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New exhibition on Basquiat's social activism opening at NY Guggenheim museum

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The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City, United States.
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The exhibition, titled "Basquiat's 'Defacement': The Untold Story," will examine the artist's protest against police brutality.

The focal point of the show is "Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)," a painting created by Basquiat in 1983 in tribute to Michael Stewart.

The fellow black artist died of cardiac arrest following 13 days in coma, after his arrest by New York City Transit Police for spray-painting graffiti on a wall in an East Village subway station.

Deeply shaken by Stewart's death, Basquiat famously told one journalist, "It could have been me. It could have been me."

"Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)," which was originally painted on the wall of Keith Haring's studio, has rarely been exhibited in a public context.

The exhibition also features some 20 paintings and works on paper made by Basquiat and his contemporaries in response to Stewart's death and the subsequent criminal trial of the police officers involved in the incident -- who were later acquitted of all charges by an all-white jury.

Among these artworks are Haring's canvas "Michael Stewart-U.S.A. for Africa", David Hammond's stenciled print entitled "The Man Nobody Killed;" and Lyle Ashton Harris's photographic portrait "Saint Michael Stewart".

Andy Warhol's screen-printed "headline" painting from 1983, which incorporates an article on Stewart's death by the New York Daily News, will also be on show.

Archival material related to the graffiti artist's death, including diaries and protest posters, will be featured in the exhibition, along with sample of artworks from his estate.

The exhibition "Basquiat's 'Defacement': The Untold Story" was curated by writer and activist Chaédria LaBouvier, who organized in 2016 a one-work exhibition of Basquiat's "Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)" at Williams College Museum of Art.

It will be on view from June 21 to November 6 at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, in New York City.