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JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT'S *BECAUSE IT HURTS THE LUNGS*, INSPIRED BY LEONARDO DA VINCI, WILL BE A LEADING HIGHLIGHT OF THE 20TH/21ST CENTURY: EVENING SALE INCLUDING THINKING ITALIAN, LONDON ON 15 OCTOBER 2021

- Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Because it Hurts the Lungs* (1986, estimate: £7,000,000-10,000,000) takes its title from a quote, extracted from Leonardo da Vinci's notebook, which is included in Basquiat's multi-media construction
- *Because it Hurts the Lungs* has been exhibited in the 2004 retrospective of Basquiat's work at the Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, and more recently in the dual exhibition Keith Haring | Jean-Michel Basquiat: Crossing Lines (2019-2020) at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
- Christie's 20th / 21st Century: Evening Sale Including Thinking Italian, London will incorporate the Hong Kong and New York sale rooms, taking place on 15 October 2021



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Because it Hurts the Lungs* (1986, estimate: £7,000,000-10,000,000)

LONDON – Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Because it Hurts the Lungs* (1986, estimate: £7,000,000-10,000,000) will be a leading highlight of Christie's live and livestreamed 20th / 21st Century: Evening Sale Including Thinking Italian, London on 15 October 2021. Unveiled in Hong Kong on 21 September, *Because it Hurts the Lungs* is a multimedia work depicting a life-size green figure with a russet, cyclopean skull against a white ground. To the painted wood backdrop, Basquiat has applied sheets of his own drawings and text,

among them a cryptic extract from the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci that lends the work its title: “Why the thunderbolt kills a [man and] does not wound him, and if the man blew his nose he would not die. Because it hurts the lungs.” Further collage and pigment adorn two boxes that protrude from the surface, including a drawing of the Lester Young Quartet’s 1944 jazz record *Afternoon Of A Basie-ite*, Japanese script, snatches of dialogue from Sophocles’ Greek tragedy *Ajax*, and a grinning, eyeless black head wearing a mitre-like crown. *Because it Hurts the Lungs* will remain on view in Hong Kong until 24 September before being displayed at Rockefeller Center in New York from 29 September to 3 October 2021. The pre-sale exhibition will then take place at Christie’s King Street galleries from 9 to 15 October 2021, coinciding with London’s Frieze Week.

Katharine Arnold, Co-Head, Post-War and Contemporary Art, Christie’s Europe: “Our 20th/21st Century sales in 2021 have been highlighted by masterpieces by Jean-Michel Basquiat and we are delighted to continue this by offering our clients an exceptional painting in *Because it Hurts the Lungs*. London’s Frieze Week is an international spotlight on the city where we focus on those artists who have had global influence, together with those names at the forefront of contemporary culture. Jean-Michel Basquiat’s impact on the art world is undisputed and I feel sure this painting will resonate with our international collectors as we welcome many back to our saleroom in London.”

Cristian Albu, Co-Head of 20th and 21st Century Art Department, Christie’s Asia Pacific: “Jean-Michel Basquiat’s *Because it Hurts the Lungs* was created in that seminal year, 1986, in which he was at his peak. This object plays with the history of art, reflecting Basquiat’s appetite to explore those artists who had come before him as well as all aspects of his cultural history. His fascination with Leonardo da Vinci is never more evident than in *Because it Hurts the Lungs* and we look forward to unveiling the work to our clients in Hong Kong ahead of exhibitions in New York and, ultimately, London.”

While the supports of *Because it Hurts the Lungs* speak to Basquiat’s streetwise ingenuity, it also relates to his interest in the mystical properties of the art object. His frequent figural references to saints, kings and messiahs were often deployed in panelled structures reminiscent of church altarpieces or domestic icons. These formal aspects went hand in hand with *vodoun* echoes of Basquiat’s own Haitian-Puerto Rican heritage, as well as with nods to fetish objects such as the *nkisi* from the Congo Basin, believed to be inhabited by spirits, and sometimes studded with nails or blades, that he saw in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Complex assemblages like *Because it Hurts the Lungs* reflect the richness of Basquiat’s identity and the depths of his learning.

Basquiat became increasingly fascinated by African spiritual symbolism from around 1984, when he read Farris Thompson’s new publication *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*. Major works from this era like *Gold Griot* (1984, Broad Art Foundation) and *Grillo* (1984, Fondation Louis Vuitton), whose figures refer to the storyteller-poets of West Africa, relate closely to *Because it Hurts the Lungs* in their ornate materiality. *Because it Hurts the Lungs* reflects one of the most totemic influences in his library. While he was in hospital following a childhood car accident, Basquiat’s mother had given him a copy of Gray’s Anatomy and a book of Leonardo da Vinci’s drawings. He would return often to the lessons of these volumes in his art, with many of his figures revealing their skulls, muscles and nervous systems. As well as the drawings, however, Basquiat found inspiration in Leonardo’s words. The collaged sheet at the upper right lifts text from a page of the master’s notebooks written in 1489, in which he outlined some of the subjects to be treated in his forthcoming *Anatomia*. In Basquiat’s hands, this evocative list, including references to madness, hunger, poison and ‘anger when it works in the body’, becomes a poetic incantation, inflecting the central figure with a sensory and emotive physicality.

In 1986, Basquiat was working out of a liberating loft space on Great Jones Street where his art grew in physical and thematic grandeur. His celebrity had hit new heights in 1985, when he was featured on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* as the face of the era’s heady contemporary art scene. In 1986, he also made his first visit to Africa for a show of his work in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, and a major exhibition of more than 60 of his works opened at the Kestner-Gesellschaft in Hannover: Basquiat’s second survey at a European museum, at the age of just 25.

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