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Mr. Greco

English III

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Art Gives Voice to the Unheard

Doris Salcedo, a Colombian artist, centers her work on the impact of political violence and crisis. In her article, "Naming the Disappeared, Raising the Dead," Salcedo argues that art finds its most profound meaning during crises, as it makes the suffering of oppressed victims visible. Having lived through awful circumstances herself, Salcedo finds value in ensuring society hears her and others' stories. Her art emphasizes overlooked aspects of humanity, challenging societal perceptions. She frequently incorporates acts of breaking into her artwork to symbolize the fragility of life and the irreversible nature of certain events. Salcedo's ultimate goal is to help society remember recent history and transform pain and suffering into powerful images that bring light to life's challenging experiences.

Salcedo's values and ethos are similarly expressed in the works of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Born in 1960, Basquiat formerly known as the street graffiti artist SAMO, is most famously known as a neo-expressionist artist that commented on the politics surrounding race in the United States. Basquiat brought light to injustice in his community that was otherwise overlooked. His works such as *Defacement (1983)*, *La Hara (1981)*, and *Boxer (1982)* emphasize his internal battle with racial identity and earned him the nickname of "the heir of abstract/neo expressionism".



Fig 1 Basquiat, Jean-Michel. *Defacement* (1983) Williams College Museum of Art
<https://artmuseum.williams.edu/news-item/basquiat-defacement>

In *Defacement* (see fig 1.), Basquiat painted an ode to the recent death of his colleague Michael Stewart. Stewart was an African American artist who was beaten to death by the police. In the 80's, police brutality was rampant in urban communities, many African American families lost their loved ones to the epidemic of police violence. Police departments were blinded by their prejudice, attacking people of color for the slightest mishaps. Though hurt and shaken by these acts of cruelty, people stayed silent. Angry and saddened by the death of Stewart, Basquiat created this piece to bring awareness to police misconduct. Basquiat used harsh lines, and big blocks of color to create a sense of disturbance in this piece in order to depict the fear and pain of victims. Basquiat also caricatured the officers, depicting them as some sort of otherworldly creature. Basquiat was drawing irony to prejudiced beliefs about African Americans, depicting police officers as the villains destroying communities, contrasting similar beliefs about African Americans.



Fig 2 Basquiat, Jean-Michel. *La Hara* (1981)
<https://www.jean-michel-basquiat.org/la-hara/>

Basquiat's struggle with power and societal structure is further depicted in his piece *La Hara* (see fig 2.) "La Hara" was an interesting play on words, a fusion of the Irish last name O'Hara, and the Puerto Rican slang "La Jara" meaning police. Basquiat was Puerto Rican/Haitian American. As seen in much of his art, Basquiat had deep internal struggles with his own ethnic identity and often explored it through art. Similarly Interesting, O'Hara was a common surname seen in New York police officers. Basquiat used repetition in this piece, placing the phrase "La Hara" numerous times throughout the painting. Basquiat may have been commenting on the historically repetitive nature of police violence as well as the indistinguishable demographic of police officers, white, male, racist. To further analyze, Basquiat's choice to depict the police officer as a skeleton moves the audience to interpret that police department policies are outdated and literally lethal.



Fig 3 Basquiat, Jean-Michel *Boxer* (1982)
<https://www.jean-michel-basquiat.org/untitled-boxer/>

Though numerous of Basquiat's works were clear societal commentary, his piece *Boxer* (see fig 3.) focuses on the exploration of racial identity and the internal turmoil himself and many experienced. Growing up as a young Hispanic and African American man, Basquiat faced discrimination and prejudice on a daily basis. one can only imagine the impact that had on his self image. Through this painting, Basquiat developed a self-portrait, the image of a fighter. Basquiat was seen as a pioneer of his time, making creative works that other artists did not dare create. Besides art, Basquiat was a pioneer of the social justice movement. He created art that celebrated people of color, highlighting their strengths and values. He chose to depict the boxer as an African American man. As seen in the painting, the man is holding both of his fists up in a similar manner to the Black power fist. Through this piece of art, Basquiat showed other young African American children that they're just as important and valuable as white children. He gave these kids art that they could relate to, that they could see themselves in. Basquiat gave these children representation, something he wished he had growing up.

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Note on the use of AI:

I did not use AI tools to write this essay, though I did use ChatGPT to proofread and help me revise my first paragraph, a summary and statement about Dolores Salcedo.