

# KANTOR GALLERY

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# JEAN - MICHEL BASQUIAT

1974-1988

**JEAN - Michel** Basquiat was born on December 22, 1960 in Brooklyn, N.Y. to Gerard and Marilise Basquiat. He first became famous for his art, then he became famous for being famous, then he became famous for being infamous - a succession of reputations that often overshadowed the seriousness and significance of the art he produced. His nine-year career was one that was very brief, yet highly productive. His work included autobiography, black history, and popular culture, as well as graffiti and graffiti - religious and symbols, and carefully chosen words and phrases. They occur in different languages (English, Spanish, French, German, and Italian) and in different media (painting, drawing, collages and silk-screens, and sculpture) and vary infrequency and intensity, although almost any Basquiat work from 1980 on will contain many of these elements. Basquiat's career divides into three broad though overlapping phases, each characterized by a shift in style, subject matter and reference. In the earliest, from 1980 to 1982, Basquiat used painterly gestures on canvases, most often depicting skeletal figures and masklike faces that signal his obsession with mortality and imagery derived from his secret existence, such as automobiles, buildings, police, children's sidewalk games, and graffiti. A middle period from late 1982 to 1985 features multi-panel paintings and individual canvases with exposed stretchers, the surfaces dense with writing, collage, and seemingly unrelated imagery. These works



**BANKER, 1982** Acrylic on paper on canvas (15" x 10")

Basquiat's painterly, figurative, and political inclinations. Basquiat looked to the vocabulary of modern art for the technical means and painterly styles that would accommodate his message. His earliest works have a strong affinity to those of Jean Dubuffet - not necessarily a conscious mimicking, but a related and compatible Art Brut sensibility. Dubuffet, believing that true art could only be found outside the traditions of the artistic elite, sought inspiration in the art of children and the insane. Both artists painted awkward and rough observations of city life, rejecting perspective for an intentionally naive presentation of space. Dubuffet turned for the imagery to the city's pavement and walls, whereas Basquiat's original canvas was the walls themselves. As a result, many of his early pieces have the same scratched, graffiti-like, and overpainted look of Dubuffet's inverted surfaces. Other artists served as models and inspiration for Basquiat's art education as well - primarily Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, and Cy Twombly, a shift in painterly and characterizes this group of late paintings. The broad, jagged swatches of color in layers of under - and overpainting, with whole areas of drawn and painted images canceled out, have given way to monochromatic fields of color that flatly cover the entire surface and serve as ground for isolated figures. The figures that Basquiat uses in these works are also flatter, less detailed, and more cartoonlike. The altered subject style, subject, and mood of these late paintings shows Basquiat exploring a new vocabulary. Understandably resistant to being identified only with his familiar masklike heads, skeletal black men, and tributes to famous black musicians, he was seeking out new means of visually expressing his deep-felt concerns with issues of race, identity and aesthetics, yet this desire to grow artistically and to challenge himself and his viewers' expectations was mitigated by his feelings of disillusionment and loss, all exacerbated by his drug dependency. Riding with Death, a powerful and moving image with an eerie foreboding message, was one of Basquiat's last works. The painting depicts a thin and loosely delineated black figure sitting astride a hunched skeleton on a brushy, monochromatic ground. The painting and its title are a direct reference to the artist and his precarious physical and emotional position. Where he had previously seen himself with death only as a potential threat, Basquiat now pictures himself riding death, with final destination understood but not spoken. Visit **KANTOR GALLERY** Sept. 19 through Nov. 13, 1996. *Jean-Michel Basquiat 1978-1988*

reveal a strong interest in Basquiat's black and Hispanic identity and his identification with contemporary black figures and events. The last phase, from about 1986 to his death in 1988, displays new type of figurative depiction, in a new painterly style, with different symbols, sources and content. Basquiat here seems to have been breaking with earlier imagery that had become too familiar and comfortable and pushing ahead in new territory. Basquiat's work typifies a synthesis of the many artistic sensibilities and sociopolitical attitudes that coexisted in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Imagistic painting, which reemerged after a long phase on Minimalist domination in the art world had assimilated an Abstract Expressionist approach to painting yet allowed recognizable subject matter. By the early 1980's Francesco Clemente, and David Salle had introduced a more personalized and subjective figurative imagery, often appropriated from non-art sources and featuring psychological and conceptual undertones, the art world thus offered a sympathetic atmosphere for



**BANKER, 1982** Mixed media on canvas (50" x 50")

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