

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–88, New York City) was born to a Haitian father and a Puerto-Rican mother in Brooklyn. He left his family home at the age of fifteen and took to the streets. He quickly immersed himself in the downtown Manhattan subculture of the 1970s, with his SAMO graffiti tag becoming a recognizable icon of the moment, making the precocious young artist a legend before he was known. In 1981 he began drawing and painting, first on salvaged materials and later on canvas and paper. He sold his first painting in the same year, and by the mid-80s had attained wealth and fame in a superheated art market and within an intensified celebrity media culture. In 1988 he passed away from a drug overdose at the age of 27. Basquiat is represented in several prominent museum collections all over the world. Major solo exhibitions include *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Paintings 1981–1984*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh (1984; traveled to the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; and the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, through 1985); *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1992; traveled to the Menil Collection, Houston; the Des Moines Art Center, Iowa; and the Montgomery Museum of Fine Art, Alabama, through 1994); *Basquiat*, Brooklyn Museum, New York (2005; traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, through 2006); *Basquiat*, Fondation Beyeler, Basel, Switzerland (2010; traveled to Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris); and *Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks*, Brooklyn Museum (2015).

Basquiat Before Basquiat: East 12th Street, 1979–1980 is organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver and curated by Nora Burnett Abrams, Ellen Bruss Curator and Director of Planning. The Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis exhibition is organized by Lisa Melandri, Executive Director.

This exhibition is generously supported by Jan and Ronald Greenberg, and James C. Jamieson III. *A Conversation on Jean-Michel Basquiat* is generously supported by the Robert Lehman Foundation.

Related Programs

A Conversation on Jean-Michel Basquiat
Saturday, September 8, 11:00 am

Performance: Joe McPhee
Saturday, September 22, 1:00 pm

Film Screening: Boom For Real (2017)
Thursday, November 8, 7:00 pm

A full-color, 128-page, illustrated catalog accompanies the exhibition, featuring Alexis Adler's photographs, as well as an essay by MCA Denver curator Nora Burnett Abrams and critical texts and personal remembrances by friends of the artist, including Adler, Luc Sante, Darryl Pinckney, Sara Driver, Jennifer Jaz, Malu Halasa, Michael Holman, Bud Kliment, Sur Rodney Sur, and Felice Rosser. The book provides an intimate glimpse into the creative life of the artist at a moment that incontrovertibly shaped his artistic practice.

Basquiat Before Basquiat

East 12th Street, 1979–1980



Basquiat performing in the apartment, c. 1980. Photograph by Alexis Adler.

Basquiat Before Basquiat: East 12th Street, 1979–1980 presents work made by Jean-Michel Basquiat during the year he lived with his friend Alexis Adler in a small apartment in the East Village.

This archival material provides rare insight into the artistic life of Basquiat before he was recognized as a prominent painter in the early 1980s. While living in this apartment, Basquiat's creative impulses moved fluidly from his SAMO© tags on the surrounding streets and neighborhood into a more sustained practice in his and Adler's shared home. Through painting, sculpture, works on paper, a notebook, and other ephemera, as

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well as Adler's many photographs from this period, this exhibition explores how the context of life in New York informed and formed Basquiat's artistic practice.



Audio Tour

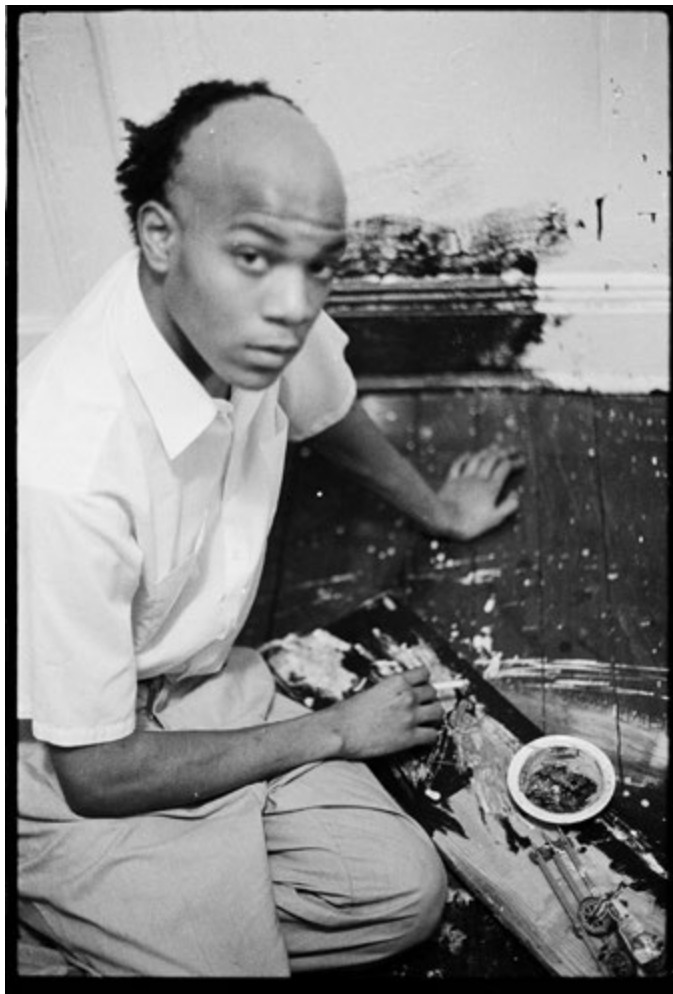
Visit camstlaudio.org or ask for an iPod at the front desk to hear directly from the curator on the audio tour.

Basquiat Before Basquiat deepens our understanding of the artist at a vital yet mostly unknown moment of his career. The exhibition also attests to Basquiat's virtuosity in formation and explores the many diversions he took as he developed his signature style. The final section of this exhibition includes rarely seen major works from local St. Louis collections, which add a perspective of the artist's evolution into the mid-1980s.

Jean-Michel Basquiat was born in 1960 in Brooklyn. He lived and worked in New York until his death in 1988.

A day in 1979

The day really began after spotting a poster for a show or party on my way to work, picking up The Voice to see what band was playing, or better, wait for a call at the lab from someone who had a job in the biz and had free tickets for the night's show. After work head back to the East Village, check out a second hand shop for some "new" fashions, stop by Sounds Records to find a musical treasure in the many bins, like a physical music stroll pre you tube, though far more social, as making eye contact with a guy opposite doing the same was a possibility, heading further east into the wilder part of the neighborhood where cabs did not venture and the streets were vacant of all but a few derelict cars, pick up a nickel bag of weed from a street vendor or by slipping \$5 into a slot in back of a store, then find some friends, pick up a 40 oz. of beer to sit on a stoop before going home for a quick nap, roll up a few joints and get dressed for the night. I don't remember much fuss over meals, breakfast cereal or eggs and grits, rice, maybe stir fry was sufficient to keep things going, maybe a donut or if we were feeling it, a pastry from our local Italian shop Veniero's. There would be time to sit and eat after the clubs closed at 4 AM at one of our favorite 24 hour establishments like Dave's Luncheonette around the corner from Mudd Club which in 1979 was our primary party spot, every night it seems. We did go elsewhere, Club 57 on St. Marks and Tier 3 were also regular stops, but at that time Mudd was every night, just to check in with whoever we found, dancing was always, so was drug use of all kinds, there was always amazing music being spun or performed from the B52's to Afrika Bambaataa, to Klaus Nomi. Other clubs came and went but that moment was Mudd's! On the way home, maybe an afterhours party or club then at 6 the Chinese coffee shops opened and we would feast on roast pork buns and coconut buns with the old Chinese men just getting up. Then home to shower and change and off to work! In my 6 months living with Jean on 12th Street, I would head to the lab at Rockefeller University while he worked from home, percolating art while I grew malaria parasites, both of us working out of Petri Dishes. —Alexis Adler



Basquiat in the apartment, 1980. Photograph by Alexis Adler.

In the late 1970s, the East Village in New York City was a porous scene, where artists collaborated with musicians, punk rock and video art coalesced, and music was part of photography and film. The possibilities of artistic expression were endless. The landscape of the neighborhood resembled bombed out war zones—largely abandoned and depopulated—and an impending threat of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union hung heavy, creating an anxiety to produce, which was additionally fueled by drug use. The streets provided ample materials for the young Basquiat to salvage, haul up six flights of stairs home, and transform into artwork. There was a permissiveness to this moment, which lasted ten years until the mid-1980s when AIDS began killing friends and lovers and shifted the creative landscape. During Basquiat's time living with Alexis Adler, his explorative art practice was inseparable from his daily life, and through photographs Adler captured this transient moment in the young artist's career.

The fluidity with which Basquiat worked is evident in the multiplicity of his artistic pursuits: Basquiat performed in a dub jazz band called Gray, staged performances and scenarios, painted on clothing, adopted personas, and incorporated the mundane,

intellectual, and commercial aspects of the world around him into his art. He often explored an idea or concept across many months through various media, as in the case of the term "MANMADE," which was written on a jumpsuit, sweatshirt, collage, and wall. This pattern signals perhaps the most fluid aspect of his practice—the use of language. Basquiat incorporated commercial advertising language, comic book-like conversation bubbles, political slogans, and performance scripts. His text pieces resemble concrete poetry in the way that words are composed on and occupy space on a sheet of paper. In the wake of Pop art, Basquiat often worked within an existing structure and innovated, appropriated, and absorbed source material in order to produce his own critical take.

The period from 1979 to 1980, during which Basquiat's practice migrated away from the street and toward the studio, stands as a significant transitional moment in his life and art, and anticipates his breakthrough works of 1981. That was the year Basquiat established his first studio in the basement of Annina Nosei's gallery. On view in this exhibition are rarely seen Basquiat works from local St. Louis collections, which hint at the artist's evolution into the mid-1980s, as he developed a singular approach to art-making. Here, Basquiat's signature symbols, such as the crown, and phrases like "TAR TAR TAR" translate across media, from drawings to

paintings to works on readily available materials. Also on view are two paintings on canvas from the mid-1980s, evidence of Basquiat's transition from working with found materials to painting on stretched canvas. *Bayer Blackhead* (1984/85) is a collaboration between Basquiat and Andy Warhol. While he was living in the East 12th Street apartment, the young Basquiat made art with whatever materials he found at hand and sold these works on the streets. When he sold some of his handmade postcards to the legendary Warhol, Basquiat was thrilled at their chance exchange. In 1982, the two artists were formally introduced at a time when Basquiat had become the most talked about figure in the art world, much as Warhol had experienced two decades prior. The two forged a friendship and engaged in a collaborative practice that culminated in a gallery show in 1985.



Painted television in the apartment, c. 1979-1980. Photograph by Alexis Adler.