

**A FRESH LOOK AT THE SOHO
OF THE LATE 70s
AND EARLY 80s**



Despo Magoni at Nonson Gallery during her "Winter of 79 . . . Day after Day . . ." exhibition.

HEAD TO HEAD: MAGONI, BASQUIAT, AND A FORGOTTEN SOHO

by JOHN ANGELINE*

When one thinks about the art world of the 80s, ironies and paradoxes abound. Although this is a period that falls well within most readers' lifetimes, and indeed its art is still categorized as "Contemporary," it is more than a generation removed from today and in many ways seems like a very different time and place. The entire *zeitgeist* of the early 80s downtown art scene, where the cultural establishment lived, worked, and socialized, is so far removed from the New York City of today (with the possible partial exception of Williamsburg) that it has already been thoroughly mythologized and canonized in the major historical surveys. One result is that a large majority of the artists who came into prominence during this time, dominated the art world's attention, became minor celebrities, and commanded unprecedented prices for living artists, have fallen into a general kind of obscurity, irrelevance, or premature retirement. Such names as Scharf, Haring, Longo, Clemente, and Cucci no longer command the attention, prices, nor wall space they once did and others such as Sherman and Holzer have long since made their most groundbreaking work and seem to simply rehash established ideas these days.

Given the mercurial fortunes and reputations of many of these 80s artists it is all the more ironic that the artist who probably emerges from this period as having the strongest body of work and one of the most enduring reputations is someone who personally did not even survive the decade itself: Jean-Michel Basquiat. Personification of the artistic and cultural fluidity of the day, beneficiary of the booming market and its need to quickly establish careers, and victim of the scene's wretched excesses, Basquiat can be argued to more successfully than anyone embody this cultural moment. As a recent traveling retrospective has

*JOHN ANGELINE earned his Ph.D. in Art History from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He currently teaches at Parsons School of Design and John Jay College of Criminal Justice and is a regular contributor to *Art Nexus*.

revealed, his best work has not diminished in vibrancy, intensity, and engagement of the general public, collectors, and historians alike. His art reconciles text and image, the personal and the universal, plebeian “street” sources like rap and graffiti with high culture practices. Quite possibly it is because of its layered, rich complexity that his art still has the capacity to confound its audience, as critics and historians strive to decode what remains a largely personal and cryptic body of work, art that the artist himself never lived long enough to assess and explicate.



Basquiat, Jean-Michel, 1960-1988

Untitled, 1981

acrylic and mixed media on canvas

81 x 69¹/₄ inches

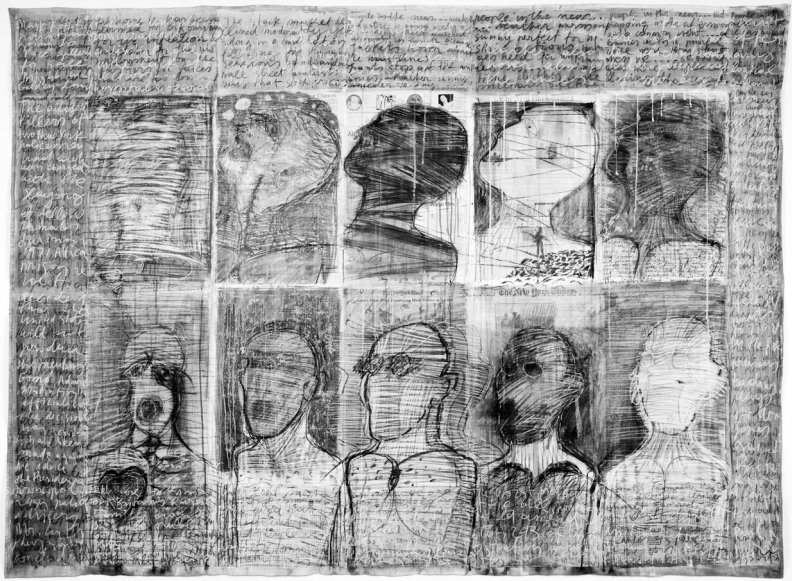
The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection, Los Angeles

Photography credit: Douglas M. Parker Studio, Los Angeles

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One of the seminal works of Basquiat's career, a painting that introduces what would become one of the key recurring motifs in his art, is the 1981 painting *Untitled (Head)*. This large isolated head, rendered in an expressionistically graphic style, is considered to be so important that it has been suggested that "With its public presentation, this painting declared Basquiat's arrival as a new and authentic voice in the world of contemporary art" (Hoffman, 130). While few would dispute Hoffman's assessment of the relative importance of the head in Basquiat's art and he also makes the equally valid point that this figure should be read as a head, not a skull (as it sometimes has been in the past), he unfortunately goes on to declare the image to be a "breakthrough," one "having little, if any, precedent in modern art history" (130). With this statement one sees the author relying on the standard mythology for Basquiat, in which the need to validate his genius is achieved by stressing its unprecedented uniqueness. However, a broader and yet more discerning look might suggest otherwise.

In January-February of 1980, the Nonson Gallery located on Wooster Street in SoHo, mounted an exhibition of 25 artists entitled "A New Decade In Art." One of the very young artists included in the show was Jean Samo, as Basquiat was then referring to himself, combining his first name with his graffiti tag. Another artist in the exhibition was somewhat older than Basquiat and was a regular in the Nonson stable at that time named Despo Magoni. Magoni is a Greek-born artist, active since the very late 60s, whose reputation has never even closely approached that of Basquiat's. Nor does her name come up in any of the histories or biographies that are devoted to Basquiat and his art. Nevertheless, during the heady days of SoHo at the dawn of the 80s Magoni was a visible figure and her work could be seen at the Nonson Gallery and the Alternative Museum. One of her admirers in those days was the young Basquiat. Based upon gallery guest lists and the personal recollections of George Staples, the director of Nonson, Basquiat was a frequent and appreciative visitor to Magoni's solo exhibitions that were held there. One show in particular stood out for Basquiat at the time, a 1978 exhibition of works from a series that Magoni had entitled "People in the News". This series is comprised of works of varying sizes and mixed media which features different combinations of heads and faces in exaggerated, expressionistic poses. What is visually compelling is the



Despo Magoni

About Men, 1978 (People in the News series).

Oil pastel, charcoal, colored pencil on pages of the NY Times,
mounted on a linen sheet 64½ x 86".

Collection of the artist.



Despo Magoni
Saks Fifth Avenue, 1977
(People in the News series).
Oil pastel on a page of the NY Times, 23 x 14 1/4".
Collection of the artist.

style of the heads—rendered in bold slashing strokes and overdetermined lines, they convey an effect both painterly and graphic. The faces have a gaunt skeletal quality, almost as if they were conveying a sort of transparency effect like an X-ray, yet they are in fact faces and heads, not skulls. Most of these heads emphasize the eyes and mouth, and those with open mouths clearly define both upper and lower rows of teeth, sometimes rendered in canine-like spikes. As one can see, many of these formal aspects are equally true of Basquiat's canonical *Untitled (Head)* of 1981 and subsequent ones. While Basquiat's piece may be more intensely colorful and layered, there is an undeniable affinity in the texture, graphic quality, articulated eyes and mouths, and transparency effect, to say nothing of the obviously shared subject matter.

According to Magoni, the young Basquiat shyly approached her during the run of her 1979 show and told her "I like your work very much." Even more tellingly, he approached her on another occasion and requested a piece of hers for inclusion in an exhibition he was co-curating at St. Mark's Church. The work chosen by Basquiat, *Hostages Held for Unknown Reasons*, is intriguing because it demonstrates how fully



Despo Magoni
 Hostages Held for
 Unknown Reasons, 1978
 (People in the News
 series).

Oil pastel, charcoal &
 pencil on pages of the NY
 Times mounted on a linen
 sheet 73½ x 58½".
 Collection of the artist.



Basquiat, Jean-Michel, 1960-1988

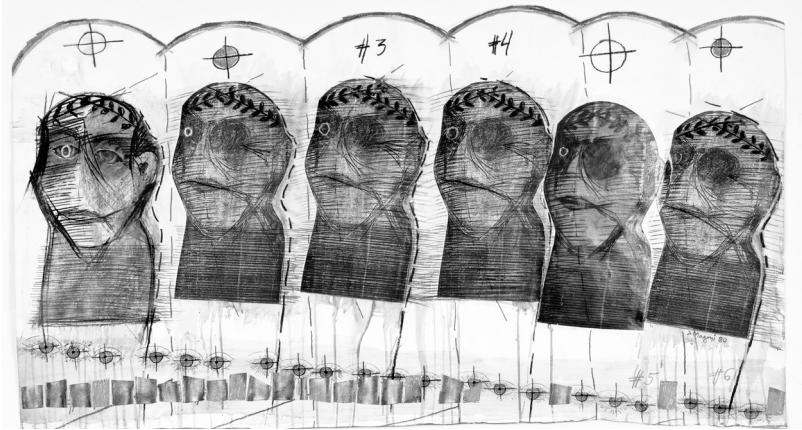
Boy and Dog in a Johnnypump, 1982

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Basquiat absorbed Magoni's art and the true extent to which Magoni's art seems to have laid a foundation for Basquiat's paintings. Rather than an isolated head, this piece features two full-length figures standing in poses of surrender. The bodies have a flat cut-out quality to them although they are filled in with rich layers of gestural linear strokes. The ground is a page from the *New York Times* and much of the text has been covered although some random words and phrases are visible. At the top is a handwritten "headline" that reads "hostages held for unknown reasons." One can see parallels between this type of piece by Magoni and many of Basquiat's early works, including *Untitled (We Have Determined . . .)* from 1979–80 which collages a news photo with acrylic and blood dripping down the surface, and a hand-stamped "headline." The icon of the flattened frontal figure with arms raised in surrender becomes a recurring motif throughout Basquiat's work almost as ubiquitously as the heads, and of course the combination of evocative phrases with the figural imagery is another shared element between these two artists.

One can see many other works that show these parallels between them. A painting like Basquiat's *Six Crimee* from 1982 combines the sequencing of the heads, the layering of the gestural strokes, and even

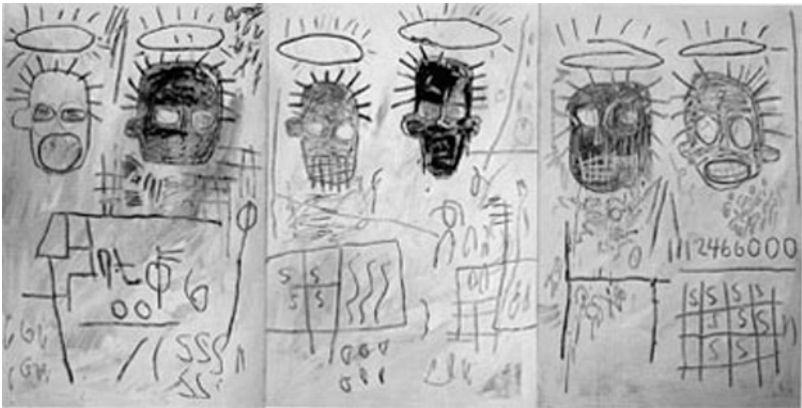
the palette of pale blues and grays that Magoni employs throughout her series *Echoes of the Past Are Always Present* from 1980. We can also see a continued deployment of the surrendering figure in such works as *Boy and Dog in a Johnnpump* from 1982.



Despo Magoni

Echoes from the Past are Always Present #3, 1980.

Charcoal, oil pastel, colored pencil, paper & Xerox collage on paper 26 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 48 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Collection of the artist.



Basquiat, Jean-Michel, 1960-1988

Six Crimee, 1982

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To be sure, Basquiat and Magoni are far from the only two artists in the history of modern art to fetishize the head for expressive purposes. And Basquiat was nothing if not prolific in his sources of inspiration. Yet as Hoffman and others have stated, thus far no other antecedent for this leitmotif of Basquiat's has proven fully satisfactory. Magoni's art stands out because of the obviously shared formal strategies, as well as the chronological and personal proximity. The formal comparisons are truly compelling, yet the affinity Basquiat felt for Magoni's art, if we accept it to be so, transcends the merely formal. As Maria Fox Hausman has noted, "Like Basquiat's [Magoni's] work conveys human energy and emotion . . . Magoni and Basquiat both go below the skin to inspect, expose and reveal the human condition" (6). Another affinity between the two artists is how they reconcile the prevailing art trends surrounding them. After decades of single-minded formalism in the art world, one sees with these artists an engagement with social content and the human condition. Both artists, coming from the margins (a man of color and a woman) are happy to "depurify" their artistic practices. Both artists, coming out of the 70s and anticipating the 80s, evince elements of conceptual, text-based projects with a newfound reaffirmation of expressionist exuberance and engagement with the figure. Both artists use a variety of styles, marks and gestures to reference different sources and both were early practitioners of "postmodern"-era appropriation.

Of course, given what appears to be overwhelming evidence of the connection between these two artists and what can be argued to be the crucially influential role that Magoni's art played upon the developing Basquiat, one may ask why this has gone unnoticed heretofore. This can be explained in many ways, beginning with Basquiat's own premature decline and death. Many artists keep their ideas and sources very close to themselves, and Basquiat was one who did not choose to effusively over-explain his work. He is also an artist whose biography was shaped with little input by the man himself. Basquiat had died before the art world had even fully absorbed his complex and powerful work and certainly before any true consensus was formed concerning its lasting relevance. By now his life and art have been rather hastily reified into a master narrative that, like most master narratives, eschews the intricacies of a fuller story for the manageability of a streamlined discourse. Thus any sources not known to the broader public but more personal

to the man himself are likely to be written out or simply overlooked. This of course raises a larger issue—that an artist with as consistently strong a body of work and an exhibition history that covers three decades and is global in scope such as Magoni can still be thought of as a relatively unknown, and therefore unimportant figure. No one can fully account for the vagaries of fate and fashion in the art world and certainly only a select few can be thought of as top talents and seminal historical figures, yet if one only looks to these artists to tell the whole story of artistic development then one can only perpetuate the same tautologies.

The period of the late 70s—early 80s has proven to be notoriously difficult to contain with neat labels and categories. This was a time that was potentially the most pluralistic in terms of style, practices, and voices in the history of art. Supposedly the end of modernism yet replete with the lessons and practices that defined the modern period, called in its day the era of postmodernism although that is now increasingly considered to be a useless and false label, inflated by the self-importance of a market that violently crashed, this is a period that evades easy, complacent treatment. Just as many of the careers that were very quickly established and have at this point diminished or faded into obscurity, there were other artists who were active at this time that clearly merit a second look. Some of them may not have been the darlings of the marketplace, which in turn led to neglect by the media; some, like Magoni, were represented by spaces that failed, like Nonson. Furthermore, despite the increasing openness of the time, women were still underrepresented in the larger scheme of things, resulting in such phenomena as the Gorilla Girls.

One of the lessons that we should be learning now that we have the benefit of historical hindsight into the whole of the 20th century is just how much the modern period is in need of revision and reconsideration. The standard story of modern art as told in most textbooks or by institutions such as The Museum of Modern Art is overly essentialized to the expense of entire careers and movements that were wrongly neglected because they could be easily subsumed into the flow of the master narrative or they challenged prevailing theories of artistic development that held sway at the time. The same error has been perpetrated with the SoHo art world of the early 80s. For the pioneering

role she played in exploring trends and ideas that would shape the art of this time, the intrinsic strength of her own vision, and now the virtually undeniable influence she exerted on the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Despo Magoni is certainly without question an artist who merits a renewed consideration. In this way as in so many others, she comes to personify the period itself.

The author would like to acknowledge the work of Mariah Fox Hausman, who got the ball rolling.

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