

CHRISTIE'S

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RECORD BREAKING

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

POISED TO ACHIEVE THE HIGHEST PRICE FOR THE ARTIST



Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988)

Untitled, 1981

Acrylic and oilstick on Canvas

78 x 68 in, 198 x 173 cm

Estimate in the region of \$20 million

POST-WAR & CONTEMPORARY ART EVENING SALE

New York – 14 November 2012

New York – On November 14th, Christie's will offer a major work by Jean-Michel Basquiat, executed in 1981. *Untitled*, which has been in the same private collection for almost two decades, is regarded as one of Basquiat's ultimate masterpieces from the beginning of his career alongside *Untitled (Skull)* 1981, from the Broad Collection. The work has been featured prominently in every major Basquiat retrospective, including the recent survey at the Beyeler Foundation and the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. *Untitled 1981*, which set a record when it sold at auction in 1988 for \$110,000 is poised to break the

previous highest record price of \$ 20.1million achieved by the artist at auction last June at Christie's in London.

Loic Gouzer, International Specialist of Post-War and Contemporary Art, declared: “*In contrast to most artists, Basquiat created his best paintings at the beginning of his career. Untitled 1981 unites all the elements of energy, freedom and boldness that one looks for in Basquiat. The market has been waiting a long time for a work of this caliber and freshness, therefore we expect it to set a new record for Basquiat, an artist who is in the process of being recognized as a classic of Post-War American Art alongside Warhol, De Kooning and Pollock.*”

This work is a remarkable and important early example of the potency of Jean-Michel Basquiat's unique artistic language. Painted in 1981, as the artist emerged from the underground world of street art into the adulation of the New York art scene, this monumental painting displays the powerful iconography and painterly energy that enraptured both critics and collectors alike until the artist's untimely death seven years later at the age of just 27.

Standing boldly at the center of the canvas, the majestic figure of the fisherman proudly displays his catch, a large fish dangling at the end of a long line. The dark figure, whose skeletal contours are outlined in stark black and white, is crowned with what appears to be a wreath made from barbed wire—twisted pieces of sharp metal appearing as a halo around the figure's head. The raw intensity with which Basquiat depicts the man's features recalls the naïve figures which populated the artist's street art, scrawled and scratched across the abandoned buildings of the city's less desirable neighborhoods. In stark contrast to the dark figure's haunting raw expressionism, Basquiat locates his protagonist against a background composed of a palette of vibrant yellows, creams, pinks and mauves, thereby forcing our attention onto this central character and pushing the figure to the forefront of the composition. As an early example of Basquiat's rich visual language, *Untitled* attests to the artist's growing use of iconography in his art.

Whereas in later paintings, in which the artist depicted figures representing some of his childhood heroes such as Sugar Ray Robinson, Cassius Clay and Joe Louis, *Untitled* features a figure that remains a mysterious apparition, which appears to be an amalgamation of characters from Basquiat's own vivid imagination made up from a heady concoction of observations of New York life mixed together with the rich symbolism of his Haitian and Puerto Rican heritage. Whilst not overtly representational, this particular figure may have its origins in any number of sources, from the glimpses of the dispossessed fishing along the banks of New York's numerous waterways to the obvious Christian symbolism (the 'crown of thorns' and Jesus' instructions to his Disciples to become 'Fishers of Men'). But perhaps the strongest resonance comes from the artist's own cultural legacy. The boxy shape and cross hatched markings of the fish caught at the end of the line indicate that it could be a Puffer Fish, valued by Haitian Vodou culture for its poison, by which the Bokor (a Vodou priest) is believed to create zombies through a potion. Indeed the central figure in *Untitled* could easily be Basquiat's rendering of a Bokor, as the man's ashen complexion recalls the ash smeared onto the faces of those participating in religious

festivals and ceremonies. The figure of the fisherman was clearly an important one for Basquiat during this pivotal period of his career as it makes an appearance, with slight compositional variations, in a number of his other works.

***WORLD RECORD PRICE FOR THE ARTIST AT AUCTION**

Christie's London – Wednesday, 27 June 2012

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988), *Untitled*, 1981
\$20,170,071 (£12,921,250)

Preview

London
Paris

6-11 October 2012
17-19 October 2012

Sale Preview

New York

10-13 November 2012

Auction

Post-War and Contemporary Art, Evening Sale

14 November 2012

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About Christie's

Christie's, the world's leading art business, had global auction and private sales in 2011 that totaled £3.6 billion/\$5.7 billion. Christie's is a name and place that speaks of extraordinary art, unparalleled service and expertise, as well as international glamour. Founded in 1766 by James Christie, Christie's has since conducted the greatest and most celebrated auctions through the centuries providing a popular showcase for the unique and the beautiful. Christie's offers over 450 auctions annually in over 80 categories, including all areas of fine and decorative arts, jewellery, photographs, collectibles, wine, and more. Prices range from \$200 to over \$100 million. Christie's also has a long and successful history conducting private sales for its clients in all categories, with emphasis on Post-War and Contemporary, Impressionist and Modern, Old Masters and Jewellery. Private sales totaled £502 million / \$808.6m in 2011, an increase of 44% on the previous year.

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**Estimates do not include buyer's premium. Sales totals are hammer price plus buyer's premium and do not reflect costs, financing fees or application of buyer's or seller's credits.*

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