



"A Place for Negroes" and "Coloured People"; below the Star of David is "Negro Athlete," and beside the face of Owens, "Famous Negro Athletes #47." The works *Dark Horse Race - Jesse Owens* (1983) and *Big Snow* (1984) again relate to the sprinter Owens, who won four gold medals at the Nazi-sponsored 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin.

Besides sportsmen, Basquiat also honored black musicians, especially Charlie Parker (1920-1955) and Miles Davis (1926-1991), a reverence proved distinctively in the works *Discography I* (ill. p. 24) and *Discography II*, both from 1983. The artist continued to dedicate works to the theme of jazz until the day he died. Basquiat in particular honored Charlie Parker, the seminal bebop saxophonist and composer often featured in his oeuvre. Beginning in 1941, Parker, together with Dizzy Gillespie, recorded music which set off a new revolution in jazz with its freedom of improvisation, introduction of scales and rapid tempo. Parker has a place as one of the most important rejuvenating forces in the history of jazz. Significantly, he never received formal training in music. Constantly afflicted with drug and alcohol problems, he suffered a nervous breakdown in 1946. Following several attempts at suicide, he died on April 2, 1955, tortured by mental and physical conditions.

Charles the First from 1981 (ill. p. 27) contains various references to the life of the musician. The triptych displays many crowns, the most apparent of which is associated with the name of the Nordic god Thor. The many appearances of an "S" symbolized the comic-book hero Superman. While on the left side the nimbus is titled with the word "halos," in the center of the work it appears as a repeatedly contoured oval under the name of Parker's daughter, Prec, accompanied by the dates of her birth and death as well as a cemetery cross. The word "Cherokee" refers not only to the famous composition by Parker but also to the Indian tribe, among the original inhabitants of America. A more subtle epitaph is rendered in the work *CPRRK* (ill. p. 18) from 1982. Like SAMO, *CPRRK* is an acronym. Underneath this underlined script, which acts as a title for the picture, there is the ubiquitous crown and the name of the hotel in which Parker died, together with the date of his death and a cross. The footnote at the bottom edge of the painting refers back to the aforementioned painting of 1981.

When Basquiat writes, in the lower region of the painting *Charles the First*, "Most young kings get their head cut off," it is symptomatic of his choice of heroes. They are invariably martyrs, victims either of society's oppression or of their own restless or selfish lifestyles. It is poignant that Basquiat once said he would like to live like James Dean - who sped recklessly to his death at 24 in a car crash - or that he idolized Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix, the two groundbreaking rock musicians who died in 1970, both at the age of 27, both from overdoses of multiple drugs. Could the parallels to Basquiat's own life be more striking?

The show at PS.1 marked Basquiat's breakthrough. The director of PS.1 herself, Alanna Heiss, otherwise noted for her critical stance to Cortez's efforts as curator, was very impressed by Basquiat's work. Yet it was thanks to the tireless efforts of Cortez that Basquiat's work attracted the interest of both artists like Sandro Chia and curators like Geldzahler. Chia wanted to purchase a picture, and Geldzahler, who previously had so rudely dismissed the young Basquiat, asked Cortez to help him make the artist's acquaintance. He bought a painted refrigerator, together with several other works. Objects such as painted refrigerator doors (ill. p. 25), painted boards, stools, tables, and so on are repeatedly found in Basquiat's work. He was also in the habit of painting everything



Untitled (Refrigerator), 1981
 Acrylic, felt-tip pen and collage on refrigerator doors, 140 x 83.5 x 57 cm (55 x 33 x 23 1/2 in.)
 Courtesy Terry Shubert Gallery, New York

Basquiat often painted on the surfaces of found objects like doors, refrigerators, stools and tables, at times running into serious problems with his hosts when he would completely paint over their furniture without asking.

PAGE 24
Discography I, 1983
 Acrylic and elastick on canvas,
 168 x 152 cm (66 1/8 x 60 in.)
 Private collection

Like *Discography I*, many of Basquiat's works consist entirely of names and word lists. Basquiat termed these his "facts." In their conceptual radicalism, these works prevent a simple classification of Basquiat as Neo-Expressionist.





"Riding with Death" The Final Years

In 1984, on the Hawaiian island of Maui, Basquiat for the first time rented a ranch, where he set up a studio. In subsequent years he returned there many times to recuperate from big-city life.

At Basquiat's behest, Bruno Bischofberger set up an August 1986 exhibition at the Centre Culturel de France in Abidjan, the capital of Ivory Coast (see ill. p. 26). The artist attended the opening, once again in the company of Jennifer Goode. His interest in visiting Africa perhaps was due to the influence of Shengé Ka Pharaoh, the assistant who kept his accounting books from 1983 to 1986. Shengé cultivated mix of Black consciousness, Reggae ideology and interest in Egyptian cults may have caused Basquiat for the first time to consider seeking out an identity that did not reject or ignore his blackness, but accepted it as fundamental.

A second museum-run Basquiat retrospective was held in 1986 by the Kestner Society in Hannover, and Basquiat was interviewed on that occasion by Isabelle Graw for the German-language magazine *Wolkenkruzler*. This document is remarkable for the openness on both sides. "How do you work?" Graw asks. "I start a picture and I finish it," Basquiat answers. "I don't think about art while I work. I try to think about life." Graw: "What about the influence of Afro-Caribbean art, or of Cy Twombly, as discerned by the critics?" Basquiat: "I don't listen to what art critics say. I don't know anybody who needs a critic to find out what art is." The interview ends with Graw asking if she should come to New York before writing her article on him. "What would you do if you were writing about a dead artist?" Basquiat replied. "I would do as much research as possible, to get all of the available information," says Graw. "Then do it that way," Basquiat says. "Just pretend I was dead."

Jennifer Goode, who was probably the most important woman in Basquiat's life, separated from him in November 1986. A second shock followed a few months later with the death of Andy Warhol from complications during a gall-bladder operation on February 22, 1987. Basquiat's grief was inconsolable. In memory of Warhol, he created *Gravestone* (ill. p. 77), a triptych of three castaway doors: a flower and cross on the left side, a skull with a heart engraved on it on the right. The center and highest door bears the repeated word, "Perishable." Though all living things are ephemeral, Basquiat is also suggesting that death is a passage, a door into a different form of existence.



To Repel Ghosts, 1986
Acrylic on wood, 112 x 83 x 10 cm
(44 x 33 1/8 x 4 in.)
Paris, Collection Pierre Corneille de Saint Cyr

PAGE 74
Illustrated, 1985
Acrylic and oilstick on canvas,
triptych, 244 x 364 cm (96 x 143 in.)
Private collection
Courtesy Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York