

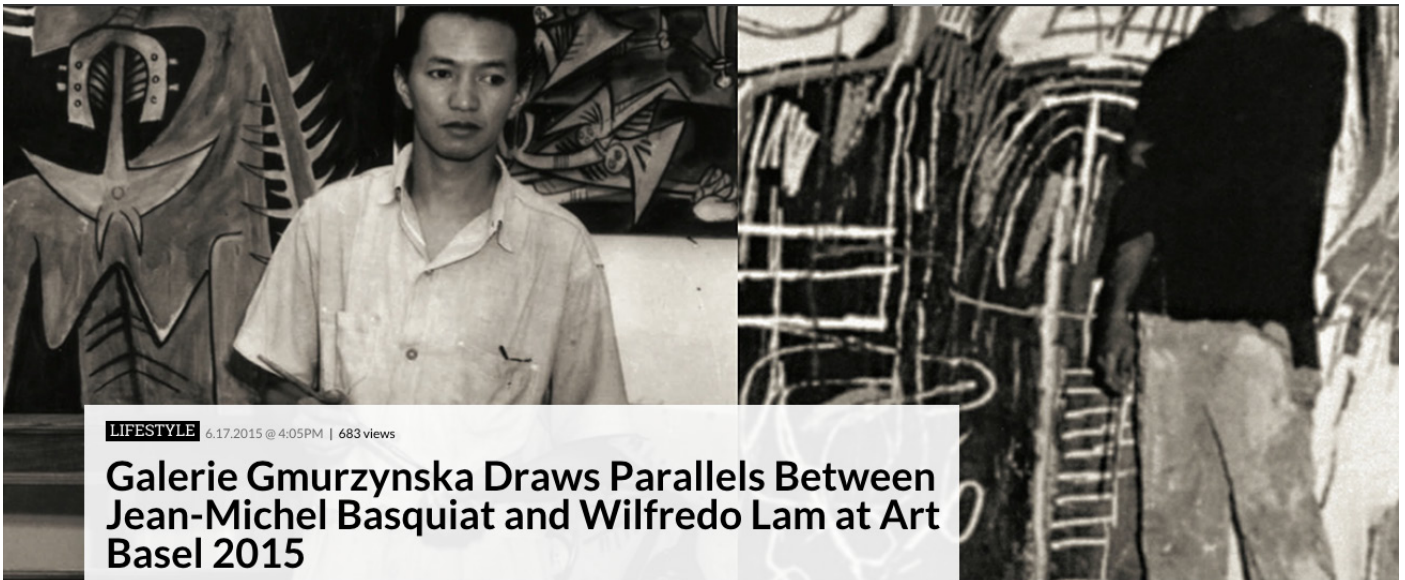
galerie gmurzynska

Forbes®

An exclusive in-depth feature
on the special exhibition and publication

LAM / BASQUIAT

at Art Basel 2015



When thinking about the two artists featured in [Galerie's Gmurzynska's Art Basel 2015](#) booth 'Lam / Basquiat', [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#) and Wilfredo Lam, one might be able to immediately start connecting thematic dots between the two art legends. Both artists share Caribbean and African heritage and let those heritages shine through in their art. Both artists were among the very few artists of color of their respective times. Both artists turned the art paradigm on its head.

But perhaps you aren't convinced and you think that Galerie Gmurzynska might be reaching too far in its drawing of these connections between Lam and Basquiat. That skepticism will surely be challenged when you flip through the catalogue that the gallery compiled to accompany the exhibition. Full of photos of and art works by Basquiat and Lam and featuring texts by Jonathan Fineberg, Anthony Haden-Guest, Kobena [Mercer](#), and Annina Nosei, the catalog reveals that the connections between Lam and Basquiat aren't only in their lives and backgrounds, but that the connections exist in the visual languages of the work itself. And not only are those connections real, they are startlingly apparent the more you flip through the catalog and/or walk through the exhibit.



Wilfredo Lam/Jean-Michel Basquiat, image from the exhibit gallery

“When you examine paintings by both artists, you will find astonishing similarities: line drawings, the use of text,” says Galerie’s Gmurzynska’s co-CEO and member of Art Basel’s Joint Committee Mathias Rastorfer. “I would have never done this show if I wasn’t comfortable with there indeed being something new to report and present.”

Since forming in 1965 in Cologne, Germany to evaluate contemporary and modern works by artists amongst the Russian avant-garde, Galerie Gmurzynska has made it something of its mission statement to re-evaluate the works of 20th Century artists who achieved fame and recognition against all odds. They examine artists that were not only important in the 20th Century, but artists whose outputs were radically different than other work from their time periods and who molded the art mainstream into their own world views as a result.



'Lam / Basquiat' exhibition, photo courtesy of Galerie Gmurzynska

“All of the greatest contributions of the 20th Century started with a rebellion,” says Rastorfer, “Basquiat and Lam found success against all of the established rules.”

The exhibit materialized as a result of the working relationship between Rastorfer and Nosei. Nosei, owner of the New York-based [Annina Nosei Gallery](#), is often credited with discovering Basquiat. Nosei let the young artist paint in the basement of her (then) SoHO-based gallery in the early '80s and gave him his first one-man show in 1981. Nosei and Basquiat's relationship and its sometimes tense nature is well-documented, and a passage in the Phoebe Hoban-penned biography, *Basquiat*, describes an angry young Basquiat destroying much of his Nosei-owned paintings after he left her gallery. Despite all of this, Nosei is one of the most passionate art dealers in terms of preserving the legacy of Basquiat and it's hard to imagine Basquiat's name meaning what it does had she not assisted in introducing the artist to the world.



Jean-Michel Basquiat 'Soap Box'

Nosei told Rastorfer something that Basquiat had once said to her regarding Wilfredo Lam. “Annina, who I have worked with in the past and who had worked with Basquiat, said to me that at one point Basquiat had actually mentioned a desire to pair his work alongside that of Wilfredo Lam,” says Rastorfer. “That started the conversation and then the research. We found loads of parallels and influences shared in the two artists’ work that had profound impact on the 20th Century and its legacy.”

Curating the exhibit was a special experience for Rastorfer. Not only does he carry an immense love of the work of both of these artists, he actually was already working in the art industry in the 1980s and remembers being dazzled when Basquiat exploded onto the scene: “SoHO in the ‘80s was a very small community and word of [Basquiat’s] talents spread very quickly and there was loads of excitement [about his art],” says Rastorfer. “I don’t recall anyone being critical or thinking that his work was rubbish. He created something that you knew would have an impact. It was the kind of thing that you feel while you’re there; you felt something special.”



Wilfredo Lam 'Untitled' 1965

The exhibit hits its marks expertly in its drawing attention to the similarities in Basquiat and Lam, but also in its highlighting the aspects of both artists that made them utterly unique. Both Lam and Basquiat's heritages distinguished them from the artistic herds in the periods they lived through, but their two distinct heritages manifested in distinct ways in the work. Lam was a Cuban immigrant born to a Chinese father and a Cuban-Congolese mother. Basquiat was born in Brooklyn, the son of a Haitian father and a Puerto Rican mother. The artists shared similar experiences in the art world versus their day-to-day existences. Basquiat was, along with Julian Schnabel and Keith Haring, New York's biggest art superstar in the '80s. But at the same time he was making millions of dollars and receiving the highest of artistic accolades, he often lamented not being able to get a taxi. When Lam was the toast of France and sold his painting, 'The Jungle,' to MoMA, the New York Times referred to him as, "The negro artist that sold a painting to MoMA."

Lam and Basquiat were both intimately acquainted with art history, but what made them exceptional was the ability that they held in common to filter that history through the lens of their ethnic backgrounds. "Lam went to Spain on a cultural exchange and studied the great masters," says Rastorfer, "Basquiat read books and books. They knew the masters, the images, and the work. I think that's very important."



Wilfredo Lam 'Jeune Fille'

Indeed: one cannot subvert an institution without knowing what the institution is and represents. By being studied in art history, Basquiat and Lam were able to apply their heritages and visual languages into the tropes of art history and as a result they changed the course of art history. This notion is evidenced throughout the exhibition and its accompanying catalog.

In Jonathan Fineberg's addition to the catalog, 'Additive Aesthetics,' he discusses Basquiat's ability to filter the TV that he watched, the music that he listened to, the books that he read, and, most importantly, the artists that he looked at into his work: "The imagery in Basquiat's work reveals his voracious appetite for assimilating what he saw," he writes, "He made a canny appraisal of successful artists - often work that seemed entirely different from his. He didn't "misread" them, rather he appropriated and redefined them to fit his free train of thought and exploit devices for his own ends."



Wilfredo Lam 'Sans Titre'

Basquiat looked at a lot of art, but he processed it through his distinctive perspective drenched in Trinidadian and Puerto Rican folklore, American Jazz music, and low brow pop culture. But his exploration of pop culture was different than that of say, Andy Warhol, who simply reflected the culture's media and mass marketing: "Warhol would show us what was going up on the billboards as a mirror," says Rastorfer, "Basquiat would show us what was behind the mirror."

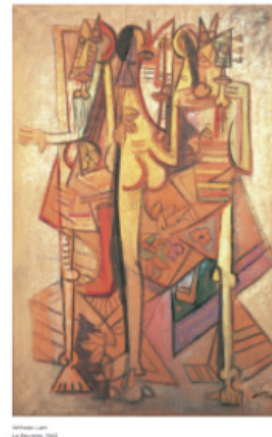
Lam initially was taken with European modernism, but when he returned to Cuba in the 1940s he took on a far more personal style that enveloped Afro-Cuban imagery into the work. Subsequently, it was the incorporating of that Cuban identity into the work that elevated Lam to transcendent status amongst the art elite.



Basquiat "Everybody's Two Cents"

Lam and Basquiat were fascinating in their abilities to have one foot sitting firmly in the art paradigms of their times while still incorporating enough of their personal identities to connect them to the spirits of the folk art of their ancestors. “Both identified as black and sought subjects that reconnected them to their ancestry in the black Atlantic,” writes Fineberg in the catalog.

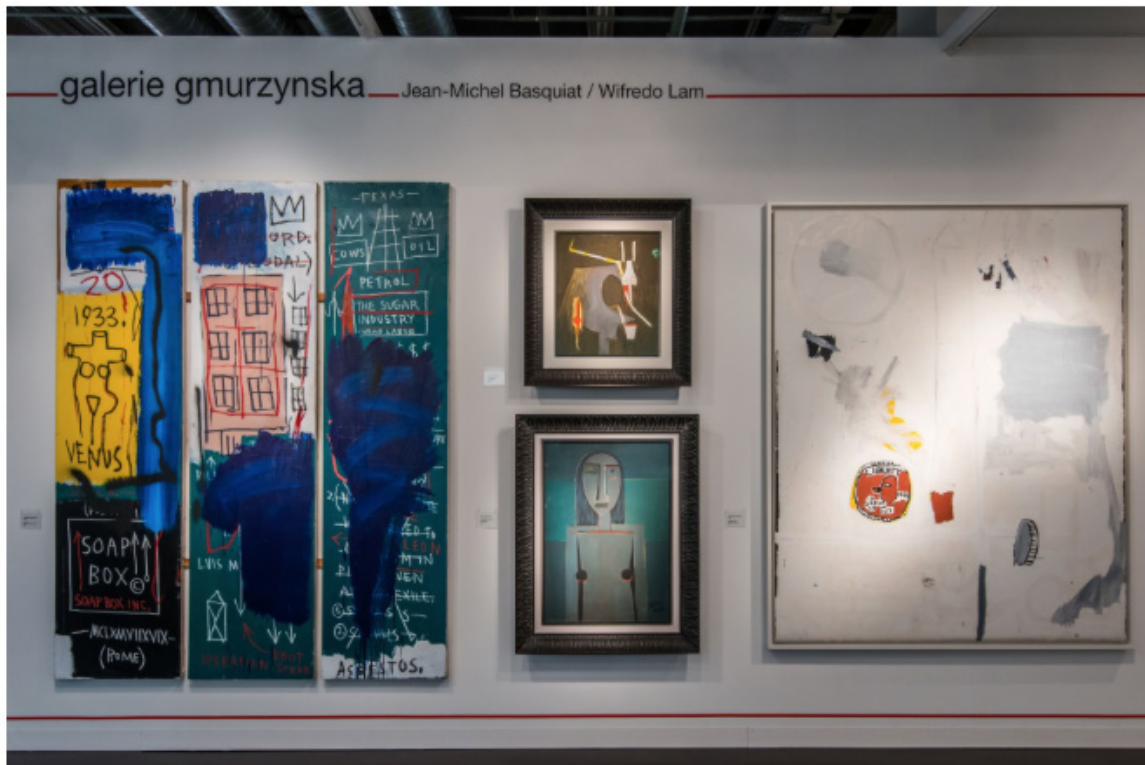
There is of course one glaring difference in the lives of Basquiat and Lam that makes the exhibit all the more interesting and endearing. Lam died in 1982 at the age of 79. Basquiat died in 1988 at the age of 27. Galerie Gmurzynska had a full lifetime’s worth of work to choose from with Lam, which certainly wasn’t the case for Basquiat. In Lam’s instance, we get to see how his artistic identity developed as he grew into old age; in Basquiat’s we are left wondering what his work would evolve into. “He’s become a mysterious figure in that he could have done so much more but he died so young,” says Rastorfer.



Basquiat 'Untitled' (1984), Lam 'La Reunion,'

Galerie’s Gmurzynska’s ‘Lam / Basquiat’ Art Basel exhibit forces one to speculate over the reasons that a critical appraisal of Wilfredo Lam and Jean-Michel Basquiat hasn’t already happened. These are two black artists whom radically altered common conceptions of art and shattered pre-conceived ideas of what art should and could be.

“These two artists stand out as geniuses of the 20th century,” says Rastorfer, “These two lives connect through outsider narratives, through these different forces of inspiration, and that they are very different from all of the artists of their times.”



'Lam / Basquiat' exhibition, photo courtesy of Galerie Gmurzynska



Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1982
© Sotheby's

Lam/Basquiat, image from the exhibition catalog

Galerie's Gmurzynska's 'Lam / Basquiat' will be on view at Art Basel, which is open in Basel, Switzerland from June 18-21. Galerie's Gmurzynska's booth will also include works by Joan Miró, Kazimir Malevich, Yves Klein, and Francis Bacon.