



# ART REVIEW: Basquiat Notebooks Reveal Artist Who Was a Street Poet First

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by Sandra Hale Schulman

It's still unnerving for me to venture into a big-time museum show at a venue like [Pérez Art Museum Miami](#) and view the work of an artist I used to see tagging the gritty streets of the Lower East Side and hanging out at the Mudd Club. Not that the late [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#) doesn't deserve this kind of success: he was truly a rare bird that came to roost at just the right time and place in art history.

I used to see him—all askew dreadlocks and shabby tweed overcoat—standing in corners, a bemused half smile on his face, taking in the scene of artists, musicians, fashion victims and other downtown denizens looking for their place in the world they were creating.

Out on the streets he was SAMO, the name he and his friend Al Diaz tagged all their work with, sometimes just using the tag with a copyright symbol. It started as an in-joke between Basquiat and Diaz in reference to some inferior marijuana (“Same old shit”). The abbreviation then morphed into the name of a character called SAMO, a prophet of a false religion in comic style pamphlets the two friends created while attending the City as School high school program.

Then they made stickers, then they passed out pamphlets in the subway, then came the street art in 1977 that paired the tag with idiosyncratic phrases.

At the press preview at Pérez Art Museum Miami on August 9, 2016, the entire show was not yet fully installed, but there was a short clip from Edo Bertoglio's film “[Downtown 81](#)”—shot in 1980-1981 but completed and released in 2000—that shows Basquiat spraying a lengthy phrase poem on a crumbling concrete wall:

THE WHOLE LIVERY LINE

BOW LIKE THIS WITH

THE BIG MONEY ALL

CRUSHED INTO THESE FEET

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Basquiat on the set of Edo Bertoglio's “Downtown 81,” 1980-81. © New York Beat Films, LLC. Courtesy Maripol. By permission of the Estate of Jean-Michel

Basquiat, all rights reserved.

What does it mean? That's one of the many questions whose answers—if there are answers—were locked in the mind of an artist who spoke Haitian Creole, Spanish and English and had been going to museums since age 5.

The poetry tagging, often done in collaboration with Diaz and others, continued for years. Once he began showing in galleries, though, the street art ceased and Basquiat wrote SAMO IS DEAD over most of the former SAMO tags. His writing transitioned into his artwork and his private notebooks: standard composition books with black marbled covers he filled with words, sentences, fragments, musings, scribbles and drawings.



Untitled Notebook (front cover) by Jean-Michel Basquiat.  
Mixed media on board, 9 5/8 x 7 5/8 x 1/4 inches.  
Collection of Larry Warsh. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Sarah DeSantis, Brooklyn Museum.

“Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks” at PAMM features 160 notebook pages along with related objects, works on paper, films, and large scale paintings. The exhibition was originally organized by the Brooklyn Museum and curated by Dieter Buchhart, guest curator, with Tricia Laughlin Bloom, former Associate Curator of Exhibitions, Brooklyn Museum. It was brought to the Pérez by new PAMM Director Franklin Sirmans, who came to the museum from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Untitled Notebook page by Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1987.  
Wax crayon on ruled notebook paper. Collection of Larry Warsh. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Sarah DeSantis, Brooklyn Museum.

“This is an exhibit that just had to come to Miami,” Sirmans said at the press preview. He explained that the notebook pages we all taken apart, with each page presented separately in its own frame.

The presentation was coordinated by the collector Larry Warsh, who owns eight of the artist's notebooks, and by the Basquiat estate. Warsh had been keeping the notebooks in a closet in his house for some 30 years.

The work covering the notebook pages is neither sketching nor doodling, per se. It is a totally separate practice, different from what the artist did on the street and later in the studio. Nothing in the notebooks appears in any other form of his work, though his practice of using all capital block letters and the letter "E" without the vertical line on the left is recognizable in all his writing. Some notebook pages were torn out and applied to blocks of wood or onto the canvas directly.



"Untitled (Crown)" by Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1982. Acrylic, ink and collage on paper, 20 x 29 inches. Private collection, courtesy of Lio Malca. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Mark-Woods.com.



"Famous recto and verso" by Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1982. Acrylic and Xerox collage on canvas mounted on wood, 72 3/4 x 39 1/8 x 21 1/2 inches. Private collection, courtesy of Lio Malca. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Christopher Burke.

Neither are the notebook entries any kind "Dear diary." There are half sentences, no dates, and crossed out words—an effect Basquiat used repeatedly, saying that viewers (or readers) pay more attention to something that has been crossed out as it seems to be something forbidden.

The idea here is to pay attention to the words. There are hardly any of his artworks that don't contain words, and the figures in the art are typically stick figures or broadly cartoonesque.



Untitled Notebook Page by Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1981-84. Wax crayon on ruled notebook paper, 9 5/8 x 7 5/8 inches. Collection of Larry Warsh. Copyright © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved.

Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo: Sarah DeSantis, Brooklyn Museum.

The focus on the words makes this an unusual exhibition, but the show is rendered more substantial and gains context by the inclusion of some knockout large paintings from various collections. Included among these are two large works with silk screened logos that were a collaboration between Basquiat and [Andy Warhol](#) and first exhibited in 1985 at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in Soho. That pivotal exhibit garnered Basquiat both a New York Times Magazine cover that made him a bona fide art star and [a review](#) that called Basquiat's social commentary in the collaborative work "obvious and rather silly."

Stretching notebook pages into a major museum show that takes up half the top floor of Miami's largest art museum requires some real commitment and not a little daring, and yet it works. Watching the excerpt from the Tamra Davis 2010 documentary "The Radiant Child" that is part of the exhibition, visitors can see the scruffy genius at work, painting tires and doors, deflecting questions he considers condescending and racist, defiantly edging his paint splattered pinstripe suit into the almost all white big league art world.

And yet he was only 25 years old, a kid really, who went to whatever place he called home at night and wrote poetry and made marks in his notebooks.

He was never quite accepted the way he wanted, and when he did hit it big it was with conflicted feelings followed by harder drug use that killed him at age 27. Looking for clues in his art, in his words, only leads into yet darker territory. A street poet first, an art star too quickly.

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**BASIC FACTS:** "Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks" is on view August 12 to October 16, 2016 at Pérez Art Museum Miami, 1103 Biscayne Blvd., Miami, FL 3313. [www.pamm.org](http://www.pamm.org)

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