

UNDERSTANDING THE MIND OF THE ARTIST THROUGH HIS ART: A REVIEW OF SOME SELECTED WORKS OF JEAN MICHEL BASQUIAT USING EXPRESSIVISM AS A CRITICAL TOOL

Njoku Moses Oñugadi

Fine and Applied Arts Department,
Faculty of Environmental Sciencies,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

mo.njoku@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

The artist Jean-Michel Basquiat lived from 1960 to 1988 to become one of the most enigmatic characters of contemporary art of the late 20th century. He was renowned for evocative neo-expressionistic outputs that incorporated text, imagery, and social commentary. This paper explores the mind of Basquiat by taking a cursory look at a selection of his oeuvre through the lens of expressivism as a technique of art criticism. Expressivism is considered the best approach because it highlights the artist's subjective emotional experience and the spontaneous communication of his inner realities, and personal opinions about his social realities. It offers the right framework to understand Basquiat's complex personality, struggles, and use of symbolic language. The analysis highlights how Basquiat's works address issues of race, class struggle, identity, trauma, and power. This review underscores the inalienable link between his creative voyage and his psychological state, showcasing how his works serve as some form of creative windows to

his psych, giving cues to how his mind worked and how he communicated in manners weightier than words.

Keywords: Jean-Michel Basquiat, expressivism, neo-expressionism, art criticism, identity, social critique.

Introduction

Jean-Michel Basquiat was an influential American artist born to Haitian father and a Puerto Rican mother in Brooklyn, New York city. He began his art career as an underground graffiti street artist, working as a member of a team with the pseudo name; SAMO@. His multicultural and multilingual family background encouraged his creativity and ensured he received adequate cultural exposure. His mother played a significant role in nurturing his early interest in art by taking him to museums and purchasing books such as *Grays Anatomy*. Influences from this book could be seen in his later works, especially after he suffered an injury through a car accident as a child. The crisis in Basquiat's home and subsequent separation from his family impacted greatly on his young impressionable mind; haunting him throughout his short but productive life.

The artistic style of Basquiat could be situated within the neo-expressionist movement which is predominantly characterized by raw emotional intensity, vivid colour, and layered symbolism (MyArtBroker, 2024). His works are rich with cryptic text, figurative elements, and a repetitive use of motifs such as the iconic three points crown and skulls which reveal an immediate great outpouring of

internal experiences and social realities, with several layers of racial identity themes and systemic injustice. (Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2022). it will be most practicable to employ expressivism as a critical tool in order to facilitate a better understanding of Basquiat's art. This is done by identifying the artist's emotional and psychological markers that shapes and forms a major part of his visual language.

Expressionism and Neo-Expressionism Clarifications

Although both Expressionism and Neo-Expressionism are products of the 20th century, the former was older in date. And they differ in characteristics and practitioners as well. Expressionism is an older, early 20th century movement that was chiefly concerned with the expression of emotions through art. The ideas and experiences of the artist are the main focus as well as the ability to evoke the intended emotion on the viewers. On the other hand, Neo-Expressionism is a late 20th century renaissance that employs vigorous, gestural paintings with contemporary subject matter, cultural hybridity, and post-modern ideologies. Just like many other art movements, Neo-Expressionism was a form of revolt against the status quo. It started as a reaction against the popular styles of the middle of 20th century; Minimalism and Conceptual Art.

For Nifesi T (2018), expressionism was birthed following the increasing urge felt by artists to “share their expression of the truth”

Expressivism as a Framework for Art Criticism

Expressivism could be traced to the earlier Romantic Movement, with a large part of its early written articulations ascribed to Leo Tolstoy. It was his opinion that art is a means of transmitting feelings and emotions from an artist to a viewer. John Dewy also contributed to the development of the theoretical framework of expressivism; emphasizing it as an efficacious means of conveying human experience and subjective emotional responses.

Expressivism carries the assertion that every work of art is an expression of the artist's inner emotions, views or perceptions, and mental state (Carroll,1999). It creates an opportunity for the authentic communication of feelings over formal perfection or external realism. For Basquiat who ascended rapidly from being a graffiti artist, operating underground and always at the risk of sanctions and arrests, to a gallery and institutional sensation and celebrity artist, his works served as an effective expressive channel for his complex identity as a black artist contending daily with systemic racism, personal trauma, and addiction. (Biography.com Editors, 2024). This is no surprising, considering that this was an era when racism was a national pandemic in America. And, the artist's mother had just died after checking in and out of a rehab facility, with a distrust father who had lost patience with an alienated son. It has also been established that the New York City art and music industry of the late 70s and 80s was characterized by widespread drug use, particularly heroin. (a substance that the young artist would later overdose on at age 27).

Review of key elements of Expressivism as witnessed in the works of Michel Basquiat

There are a number of characteristics that runs parallel throughout most of the works by Basquiat. These are the expressive elements that carry the depth of meanings used as mediums for communication of feelings and ideas by the artist in a manner that is most engaging emotionally. They include the following;

Emotional Rawness and Trauma

Basquiat's oeuvre oscillates with some level of psychological weight that reflected his turbulent life, including childhood trauma, family instability, and substance abuse (BBC, 2018). For instance, his use of skull and skeletal motifs noticeable in works such as 'Untitled' (1982) evoke themes of mortality and feebleness, showing the general notion of human weakness and a personal encounter with death (Art News, 2022). These elements of expressivism allow the viewer to perceive these works as vistas into Basquiat's emotional battles, rather than being just symbolic expressions. Other recurring motifs include a crown which symbolizes the assertion of dignity and self-worth in a world that continuously dehumanizes using the instruments of race and social inequality. (Smithsonian, 2022). these motifs serve as expressive instruments for subjects that forms the core interests of Basquiat, especially as it concerns his identity formation and resistance. The aesthetic clarity and boldness is analogous to expressive priorities which emphasizes unabridged emotion and artist-oriented meaning.

Personal and Social Expression using Visual Language

Basquiat's appropriation of codified text, invented words like "AOPKHES," and disjointed anatomy shows levels of use of personalized codes and critique of the social environment (Artspace, 2023). Through his visual language, he channels disturbing experiences of identity and power by addressing African American history, colonial history, and the trafficking of Black bodies. Only expressivism could be employed in accounting for this complex outpouring of deep seated cultural and existential threats. (myartbroker, 2024).

The years proceeding Basquiat's death saw an astronomical increase in the commodification and commercialization of the works of the artist. This action of speculators and galleries stripped his works of their original essence and potency. While the original intent of the artist was to produce works that make personal statements and express his opinions about the world around him and beyond; a form of personal catharsis, the art market commodified his works, sometimes stripping them of political force (Jacobin, 2022). This single action negates the expressive intent of the artist, and the potency of the intended message.



Untitled
(1982)
by

Basquiat. Medium: acrylic, spray paint, oilstick on canvas.
Source: www.google.com

Review of Selected Works

Untitled (1982)

This piece is one of Basquiat's most famous pieces, fetching over \$100 million in auction in 2017, making it the most expensive work by an American ever sold in an auction. The work depicts a large prominent skull with haunting eyes and a sneering mouth, reminds one of "the Brut" by Uche Okeke. Untitled (1982) is a large painting of about eight by sixteen feet, featuring a skull as a central motif. Painted in a raw manner, the skull appears aggressive, with spontaneous brushstrokes, frenzy lines, and a vivid choice of colour palette dominantly occupied with black, white, reds, blues and splashes of yellow. The rendition is disjointed, placing the skull between abstraction and naturalism. Other iconic representations include his three pronged crown and graffiti texts.

This painting reveals a deep emotional and psychological energy. The bold, radical brushstrokes carry an urgency and rawness that reflects the inner turmoil of the artist. The skull is an ever present motif in the works of Basquiat, signifying his obsession with death or an expression of the traumatic experiences of the artist's life. The artist's technique of laying colours and textures disrupts traditional ideas of beauty to elicit an intense sensory experience. His contrasting use of blacks and vivid primary colours conveys conflict and vitality. His uninhibited use of colour splashes, and drips creates

spontaneity and his direct outpouring of emotions, a hallmark of expressionism.

By including symbols such as crown, Basquiat asserts himself in defiance to a systemic operation laden American society of the era. His use of fragmented facial features suggests distorted identity and the struggle of most African-Americans in a society with wide racial gaps.

Employing Expressivism, it is easy for one to see the Untitled (1982) as a window into Basquiat's state of mind, His confrontation with racism, mortality, and self consciousness. His work is a mixture of man's primordial experience, and social critique.

The erratic composition mirrors his lived experience, his struggles with addiction, the pressures of his growing popularity, and alienation in a predominantly white art market. In one of his interviews (most), Basquiat is noticeably weary and unyielding to the questions of the interviewer who obviously was a stranger in his world.

Contextually, when compared to his other works, Untitled highlights Basquiat's constant explorations of concepts such as mortality, identity, and power. It remains a masterpiece work on expressionism, challenging viewers to appreciate not only the aesthetics but the psychological and social narratives undertone.

Untitled (History of the Black People)

This is a triptych of three hinged canvases which combined fragments of images, texts, and symbols that

evokes African, and African-American history. The work is built around a central image of an Egyptian boat commanded by Osiris; this is a visual attempt to represent ancient African civilizations. Such texts like 'ESCAPE, SLAVE, and ESCLAVE' make an overt reference to slavery. The scribbled letters could symbolize erased or forgotten histories. Afrocentric masks and references to the Nile River centers the work within African heritage. Other images allude to the Atlantic Slave Trade, and plantation economy, including the repeated use of the word "SICKEL" (referencing agricultural exploitation and possibly sickle cell anemia) and "SALT" which symbolically represented commodities traded in the days of slavery. (Forever Black Effusion, 2013).

Expressively speaking, Basquiat's visual language which is always charged with emotional urgency and raw power is ever present in this piece. Its spontaneous brushstrokes, chaotic arrangement of colours over each other, and disjointed composition exposes a psychological state filled with trauma, and resistance. His palette amplifies the tension between erasure and reclaiming history, while the texts announces the past in protest. The intensity of this piece shows Basquiat's effort in giving voice to suppressed histories and personal pains. The distortions mirror the systemic destabilization of black lives and civilizations through slavery and racism.

A common theme reflective of Marxist ethos could be seen in this piece, like in many other works by the artist. This is most noticeable in his emphasis on economic and historical exploitation. The work shows class disparity and uneven social structures that ensured the subjugation of



Jean-Michel Basquiat's Photograph. Courtesy: www.google.com

Basquiat's Prodiges in Nigeria

It is indisputable that Basquiat's style of art makes a demand on the audience to recognize the power of art as a medium for radical social expression and political engagement. A number of artists in Nigeria are currently employing this power to drive their artistic endeavours in the Nigerian contemporary art space. Nevertheless, some of these artists may have not intentionally chosen to embrace the techniques of Basquiat, his influences are too glaring to be overlooked.

These Nigerian Artists share stylistic and thematic affinities with Jean-Michel Basquiat, especially in their use of expressionism as a technique; graffiti-like text and imagery, emotion laden symbolisms, and exploration of socio-political issues as subject matter.

Some of these Nigerian artists include; Edozie Anedu, Wisdom Uche, Olasunkanmi Oyelusi, Ayanfe Olarinde and so on.

The existence of these contemporary crop of Nigerian artists producing Basquiat's inspired Neo-expressionistic art, highlights the hybridity that currently pervades the global art sector and stands as a testament to the growth and heterogeneity of contemporary Nigerian art.



Edozie Anedu's Photograph. Notice the Basquiat's inspired hairstyle. Source: www.google.com



The rain makers dance by Edozie Anedu (2023). Medium: oil and acrylic on canvas Source: www.artsy.com



Asake's album cover featuring Olarinde Ayanfe's painting inspired by Basquiat. Insets are photographs of artist and her muze.

Conclusion

A cursory look on the oeuvre of Jean Michel - Basquiat shows an overwhelming ability of art to act as an expressive medium for challenging personal and social issues. By` exploring Neo-expressionism, chiefly characterized by vibrant imagery, monumental canvases, raw symbolism, and appropriation of texts, Basquiat anticipated complex and contentious subjects such as race, identity, trauma, and defiance. His multicultural background helped him in projecting his African and African-American histories with dignity and pride, albeit its abundance of personal and collective trauma.

Similarly, his personal experiences such as family problems, addiction, and racial segregation are given generous representation in his works. All these gave rise to his production of a body of work that carries powerful emotive weight that shows the artist's internal battles as well as his social commentaries; for he recognized that at

the heart of his struggles was the persistence of structured social inequalities of the racially stratified society he lived in.

Consequently, Basquiat's works and his ideologies remain relevant today as it continues to resonate as an authentic expression of human frailty and social critique, he is an inspiration for young aspiring artists having himself produced an intimidating body of work of over 3000 drawings and paintings in short lifespan; cementing his legacy as a phenomenal personality whose creative voice transcends personal pain to challenge and inspire social reflection.

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