

Jean-Michel Basquiat:
An Intimate Portrait

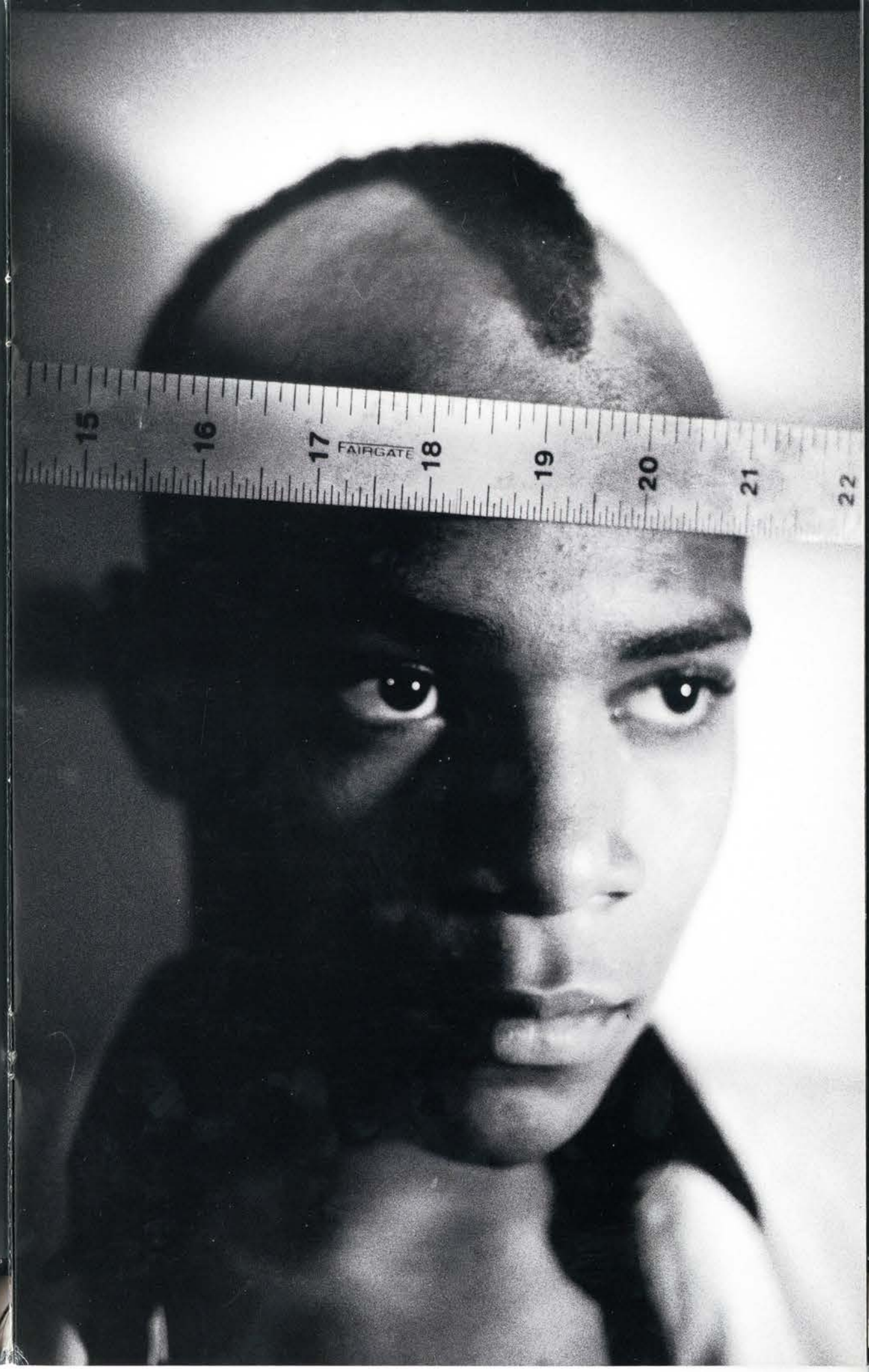
A black and white photograph of Jean-Michel Basquiat. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark, open-collared shirt with white buttons. His eyes are closed, and his head is tilted back, resting against a hand that is visible on the left side of the frame. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of his face and the texture of his skin. The background is dark and out of focus.

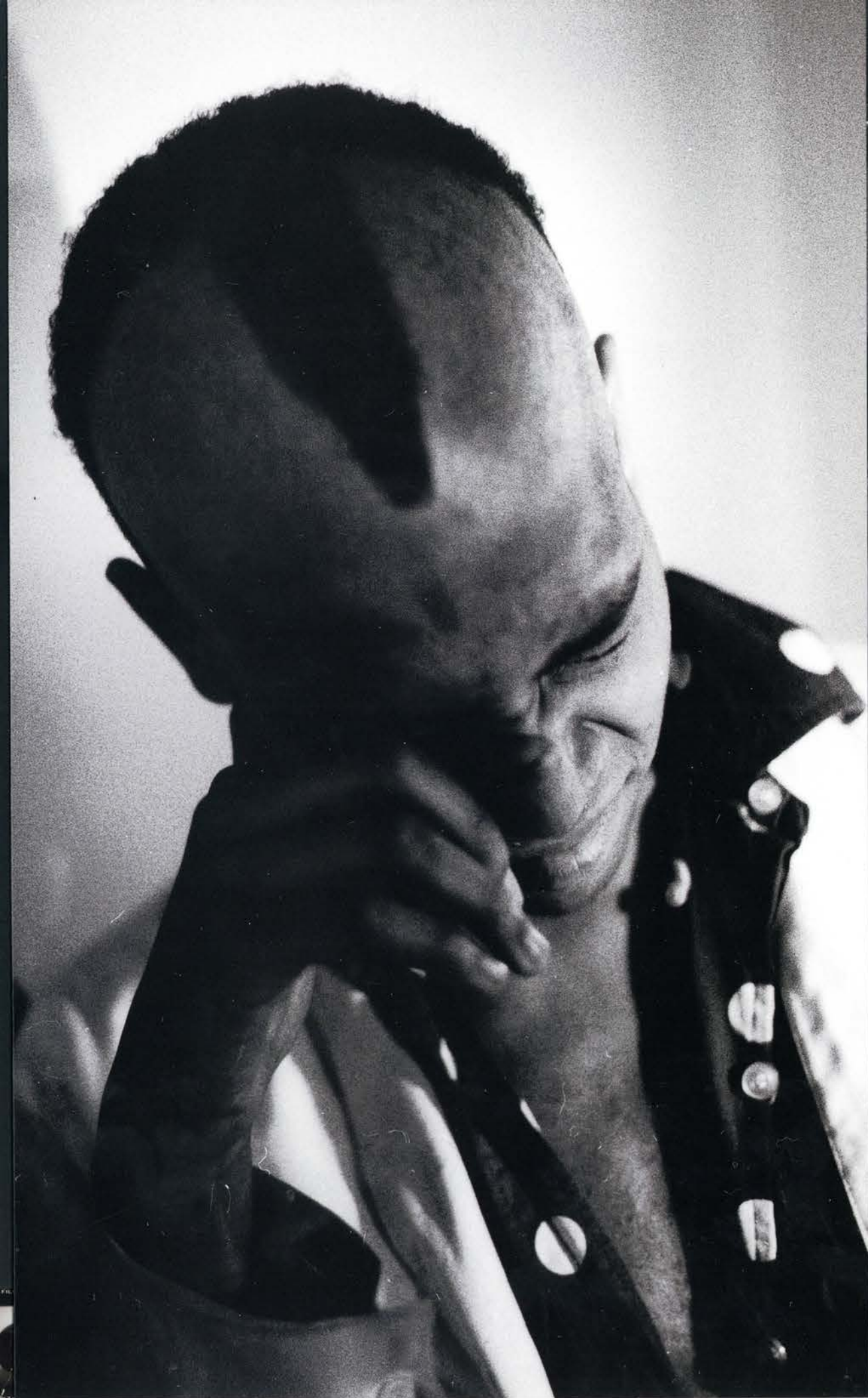
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ART MUSEUM
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I first saw Jean Michel Basquiat's work in a very large group show, curated by Diego Cortez, at P.S. 1 in Queens, New York City, in 1981. If I remember well, there were three rather small paintings on canvas by Basquiat, with childish drawings depicting the theme of the streets of New York City. The personal touch of those works convinced me immediately of their originality, and, later, I called the artist on the phone and arranged to see his works.

The first visit was very exciting, and, consequently, I asked him to participate in a group show called Public Address, organized at my gallery. Since Jean-Michel did not have a place to work and wanted to produce very large paintings, I allowed him to work in a storage area of the gallery that was below the exhibition space. It was an area in a large basement that had a huge skylight in the back. In the next few months, Jean-Michel produced a number of masterpieces that brought him to the attention of the entire art world.

Annina Nosei, Annina Nosei Gallery
February 2004, New York, New York





The photographs in this exhibition reveal an intimate look at the friendship between artists Nicholas Taylor and Jean-Michel Basquiat, a camaraderie that was born under the pulsating lights of New York's famed Mudd Club in lower Manhattan in January 1979. The Mudd Club was a beehive of creativity, where the likes of Fab Five Freddy, David Byrne (*Talking Heads*), Keith Haring, and Madonna frequented before they became famous. These historic photographs, shot on just one roll of film, are being exhibited and traveled for the first time in their entirety. These images are portals into the life of an artist who was on the threshold of taking the art world by storm. Countless essays and reviews have been written about Basquiat and his work. This exhibition focuses on the portrait of a man, an artist, and, most importantly, a friend. Taylor's and Basquiat's friendship endured many years, through the ups and downs of Basquiat's rise to notoriety in the art world until his untimely death in 1988.

These striking images, taken by Taylor, of a nineteen-year-old Jean-Michel Basquiat, unspoiled by the art-star celebrity that was to reveal itself in just a few short years. The accompanying text panels, written by Taylor, document the friendship the two shared and also serve to contextualize the historical significance of Basquiat in the early 1980s. Taylor's personal revelations and memories are shared with great candor.

Looking back on these images, twenty years later, there is a subtle aura of predetermination for Basquiat. His actions and poses, captured by Taylor, appear aloof or casual upon first glance. These are, in fact, rarely publicized visual records of Basquiat's character and use of body language to express his emotions and personality, which, in turn, reflect his serendipitous struggle for fame and respect. Basquiat struggled for fame, fortune, and, most importantly, inclusion into the very closed society that was the self-serving art world of the early 1980s.

Basquiat painted as he lived – full throttle – everything, all the time. He had little sense of self-control, nor did he seek out any realm of moderation. In retrospect, his paintings are aggressive and fragmented, radiating nervous energy and enthusiasm for the chaotic world of which he was a part. Existing simultaneously in his work is a sense of excitement, imagination, and exploration of visual language. His frustration in trying to assert himself as a black artist into a predominantly white art culture was continuously filtered into the context of his work. Readily juxtaposing images of modern and primitive icons and text, he illustrated how he directly experienced the white bourgeois class identification with commercial black culture.

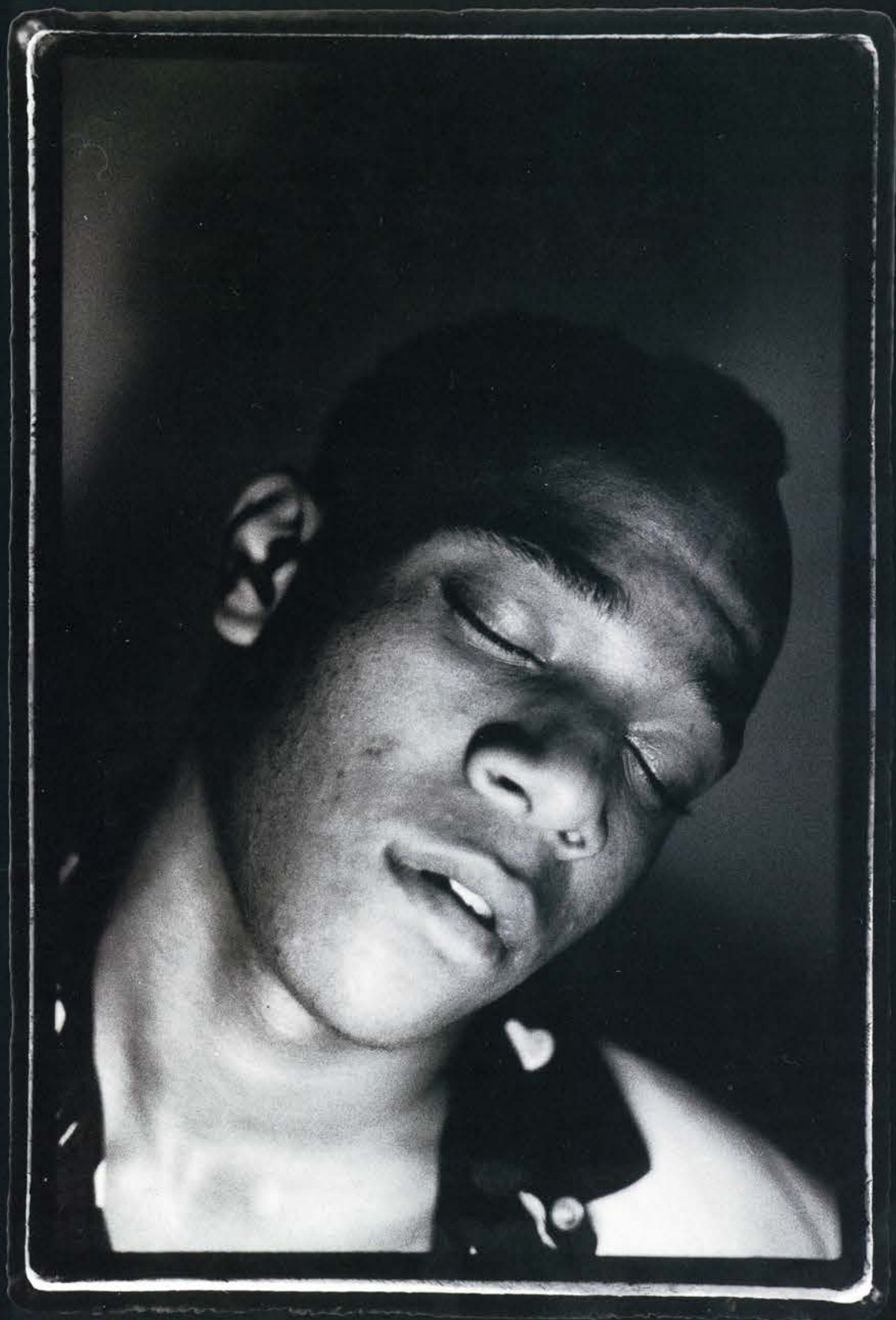
His volatile relationship with the commercial art world was symbiotic; each required the other to survive. Although there is much documentation on the overtly aggressive nature of the commercial art world, Basquiat appeared to give as good as he got. His ambition and eccentric behavior, coupled only with an obsessive hunger for fame, recognition, and, most of all, hunger for respect, thrust him into the vacuous world of New York in the early 1980s, where there was little hope of escape – let alone, survival.

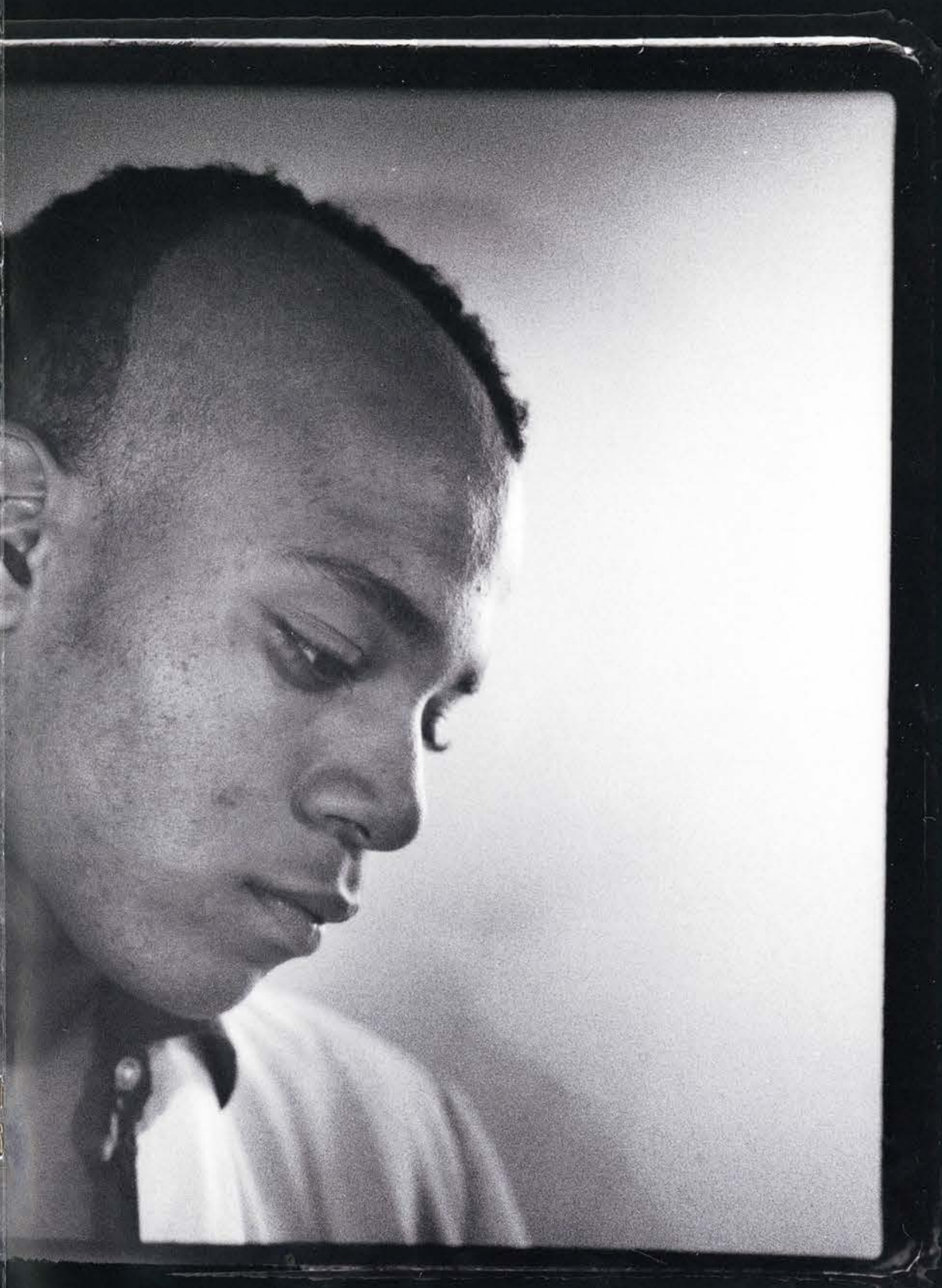
Ultimately, this exhibition is an exploration of Jean-Michel Basquiat as a person who became one of the most prolific artists of our century.

Michael J. Beam

Michael J. Beam Curator of Exhibitions, Castellani Art Museum









About the Photographer

Nicholas Taylor first met fellow artist Jean-Michel Basquiat in January 1979, at the famed Mudd Club in lower Manhattan. The two quickly became close friends and, together with Michael Holman, Wayne Clifford, and Vincent Gallo, writer and director of *Buffalo 66*, formed the musical art band Gray. Gray's sound was experimental, an energizing mix of ambient sounds and instrumental exploration. Gray had a cool, funky sound that Glenn O'Brien of Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine dubbed as "possibly the best band on the planet." Gray played at a myriad of locations throughout New York City, including a birthday party for pop art guru Leo Castelli. After the band broke up in 1981, Basquiat left to pursue painting full time; Taylor concentrated on his true passion – music. Known as DJ High Priest, Taylor, along with Michael Holman, was partially responsible for bringing the hip-hop musical genre from the Bronx to lower Manhattan. He has appeared on TV's *Ripley's Believe It Or Not!* and *PM Magazine* television program. Taylor has toured with Zulu Nation (African Bambatta), opened for Grand Master Flash, and has worked with Fab Five Freddy, Max Roach, and the New York City Breakers.



For the film *Basquiat*, at writer and director Julian Schnabel's request, Taylor collaborated with William Burroughs and Jeffery Wright (who played Basquiat) to recreate the voice-over for the "Suicide Hotline Mode" that appears on both the Island Records *Basquiat* soundtrack and in the Miramax motion picture *Basquiat*. Taylor had cameo appearances in the movie; and it was he on whom Benicio del Toro's composite character "Benny" was loosely based.

Today, Nicholas Taylor's album credits include Gomma Records motion picture soundtracks, *ANTI-NEW YORK*, *Downtown '81*, and collaborations with Debbie Harry. He has also worked with artist Ashley Bickerton on the album *We Love New York*, which includes music by Brian Eno, Boy George, and Gilbert & George. In the fall of 2003, Taylor performed at the Knitting Factory opening for Old Dirty Bastard (baby Jesus of Wu Tang fame). Taylor is most recently represented by British label APEMAN Records. Nicholas Taylor is director and host of *Outside My Window* art television show that airs Thursdays at midnight, in New York City, on AOL/Time Warner, Channel 56.



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Edition Sales Limited Edition single prints and complete portfolios of this historical exhibition are available for purchase through Lawrence Brose at CEPA Photography Gallery, 716.856.2717, or Lawrence@cepagallery.com.

All photographs: © 1979/2003 Nicholas Taylor

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