

From: *Collaborations: Warhol, Basquiat, Clemente*, curated by T. Osterwold, exhibition catalog (Kassel, 4 February - 5 May 1996; Munich, 25 July - 29 September 1996; Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 17 October 1996 - 19 January 1997), Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit 1996, pp. 88-90.

A Visit to Florida with Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol

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"We worked for about a year, on about a million paintings... Andy would start most of the paintings. He would start one and put something very recognizable on it, or a product logo, and then I would sort of deface it. Then I would try to get him to work some more on it, and then I would work some more on it. I would try to get him to do at least two things. He likes to do just one hit, and then have me do all the work after that... We used to paint over each others stuff all the time..."¹

Jean-Michel Basquiat's description of his collaborative efforts with Andy Warhol is especially apparent in their 1984 painting, *Florida*. Warhol has clone just one "hit" on the canvas, one enlarged advertisement for a special one-way airfare to Florida (from New York) for \$79. Warhol's contribution is similar to other advertisements, prices, and commercial logos that he added to collaborations such as *6.99*, *Pontiac*, *General Electric*, and *Win \$1,000,000*. After Warhol's single application to the canvas, Basquiat then took control, painting over most of Warhol's work and filling the canvas with his own free associations about the American state of Florida. Although it was a state that Basquiat had never visited, he conjured up numerous familiar and eliche associations which allude primarily to the warm weather and citrus growing industry connected with Florida.

Basquiat begins his visit to Warhol's Florida with the words HEY! SUCKERS written at the top of the painting as a disparaging reference to the power of advertising over the general public, and revealing his own suspicion of media, promotion, and money. As is typical of Basquiat's work, all of his images and text contain multiple meanings and layered references to numerous other subjects as diverse as African-American history, music, coded symbols, and autobiography, and are all recurring themes in his own body of work. Basquiat's first addition to the Warhol canvas is the application of broad, bright, and roughly painted areas that divide the rectangular canvas. Basquiat's choice of color is not accidental - he has specifically chosen red, black, green, and yellow because of their symbolic importance in African-American history. Red, black, and green are the colors of the flag of the "Back to Africa" movement, a 1920s African-American political cause led by Marcus Garvey that sought to reclaim African heritage as a positive model for identification and a unifying cultural legacy. In addition, red, green, and yellow are the colors associated with Africa, specifically the national flag of Ethiopia, and red also represents death and mourning in some African nations.² Basquiat's use of orange and yellow in *Florida* is a more obvious reference to that state's domination of the growth and processing of oranges and lemons in the United States. Basquiat

¹ Jean-Michel Basquiat statement in an unreleased, videotaped interview by Tamra Davis and Becky Johnston, Los Angeles, 1986

² Susanne Reichling, "African-American Iconography in the Work of Jean-Michel Basquiat" (unpublished thesis). Phillips-Universitat, Marburg, Germany, 1994.

elaborates on the fruit reference by painting four orange circles (one in the center of the round space in the number nine) and identifying them by writing the word CITRUS above one of the orange circles, and CITRUS above a yellow lemon. The orange circles then led Basquiat to paint two interlocking orange rings that have additional meaning for him. Interlocking rings are the logo of the Olympic Games and are the subject of another Warhol/Basquiat collaboration, *Olyrnpics*. Basquiat makes frequent references in his other works to the 1936 Olympic Games held in Berlin, in which African-American athlete Jesse Owens won four gold medals, breaking the previous record for medals won by a single athlete, and shattering Hitler's claim of Aryan superiority.³ In addition, two interlocking rings have another meaning for Basquiat, one that he discovered in the reference books often used for locating interesting and meaningful images and text, Henry Dreyfuss' *Symbol Sourcebook*. This book contains a section on "hobo symbols" that presents a lexicon of graphic designs that hobos (unemployed, itinerant, homeless men who traveled by train around America during the 1930s depression) used to communicate with each other by drawing these symbols on walls, sidewalks, and fences. Hobo symbols appealed to Basquiat because of their graffiti origins and his interest in obscure, secret languages. The double rings translate into "Police Here Frown on Hobos," an analogous situation to that confronted by black men in America.⁴

Basquiat's focus then shifts from the orange fruit theme to the idea of Florida's tropical climate. He has drawn a white box over the double orange rings, and a second box to the right of it, and identified it as HIELO, the Spanish work for ice or ice cube. This use of Spanish language acknowledges Basquiat's Latin American heritage from his Puerto Rican mother. Basquiat has then drawn a glass of lemonade with ice cubes in the yellow portion of the painting and above it has written ICE COLD, reinforcing the need for refrigeration in the sweltering heat of Florida. Dominating this same yellow area is a cartoon-like depiction of a penguin, an animal associated with cold climates. This penguin is also an image he borrowed from the Dreyfuss *Sourcebook*, and is the international symbol meaning "Keep Frozen."⁵ Basquiat used this penguin in a number of his works, including the Warhol collaborations *Keep Frozen* and *Amoco*, as an allusion to the black jazz musicians that he greatly admired, such as Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, because they frequently performed their music dressed in tuxedos and black ties, resembling black-faced penguins.

Basquiat's frequent use of ice references in numerous other works can also be interpreted as meaning "cool" - as a metaphor of assent and admiration (as opposed to a degree of temperature), particularly as the word had evolved from the vernacular language of African-American musicians. He painted another work, *Zydeco*, in 1984 (the same year as *Florida*) that deals with the subject of music and "coolness." *Zydeco* is an Afro-Atlantic jazz related music that emerged in the American southern states (Louisiana and Florida) and traveled north to the New York music scene that Basquiat admired and participated in. Basquiat has written the word VITAPHONE in white silhouette letters in *Florida* (and also in *Zydeco*) which represent his historicism of the transmission of black culture and music through phonograph records, like the early Vitaphone recording device.⁶ The dollar sign (\$) is one of the few Warhol areas in *Florida* that Basquiat did not paint over (except for one drip). The letter S has special significance for Basquiat, and appears often and in

³ See Jean-Michel Basquiat *Jesse* (1983) reproduced in Richard Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), page 143.

⁴ Henry Dreyfuss, *Symbol Sourcebook: An Authoritative Guide to international Graphic Symbols* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), page 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, page 98.

⁶ See Jean-Michel Basquiat *Zydeco* (1984) reproduced in Marshall, op. cit., pages 176- 77.

many different guises in the majority of his works. In addition to being the symbol for money, it signifies multiple meanings for the artist including the S emblem on Superman (one of Basquiat's favorite cartoon characters), S as the first letter of SAMO (Basquiat's first artistic persona and a word which is slang for 'same old shit'), and S as the first letter of Salt (a commodity that was used for monetary transactions in early African cultures). Below the \$ sign, Basquiat has included one of his familiar black heads, drawn in white line with slanted eyes, broad nose, and bared teeth. On the forehead is drawn a circle intersected and quartered by two crossing lines. In certain African regions, like the Congo, this symbol is a cosmogram of the world, indicating the cardinal points, and often appears as a pattern in carvings and weavings. Basquiat was aware of this reference from his familiarity with and admiration of Robert Farris Thompson's book about African art and philosophy, *Flash of the Spirit*.⁷ Concurrently, the Dreyfuss *Sourcebook* included this same symbol as having multiple meanings - Creation, Balance, Salt, Oil, and Injury - all of which overlapped with Basquiat's own interests. The black head represents a "Griot," a type of priest, shaman, or historian in some African and Caribbean communities who is strong and respected, and possesses special powers of vision and knowledge. This figure can also be interpreted as a surrogate self-portrait of Basquiat - an artist with creative and intellectual talents who has shared a journey with Andy Warhol that begins in the state of Florida and ends in Jean-Michel Basquiat's state of mind.

⁷ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, (New York: Random House, 1983).