

Basquiat before Basquiat

The first drawings of Basquiat as a child, never shown and belonging to his plastic arts teacher, announce what this figure of the New York underground would later become.

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) knew very early on what he wanted to become. Unlike other children, he does not dream of being a doctor, a pilot or even that of President of the United States. Quite simply, he wants to become famous. Not in an ephemeral way – Andy Warhol's famous quarter of an hour – but definitively, once and for all. We would like to embellish this legendary success with a few melodramatic elements in the romantic tradition – unhappy childhood, poor and even alcoholic parents, racial discrimination – but in reality this was not the case for Basquiat. He was born in 1960 – on December 22 – into a rather well-to-do lower-middle-class family in Brooklyn, to a Haitian father who worked as an accountant and a mother of Puerto Rican origin. His two sisters, Lisane and Jeanine, were born in 1963 and 1966. Basquiat frequented New York museums very early on – above all the Brooklyn Museum. Encouraged by his mother in his creativity, he discovered a talent for drawing and filled many notebooks inspired by the dictionary or the cartoons he watched on television. "He drew and painted from the age of three or four," says his father. For his part, Basquiat said in an interview given in 1985: "I always thought of painting or drawing, as long as I can remember. [excerpts published in the catalog of the exhibition Basquiat x Warhol, à quatre mains, at the Foundation Louis Vuitton].

A troubled childhood

At the age of seven, he attended Saint Ann's Catholic private school in Brooklyn and illustrated his newspaper. Thanks to his taste for reading, he also acquired notions of French and Spanish. In 1968, after being hit by a car, Basquiat had to have his spleen removed. During his convalescence, his mother gave him Henry Gray's book on human anatomy, which would influence all his work.

Back in elementary school, he sends a drawing of coitus to J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI.

Unsurprisingly, the answer does not come. Another feat of arms of the one who, obviously, was not a model student: he pours shaving cream on the head of the headmaster reading his end-of-year speech. In 1971, Basquiat left private school for a public secondary school, the PS. 181, the first of many public schools in New York.

After his parents divorced in 1967, his father took custody of the children and, in 1974, took the family to Puerto Rico where the teenager ran away for the first time. Back in New York in 1976, he enrolled in a special school for gifted children – Alternative High School – whose methods are based on the principle of hands-on learning. In this school, he became friends with Al Diaz, with whom he practiced spray graffiti. A new escape and a first experience of drugs follow. With Diaz, he began to sign his graffiti SAMO – "Same old shit" –, was expelled from his school a year before obtaining his diploma and, in 1978, he separated definitively from his family environment. Another life begins.

An art teacher

Curiously, if the stories, the anecdotes, even the myths around him are legion since Basquiat joined the New York underground, we know relatively few testimonies about him before this time. In the innumerable catalogs of his exhibitions, the same biography is displayed and above all, one never finds there any works produced before 1979. No doubt this period which precedes his recognition attracts less attention from historians of art. In addition, the ephemeral aspect of graffiti leaves, in essence, no traces. However, the discovery of a witness to Basquiat's childhood, Cynthia Shechter, one of his teachers – and not just any one because she is a plastic arts teacher – allows access to a knowledge most intimate of this artist in the making. Shechter met the child in 1971, while teaching at PS. 101, a public school. Basquiat, who is eleven years old, is in sixth grade, and is among about thirty black students from another school, who are transported by bus, with the aim

to operate a racial mix. According to Shechter, his homeroom teacher was so impressed with the boy's drawing skills that he suggested he take Basquiat under his wing, giving him the extra time he needed. Basquiat comes to see her before class and during the lunch break and, although he has trouble getting along with the other members of the team, he helps to prepare and put away the artistic materials necessary for the day. Once the chores are done, he has time to draw, which he does tirelessly. He is a child of great intelligence, well beyond his age, who makes everyone understand that one day he will become a famous artist.

His pencil drawing takes the form of comic strips with fanciful characters that he invents and reuses. One of the most remarkable ones he created, dubbed Ookpik, is a character with large eyes and a small body. One day, Shechter suggests that he work on a complete comic that could be in color with ink on white paper and gives him a sheet of 22 x 28 inches [56 x 71 cm] for this purpose. Basquiat produced a comic strip in one go, which he entitled: The Teenage Gangs of the 60's [Les Gangs d'adolescents des jeux 1960, voir ill. opposite]. This scene depicts members of a gang called "Suicides and the Switchblades". It's very different from the whimsical characters he usually draws. We notice the signature at the bottom right, "By BASQUIAT", which he uses to sign his works. Shechter hangs the drawing on the bulletin board.

Birth of an artist

Basquiat's mood is very changeable. You never knew how he was going to get up. One day, as Shechter recounts, he walks up to the bulletin board in anger and tears his work into several pieces which he throws in the trash. He refuses to say why. Shechter, in agreement with Basquiat, recovers the drawing, glues it back together with adhesive tape and keeps it. She is convinced that this special child would become famous. Finally, she adds, the future artist also gives her several pencil drawings of his comics, attested, as always, by his signature. One of these drawings was

produced for the anniversary of the PS 101 [see ill. page 20]. It is impossible not to already see Basquiat's graphic style, the ease of spontaneous composition, the mixture of inscriptions and characters, the rejection of any spatial logic – a wizard (?) flying away or a rocket which takes off are accompanied by other figures suspended without any explanation. Admittedly, the bodies are not yet drawn into the macabre dance that will haunt the artist. The fact remains that this strange and disturbing banquet, with disproportionate beings looking like caricatures, is like a version of Alice in Wonderland, parachuted into New York.

The other drawing in which Basquiat introduces colors, still timidly, is a sketch that tells of his daily life with characters that swarm in all directions. Here and there, signs that are difficult to decipher and formless stains disturb the reading of this naive scene. We are far from the palimpsest side of the painting to come, which will superimpose erasures and repentances. However, while avoiding the teleological temptation to already see in it the artistic production to come, we think of the chaotic universe that Basquiat will stage.

This information was published in the unauthorized biography of Phoebe Hoban, Viking/Allen Lane, 1998 (for original publication), in English, 385