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Mr. Greco

English III

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The World by a Neo-Expressionist

In the article, “In Mexico, ‘Roma’ Lit a Fire for Workers Rights,” published by the New York Times, actress Yalitza Aparicio shares how the process of playing Cleo as an indigenous woman completely altered her perspective on how impactful film can be. She explains how being cast in the film *Roma* provided a stepping stone for her to express how underrepresented women of colour are, along with the working conditions for people in Mexico, something seldom mentioned and widely protested against.. ----- Her story corroborates the feelings of many minorities and their experiences of being underrepresented in the art world.

One such artist whose works reflect Aparicio’s values is Jean-Michel Basquiat. He was an American artist active in the neo-expressionist movement, who specialised in graffiti that explored his mixed-race identity that set him quite apart from others as it was the main inspiration for his work. In the 80s, his work had a unique impact on the culture of mainstream art because of his speciality in neo expressionism and his own cultural background. Neo expressionism is a style of late modernist or early-postmodern painting and sculpture. By definition it is raw and a changed configuration of abstract expressionism that tells stories and lends itself more prominently to pop culture. (The Collector) [Basquiat] used text and colours that are not as commonly depicted in media, becoming one of the defining factors of

neo-expressionism at this time. This parallels Aparicio's work because of how the both of them came from under-represented backgrounds in art therefore resulting in a louder emergence when recognised by mainstream media.



Fig. 1. Basquiat, Jean-Michel. Hollywood Africans

<https://whitney.org/collection/works/453>

Hollywood Africans, circa 1983, is quite a similar image in the way he used colours and shapes that reflected a metropolitan, and showed the stigma associated with African culture and their representation in the film industry. The sort of vibrant colour shows pride, or boldness regarding social justice. There are also a lot of words that unevenly crowd the space surrounding the faces and main shapes. Wide, open space is often associated with opportunity or freedom, and a space like Hollywood alone symbolises so much room for prosperity, but challenge and hardship too. What one can find interesting about this is the known impact on how this country was built up by these events, but also by people of colour. The words “Hollywood Africans” are crossed out when it is completely guaranteed that there would not be a Hollywood in question if not for unseen people of colour working thanklessly behind the scenes. Notable is the fact that

the contrast between bright neon yellow and deep blue outlines however, is so strong. The black section on the bottom which reads “GANGSTERISM”, can definitely be interpreted as a perception of how black people and people of colour are stereotyped in society and in many areas throughout the world. Similarly, Aparicio battles many preconceived notions of how people of her background are seemingly understood by society. There is always a variety as seen in the image of expression, both further reflecting the concept of varying perceptions per person, and having an idea of exactly how many different things minorities deal with on a daily basis. The rhythm of the work is inconsistent, but also constant in a sense. Like a pulse of people speaking out on what they believe, but irregular because it is always changing and always louder, like the taking over of brighter hues, to that black being pushed deep deep down.



Fig. 2. Basquiat, Jean-Michel. *Self Portrait*. <https://www.jean-michel-basquiat.org/self-portrait/>.

In conjunction with this particular painting, Basquiat previously created a piece titled *Self Portrait*, reiterating his belief that art should reflect a genuine, unfiltered, person in their culture and identity. Basquiat's purpose for making art was self-expression and emoting for oneself in a way that is reflective of the contributions they bring to society. All his work is very abstract but consistent in his voice as an artist. He spoke out with very specific symbols like skulls and bones

that showcased a darkness that was otherwise not visible to the naked eye. Towards the end of his life, his works became very dark. The contrast and colours of his pieces bring a solemn mood. The text on this work reads “NO”, a phrase that has a lot of meaning and potentially negative connotations. This was his artistic interpretation of himself at this point of his life and career and carried with it a lot of unique perspective. Relating to Aparicio’s argument of under representation and call to action, this piece probably identified with most people’s darkest sides that many don’t look to understand or the roots that many do not wish to examine. He painted a reality that many fail to realise is crucial to understand when gaining knowledge of human existence. The space of this painting is very cluttered, showing mindset and how his surroundings had deep mental and physical impacts on his life. His main reason for why art matters is self expression and emoting for oneself in a way that is reflective of the contributions they bring to society.



Fig. 3. Basquiat, Jean-Michel. Riding With Death

[singularart.com/en/blog/2020/02/12/riding-with-death-1988-one-of-jean-michel-basquiats-last-paintings/](https://www.singularart.com/en/blog/2020/02/12/riding-with-death-1988-one-of-jean-michel-basquiats-last-paintings/)

Riding with Death, made public in '88 was his final piece of work and the most painfully raw. Because regular audiences were more accustomed to the happier more up-to-interpretation pieces of abstract expressionism, his work stood out for its darker hidden meanings that most would avoid because of the stigma and overall negative energy surrounding death. The bones and person of colour riding the skeleton is a metaphor for how Basquiat felt about death. He confronted the art head on in a darker, more imaginative way than most other artists, much like representation of an unglorified minority is. The plain background and pop of the figures makes the presence of "death" even more daunting. The bones are broken and missing pieces, symbolising a sort of emptiness and instability in death and towards the end of one's life. The shapes are all very sharp and darkly outlined making the figures pop out of the earthy brown.

All in all, Basquiat's work as an artist and activist only supports Aparicio's argument of representation through art. The argument from the two brings together the point that art is all about the real minds behind it and how it unifies humanity by touching a different aspect of each person. A very clear showing of not just visually appealing art, but a story, sheltered by darkness and reality of a minority not equally showcased.

Works Cited

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Note about artworks: I gave all source information about each piece with each figure caption, I do not need to provide this information on the Works Cited page.

Note on the use of generative AI: I did not use AI.