



Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child

Reviewed by [Chris Cabin](#) on Jul 22 2010

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In 1996, Miramax released [Basquiat](#), a highfalutin take on the life of the bombastic neo-expressionist Jean-Michel Basquiat; it was the first of what would become a trilogy of films about doomed artists by blowhard director Julian Schnabel. A surprisingly tame biopic, both visually and in terms of narrative, it primarily served as a setting for hilariously garish stunt casting -- David Bowie as Andy Warhol! -- and a magnificent performance by Jeffrey Wright as the titular painter and graffiti artist who died of a heroin overdose in the summer of 1988.

Schnabel, only slightly less blustery, shows up now as a talking head and in a few clippings in the new, deeply felt documentary, *Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child*. Deriving its title from the article in *Artforum*, written by Rene Ricard, that first brought Basquiat to the attention of the scene, the film builds upon footage of an interview Basquiat did in 1985 shot by Tamra Davis, the film's director and close friend of the late artist. Beginning with his early graffiti days, where he tagged lines of poetry under the name Samo, Davis simultaneously affords a look at

that over-romanticized pre-Giuliani phase of lower Manhattan, a time where "everyone was doing everything," according to one interviewee.

Thankfully, Davis never portrays that half-imagined ideal utopia as anything more than an alternative school and community for Basquiat to come up. Ditching school during his senior year, Samo became an underground hit. This led to a friendship with Fab 5 Freddy and a spot on Glenn O'Brien's cult public access show *TV Party*. Despite being a member of early noise band Gray and his success as Samo, it was a few drawings at the infamous Times Square Show in 1980 that sparked his career in painting. A year later, he was working in the Annina Nosei gallery basement, nurturing a close friendship with Warhol and hiding stacks of money all over his apartment.

Several things are done exceptionally here but none more than the sense of intimacy that Davis, a director of little interest prior to this, conjures up through personal stories and an astute attentiveness to personality. An assistant talks about the fancy delicacies that went rotten in his fridge; a gallerist mentions his odd sense of punctuality. The difference between the projected self and the private self is the basis (and downfall) of countless biopics and documentaries, but Davis wisely fills us in on the artist's quirks and his unique view, which gives her film a potent grace.

If it is as simple as Schnabel says and Basquiat simply didn't have the tools to "navigate the river of shit" that is modern art, Davis is wise in her decision to spend less time on Basquiat's descent into heroin addiction. Critical misconceptions, paranoia, and isolation certainly all hang as factors in his devastating finale but anyone who takes a gander at Basquiat's work must know that he reflected life and a plethora of cultures that often go unknown, rather than death; it comes as little surprise that one of his inspirations was a copy of Henry Gray's *Anatomy of the Human Body*. The Langston Hughes poem that opens *The Radiant Child* may suggest that a "genius child" must be killed to be truly free, but from what Davis has unearthed, it was the idea of death, both artistically and quite literally, that boxed Basquiat in.