

# Forbes

## Rarely Viewed Basquiat Exposes Timely Exploration Of Racial Identity, Activism, And Police Brutality

Natasha Gural Dec 13, 2018



Jean-Michel Basquiat

Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)

1983

Project code: BAS07299

25 x 30 1/2 inches (63.5 x 77.5 cm)

Acrylic and marker on wood, framed

Collection of Nina Clemente, New York

Basquiat's "Defacement": The Untold Story on view June 21-November 6, 2019

ALLISON CHIPAK © SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION, 2018

Trendy teens and twenty-somethings scoop up T-shirts featuring iconic images by Jean-Michel Basquiat at the Uniqlo store in Manhattan's SoHo, a short walk from the artist's NoHo studio where he was found dead three decades ago of a heroin overdose at age 27. Last year, Basquiat's 1982 "Untitled," a colorful and jarring painting of a skull, sold for a staggering \$110.5 million at Sotheby's.

There's no doubt the prolific neo-expressionist remains popular and relevant in today's art and pop culture worlds, but digging deeper into his career and personal struggles reveals timely themes that continue to torment America.

An American artist of Haitian and Puerto Rican descent, Basquiat exploded onto the art world as part of graffiti duo SAMO, tagging Manhattan's Lower East Side with powerful epigrams (pithy, surprising, and sometimes satirical statements) in the late 1970s, empowering the intersection of hip hop, punk, and street art. By the 1980s, his paintings were on view at museums and galleries worldwide.

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City will present *Basquiat's "Defacement": The Untold Story*, a thematic exhibition examining the work of Basquiat and his contemporaries from the lens of his cultural and racial identity and social activism.

Organized by guest curator Chaédria LaBouvier, in collaboration with Nancy Spector, Artistic Director and Jennifer and David Stockman Chief Curator, and Joan Young, Director of Curatorial Affairs, exhibition runs from June 21, 2019, to November 6, 2019. The focal point will be "Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)", Basquiat's 1983 tribute to fellow black artist Michael Stewart, who died of cardiac arrest following 13 days in a coma at age 25 after his arrest by New York City Transit Police for spray-painting graffiti on a New York City Subway wall at the First Avenue station in Manhattan's East Village.

Originally painted on the wall of friend and fellow artist Keith Haring's studio, "Defacement" was a private and personal work that has rarely been exhibited. Some 20 paintings and works on paper by Basquiat and his contemporaries will be on display along with *Defacement* to scrutinize his black identity, his protest against police brutality, and his construction of a unique aesthetic language of empowerment.

The Basquiat works on view at the Guggenheim aim to illustrate his engagement with state authority as well as his use of crowns as symbols for the canonization of historical black figures. Also on view will be archival material related to Stewart's death, including diaries and protest posters, along with samples of artwork from his estate. Paintings and prints by other artists in response to Stewart's death and the subsequent criminal trial of the officers charged in his death will include Haring's "Michael Stewart—U.S.A. for Africa (1985), Pop Art legend Andy Warhol's screenprinted "headline" paintings from 1983 incorporating a *New York Daily News* article on Stewart's death; David Hammons's stenciled print titled "The Man Nobody Killed" (1986), and Lyle Ashton Harris's photographic portrait "Saint Michael Stewart" (1994).

You don't have to wait until June to see Basquiat's and Warhol's acrylic-on-canvas collaborations "Paramount" (1984-85) and "Third Eye" (1985), both on loan from a private collector, on display side-by-side at the Whitney Museum of American Art. "Andy Warhol \_ From A to B and Back Again," featuring more than 350 works on display in the largest retrospective of Warhol's prolific career in nearly 30 years, runs through March 31, 2019. Buy tickets [online](#). The Whitney exhibited more than 90 Basquiat works in a 1992 retrospective.