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## ***Painting the Third Mind***

### **Keith Haring**

Jean-Michel and Andy were from different generations and different sociological backgrounds. They had radically different painting styles and equally different aesthetics. They were at different stages of their lives and different levels of their own development. Physically, the only trait they had in common was their hair.

Somewhere, though, they found a common ground and established a healthy relationship. Their personalities complemented each other. Jean was aggressive and 'point blank', while Andy was shy and polite. Jean had the nerve to do anything he felt like, anywhere he felt like it, and Andy loved to watch. It was a wonderful kind of give and take which enabled each of them to fulfill their own secret desires. The relationship was built on mutual respect. Jean had sought after Andy since he was a teenager, and by 1980 had been to the Factory several times. In time, Andy grew to respect Jean-Michel. The more he saw his work, the more he loved it. Andy eventually trusted Jean to the point that he would actually let him cut and sculpt his 'hair.' The respect ran deeper than just aesthetics. Each had a fascination with the other's impenetrable shell. The mystery that was Warhol was challenged by the complexities that were Basquiat. Their projected 'images' were powerful and uncompromising, while they both harboured a vulnerable, humble spirit which endowed both of them with a sense of humour. They 'understood' each other.

A successful collaboration is always the result of a successful relationship. The paintings are the physical proof of the harmony that existed beyond the canvas. I'm not sure if their collaboration was a deliberate, planned strategy or if it simply 'happened'. Jean was spending more and more time visiting the Factory, and eventually started painting there. This is not hard to imagine, since Jean painted anywhere he found himself. He would create with whatever materials were readily available on whatever surface would sit still long enough to draw on. Andy was also a workaholic and loved the added incentive of having Jean around. They exercised together, ate together, and laughed together. The great thing about visiting Andy was that he was always working. Whether or not there may have been endless interruptions from phone calls and visitors, there was still a sense that in between, a lot of things were getting done. There were always new paintings leaning against the wall, new piles of Polaroids, and new clippings or photostats of prospective projects. For an artist, the most important and most delicate relationship he can have with another artist is one in which he is constantly challenged and intimidated. This is probably the only productive quality of jealousy. The greatest pleasure is to be provoked to the point of inspiration. Most artists only admit to one or two others whom they feel are equal to themselves. Very few would accept the notion that their peers are actually superior. However, in the privacy of their own thoughts, they must admit to themselves that these thoughts arise, and usually lead to a kind of unspoken competition. This provocation, coupled with a little self-confidence, can create an intense working atmosphere.

Jean-Michel and Andy had achieved a healthy balance. Jean respected Andy's philosophy and was

in awe of his accomplishments and mastery of colour and images. Andy was amazed by the ease with which Jean composed and constructed his paintings, and was constantly surprised by the never-ending flow of new ideas. Each one inspired the other to outdo the next. The collaborations were seemingly effortless. It was a physical conversation happening in paint instead of words. The sense of humour, the snide remarks, the profound realizations, the simple chit-chat all happened with paint and brushes. I visited them at the Factory several times while they were painting together. The atmosphere was playful and intense at the same time. Jean-Michel's painting posture and disregard for technique created a mood of unnerving spectacle. There was a sense that one was watching something being unveiled and discovered for the first time. Andy was intrigued and intimidated at the same time. It seemed to push him to new heights. Andy returned to painting with beautiful, delicate lines, carefully laid onto the canvas. The drips and gestures immediately reminded me of the earliest Warhol paintings I had seen. The new scale had forced him to develop an even richer draftmanship. The lines flowed onto the canvas.

Painting with Jean-Michel was not easy. You had to forget any preconceived ideas of ownership, and be prepared to have anything you'd clone completely painted over within seconds. It was kind of total abandon which required total trust and respect. Andy loved the energy with which Jean would totally eradicate one image and enhance another. It was truly an event. There were canvases hanging all over the Factory. They worked on many at the same time, each idea inspiring the next. Layers and layers of images and ideas would build towards a concise climax. It was exciting to visit the Factory at this time.

Many of the staff members were not so delighted by Jean-Michel's presence. He disrupted their schedules and filled the Factory with sweet-smelling pot smoke. Andy seemed happy to defend Jean and to challenge their conservatism. Jean brought back a much-needed touch of mischief which had been disappearing from the Factory agenda. But, he also brought an atmosphere of obsessive production which left its mark long after the collaborations had stopped. The ramifications of this investigation left obvious traces in Jean-Michel's paintings. He handled scale with a new sense of confidence and introduced several new Pop icons into his work. Many people believe that Jean was the sole reason Andy returned to his brushes. Both of them benefited immeasurably.

For me, the paintings which resulted from this collaboration are the perfect testimony to the depth and importance of their friendship. The quality of the paintings mirrors the quality of the relationship. The sense of humour which permeates all of the works recalls the laughter which surrounded them while they were being made. They are truly an invention of what William S. Burroughs called *The Third Mind* - two amazing minds fusing together to create a third, totally separate and unique mind.

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