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## ***The Voyeur and the Exhibitionist***

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"Andy's best work since the 60's." That was my spontaneous reaction when I saw the canvases that Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat painted together at the Factory recently. And it's my considered opinion now.

Showing the artists kitted out in boxing gloves and Everlast, the posters that appeared all over the neighborhood suggested one of those "fights of the century" between two great champs. Some sneered at the publicity gimmick, others tried to pick the winner (Warhol, on points?). More to the point, those who knew the two men personally insisted on the spontaneous, disinterested nature of their collaboration. Andy and Jean-Michel's friendship was such that these canvases are much more than an event: they are a testament, a lively and richly humorous dialogue between two sensibilities that, in their different ways, symbolise Pop Culture at its most Pop.

In fact, the boxing theme was rather apposite as an ironic comment on the competitiveness of the New York art world in the 80s. People have complained about this and tried to deny it, but personally I find it fascinating. The intense sense of competition that has destroyed and made so many artists paranoid is also a great stimulant. This rotten but undeniably productive atmosphere - I am thinking, for example, of the rivalry between Salle and Schnabel - helped give the art made in New York in those years the unique dimension of ambition, in the best sense of the word: substance and stature.

So, squaring off for this fight of the century, we have, in one corner, Andy Warhol, age 54, of Czech (Catholic) origin, a pro of 20 years experience, unbeaten in the star category. In the opposite corner, Jean-Michel Basquiat, ex-SAMO, age 24, of Haitian (Voodoo) origin, who turned pro less than five years ago, unbeaten in the *darling of the intelligentsia* category.

We are talking two distinct styles. Andy is cool personified. His movements are light, graceful. His line is fluid, his colours clear, his themes on target. Jean-Michel is quicker and good at dodging. His line is vigorous, sometimes hesitant, but more alive. He is surprising, brilliant, and can hit below the belt - doodle, erase everything, cover it all over. He has the hunger, his language is colourful; he's the one who will dominate.

Andy comes equipped with provisions: meat, tinned foods, mayonnaise. Jean-Michel brings his fork and crocodile jaws. Andy deploys energy (*General Electric*), speed (*Honda*) and the authority of power. Jean-Michel shows strange African masks, skeletons, extraterrestrials. With his logos and fine geometrical lettering Andy is a master of *mise en scène*. Jean-Michel answers in slang (*Hello, Frogs!*), in graffiti, with all the arsenal of the street-smart kid. He handles the brush as freely as Warhol manipulates the found image. It's tit for tat, a challenge for a challenge.

Half-fight, half-feast. They have fun and frissons with all those deadly poisons and illnesses. Then throw each other a few fine patches of pure colour.

Warhol's is the strategy of emptiness. His entire oeuvre is informed by a feeling of absence: he

makes himself invisible. Basquiat, on the other hand, does all he can to assert his presence: he fills, he covers over, with a haste that reveals his profound abhorrence of the vacuum. It is a strange battle between voyeur and exhibitionist.

It seems to have done Andy a power of good. As has been observed, this was the first time in 20 years he had picked up a paint brush. He was rejuvenated, energised. There was even a smile behind that expressionless mask.

Jean-Michel had a lot more to lose. After the event, did his paranoia succumb to the idea that he may have been manipulated by a phenomenon too powerful to handle? Was he not crushed by the star? I don't think so. This encounter gave him a new dimension and assurance. Freedom. He could now escape the cliché of the ghetto prodigy where they were ready to imprison him and become a full-fledged painter. This encounter was nota combat, then, but a chance for Andy and Jean-Michel to show what they could do. I see a parallel with another meeting, that of Verlaine and Rimbaud: two generations, two temperaments destined to connect in the realm of art.

To appreciate this pictorial event, one needs to forget the exceptional circumstances and even death, which soon came for both creators of these canvases. Having done so, you realise that here is a unique synthesis of the two great sources of Pop imagery: the impact of the media and the anarchic energy of the street. This synthesis is neither didactic nor premeditated. On the contrary, it is the result of a casual, sometimes mischievous attitude full of innuendo and double entendres. This group of paintings is more than an intelligent reflection of contemporary reality. Its manifest vitality makes it a real surprise.

from: "Warhol / Basquiat: Collaboration", Didier Lambert Fine Art, Paris 1989