ALMINE RECH

Jean-Michel Basquiat and Ouattara Watts A Distant Conversation

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September 25, 2024 – Manchester, NH – The Currier Museum of Art announces the latest chapter in its ongoing series of "Distant Conversations" pairing the work of artists whose artistic and intellectual affinities manifest across barriers of time and space. Opening to the public on October 26, 2024, this new exhibition brings together six artworks by American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988), one of the most celebrated and influential artists of his generation, and seven large canvases by New York–based Ivorian painter Ouattara Watts (b. 1958). "'Distant Conversations' at the Currier has brought together artists whose works transcend time and geographical boundaries," said Jordana Pomeroy, Director of the Currier. "We are delighted to bring together Basquiat and Watts in an exhibition that captures the spark between these two artists, although they knew each other only briefly."

The two artists first met in 1988 at the opening of Basquiat's solo show at Yvon Lambert Gallery, which was held only seven months prior to his death. The exhibition at the Currier imagines how their friendship and mutual influence could have evolved over time and demonstrates how, despite Basquiat's untimely death, their dialogue and spiritual exchange have effectively continued. Following their serendipitous first meeting in Paris, Basquiat and Watts quickly became friends and established a strong intellectual connection. Basquiat was so taken by Watt's work after a single studio visit that he convinced the Ivorian painter to move to New York City, where he would introduce him to gallerists and collectors, providing essential support and help in launching Watts' career overseas. During their brief friendship and artistic alliance, Basquiat and Watts traveled together to New Orleans—Basquiat was fascinated with the city and wanted to show Watts how diasporic African cultures and traditions had permeated and creolized the local culture. The two had already planned a trip to Watts' home country of the Ivory Coast—Basquiat wanted to explore the country he had first visited in 1986 in the company of his new friend. Sadly, the trip never happened, as Basquiat died on August 12, 1988, shortly before they were to depart.

Watts moved to Paris from the Ivory Coast in 1977 to study at the École des Beaux-Arts. Watts had been showing his work in gallery contexts since 1985—the same year that Basquiat was profiled for the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* in an article titled "New Art, New Money: The Marketing of an American Artist." While Watts was beginning his career in the art world, Basquiat had already permeated mainstream culture, elevating graffiti to the realm of high art and re-energizing the art of his time by infusing the Neo-Expressionist movement with his distinct, sophisticated, and politicized visual language. Like Watts, who references multiple religions and spiritual practices in his work in addition to musical and scientific symbolism, Basquiat uniquely blended diverse sources of inspiration and often included language and writing in his paintings. Born in Brooklyn to a Haitian father and a mother of Puerto Rican descent, Basquiat's artistic inclination and intellectual curiosity manifested early. Following his participation in seminal group exhibitions such as the *Times Square Show* and *New York/New Wave*curated by Diego Cortez (MoMA PS1, NYC), and his collaboration (SAMO) with street artist Al Diaz, Basquiat began his solo career in 1980 with successful solo presentations at Annina Nosei Gallery and Fun Gallery. In 1982, he joined Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, helping to propel him to international stardom.

Born and raised in Abidjan, Watts's work has been strongly influenced by his family's cultural and religious syncretism. He first arrived in Paris in the late-1970s, motivated by his profound love for art and art history. Once in Europe, he soon found in painting a means of reconciling the African context in which he was raised with his experience of the West. By combining in his oeuvre elements originating in different religions and traditions, Watts presented Basquiat with visual and intellectual solutions for recomposing and healing his sense of displacement and diasporic fracture, which he was grappling with at the same time as he sought an outlet for righteous anger at anti-Black racism. In the time that he became close with Watts, Basquiat was increasingly invested in learning about his African heritage and keen to experience the continent firsthand. His first trip to the Ivory Coast, during which time he prophetically visited Watts' hometown of Abidjan, is an early testament to this commitment.

The exhibition at the Currier captures these two important artists as they encounter each other at a crossroads, a mental and spiritual space simultaneously informed by Africa and the West. They were literally traveling in opposite directions, in search of meaning and connection, when they found each other on a complementary although reverse journey.

Jean-Michel Basquiat and Ouattara Watts: A Distant Conversation presents six artworks by Basquiat from a private collection alongside seven large paintings by Watts. The earliest piece in the selection by Basquiat is a portrait of art critic and curator extraordinaire Henry Geldzahler (c. 1981) who interviewed Basquiat for a January 1983 feature in Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine. Works like *Feng Yao* (1983) and *Dinah Washington* (1986) speak directly to Basquiat's interest in dance and music. And jazz music was a passion he shared with Watts.

Procession (1986) painted by Basquiat on slats of wood showcases his desire to experiment with different materials while enhancing the depth of his paintings and subverting the rules of 'high art.' Similarly, Watts, whose first paintings upon arriving in Paris were created on tarp (a far cheaper and more resistant material than canvas) often combines diverse techniques and layers to create works that are worlds unto themselves. Watts' artistic vision is often outwardly and celestial. At times, however, the work seems more solidly grounded with direct references to African ceremonial traditions and landscapes. Watts' palette is explosive and rich in tonalities, as clearly demonstrated by his most recent body of work (the *Spiritual Gangster* series from 2023) included in this exhibition. While paintings like *Intercessor #0* (1989) and *Beyond Life* (1990) were made around the time of Watts' friendship with Basquiat, other works in the selection prove how their spiritual and artistic conversation continued despite the latter's passing in 1988. A conversation that continues at a distance to this day.

Jean-Michel Basquiat and Ouattara Watts: A Distant Conversation *is on view from October 26, 2024, through February 23, 2025. This exhibition is generously supported by Jessica O'Rourke McKeon. Additional support by Joseph and Carol Morrow, Bill Stelling and William Siroty, M.D., and Karma (NYC).*