recently postponed because of a suit by Basquiat's sisters, arguing against their authenticity.) In the early days Basquiat's paintings went for around $15,000–$20,000; the drawings, for something like $600. A comparison shop, now that he's the James Dean of the art world and the art world is depressingly similar to Wall Street, can't be exact, because the Schorrs have never sold any of his works from their collection. But last year, a Basquiat painting was knocked down at Christie's in New York for $48,843,750 (the top price paid for the artist so far), and the Schorrs said they'd been offered more than $2 million for one of his drawings, a number of years ago. They could not afford his works if they were buying today, and even in the old days they had to be careful about what they spent. As Lenore says, "It was not about speculation—it was about love for the work." And it shows. □

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