

Beyond Basquiat: ‘We shouldn’t use ‘black artist’ as code for ‘other’”

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988), among the most renowned figures in American art, was known for exploring the complexities and contradictions of race and mainstream society. As a retrospective of Basquiat’s work goes on display in New York, artists of color discuss his legacy

By Katie Rogers
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Awol Erizku, 25, New York City | [View his work](#) | Information: Installation for a critique at Yale School of Art. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

How has Basquiat’s work influenced you? If he has any direct influence on me, I would say it’s the fact that it made me think of how much control I can have over my work, and what I can do with it while I’m still alive. It made me aware of what I’m worth.



Awol Erizku, 25, New York City | [View his work](#) | Title: Oh what a feeling, fuck it I want a billion.
Information: Installation for a critique at Yale School of Art. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

What do you think needs to be done to make sure black artists are better represented in mainstream art culture? The art world shouldn't use 'black artist' as a code for 'other.' We make work from our experiences like everyone else. White, black, Asian, whatever, we're just artists at the end of the day. We need more diversity in schools, museums and galleries. It's happening, just not fast enough. I assure you it'll be a different conversation about 'black artists' in another 20 years.



Renaldo Leica, 45, London | [View his work](#) | Information: Interpretation of Basquiat's Riding with Death. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

How has Basquiat's work influenced you? Basquiat's boldness in his early years to get his work seen and respected is a constant form of encouragement and reflection. His raw representation of text with social commentary also has been an influential tool. We share many common muses as represented in his portrait paintings.

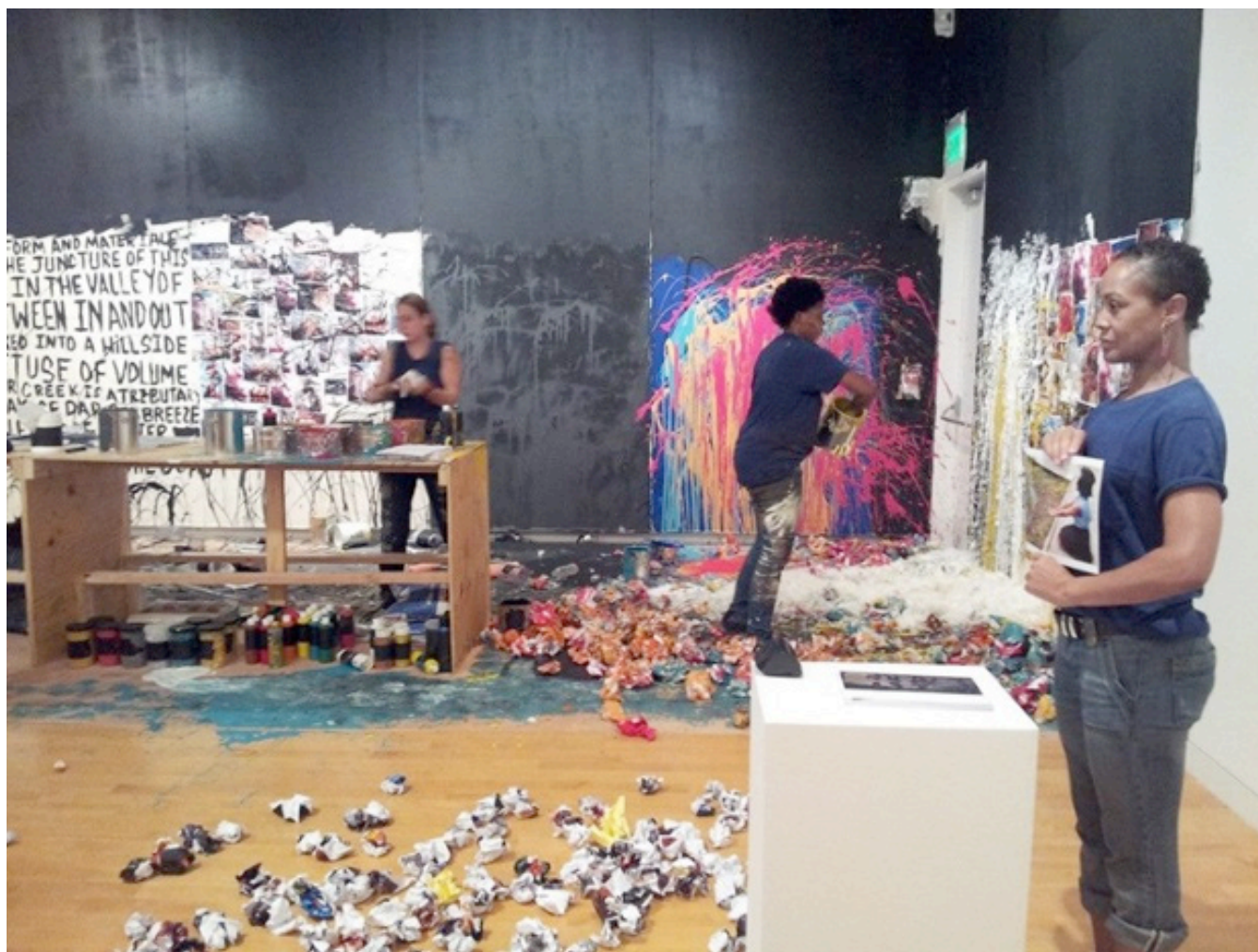
What do you think needs to be done to make sure black artists are better represented in mainstream art culture? For artists the bigger question might be why mainstream is unable to

appreciate and celebrate differences in general, in all art mediums and LIFE period. What can be done for more representation of black models in fashion draws the common parallels.



Xaviera Simmons, 39, New York City | [View her work](#) | Title: Index Four Composition Two.
Materials: Color photograph **Dimensions:** 40" x 50" **Date:** 2013. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery

How do you address your heritage in your work? That question, for me, in 2014, is too simplistic. I feel that everyone is putting in their culture ... I don't understand why it has to be heavy-handed when people of color do something, to talk about their heritage. I use the idea of migration, minimalism and abstraction as freely as I do other things of my culture ... as an artist, as an American, as a person living in Manhattan, as a former teen metal-head punk rocker ... I don't know. There's not just one culture to draw from. My racial culture's an aspect that I draw on as well as other cultures. I'm interested in woodworkers, but I never get asked to talk about that.



Xaviera Simmons, 39, New York City | [View her work](#) | Title: Underscore Materials: Performance-installation-film Date: 2014. (On view through 9 March). Photograph: Courtesy the artist and [The Aldrich Museum Contemporary Art Museum](#)

What makes New York special for artists? New York is sort of like this nutrient rich environment. It's the reality of New York, which is rigorous ... you've got to figure out how to be in conversation with your compadres. Historically it's where people have flocked to be inspired and produce. The way we produce is shifting. When Basquiat was working things weren't as expensive, but obviously New York

is a huge inspiration. New York also does this thing where it feels like it's your turn ... strictly because you're engaging with so many different types of people.



Jordan Casteel, 25, Denver | [View her work](#) | Title: Jonathan Date: 2014 Dimensions: 54" x 74"
Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

How has Basquiat's work influenced you? When I first engaged with Basquiat's work, I remember thinking, 'Wow, nothing could have stopped this man.' The energy in his work pushes me to put all I

have into everything I do.

What do you think needs to be done to make sure black artists are better represented in mainstream art culture? There was no not seeing Basquiat. He was everywhere and made sure everyone saw him. Today it is going to be the same, there is no not seeing. You will see us. We as black artists will continue to fight for that visibility, and we can do that, but, it is also going to mean that the 'mainstream' art world has to accept that there are more than a few and there is some true talent out there.



Lauren Halsey, 26, Los Angeles | [View her work](#) | Title: put that on sum10. put that on evreethang you'll never be unfunky again. **Date:** 2013 **Materials:** summa everythang. **Dimensions:** 16' x 25'
Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

How has Basquiat's work influenced you? The muchness in the work has most influenced me. The piling on and layering of information and of paint. Also, the way Basquiat abstracted and stylized language as another material has been inspiring in my attempt of working in this vein for recent works.

How did Basquiat's work influence the piece you've shared with us? Basquiat did a great job at creating these maximalist, everything surfaces. They're greedy in a beautiful way. I aspire to do this with my sculptures and installations. Also, I've always been really excited by the graphic quality of his work, especially the text.