

INTERVIEW

Jean Michel Basquiat with Becky Johnston and Tamra Davis

Becky Johnston: So I'm going to start with your childhood. What were you like as a kid?

Jean-Michel Basquiat: Here we're going now, it's going to be terrible now. [...] What was I like as a kid? See? I hate this.

BJ: Well, what kinds of things did you do? Did you have a lot of friends or were you a loner? Did you start painting when you were really young? Were you a rebel? Were you a kid who got into a lot of trouble? You know, those are the kinds of questions ...

JMB: I don't want to give a one-word answer is what it is.

BJ: I know. I want you to go into it. So if you start then we can feed off your answers and keep going Did you have any brothers or sisters? You were an only kid, right?

JMB: No, I have two sisters.

BJ: Oh, you do?

JMB: I think I was just pretty naive as a kid, mostly.

BJ: What do you mean by "naive" - you believed that if you wanted something you would get it?

JMB: I don't think I dealt with reality that much really.

BJ: But most kids don't. That's not unusual.

JMB: You know, I wasn't [bad]; I wasn't a troublemaker, I just didn't really participate much in school.

BJ: Are you younger or older than your sisters?

JMB: I'm the oldest. I'm the oldest brother.

BJ: Are you the black sheep of the family?

JMB: Well I was until I started doing well.(...]

BJ: What's your earliest, most vivid childhood memory?

JMB: Probably getting hit by a car, I guess.

BJ: How did that happen?

JMB: I was playing in the street.

BJ: How old were you?

JMB: I was seven-seven or eight years old.

BJ: Did you think: this is it?

JMB: It seemed very dreamlike. It seemed like the car ... it was just like in the movies, where they slow it down. When a car's coming at you, it was just like that.

BJ: So it was a serious accident?

JMB: Yeah, yeah, I had an operation in my stomach, the whole business. I remember it just being very dreamlike, and seeing the car sort of coming at me and then just seeing everything through sort of a red filter.

BJ: Everybody talks about what a great memory you have. Can you remember specific details of things that happened in your childhood or have you blanked it out?

JMB: I think I remember pretty much all of it. That's not the earliest memory I have but it's probably the most vivid, the thing with the car. I remember all of it pretty much.

BJ: When did you first start painting or drawing? When did you realize this was something you really loved to do?

JMB: I just thought for as long as I could remember ... I remember my mother drawing stuff out of the Bible.

BJ: Really?

JMB: Like Samson knocking down, breaking the temple down, stuff like this.

BJ: Was she a good artist?

JMB: Not bad. Pretty good.

BJ: So then you started just doing your own drawings?

JMB: I thought I wanted to be a cartoonist when I was younger and then I changed to painting when I was about fifteen or so.

BJ: So when you were about twelve years old or so, what did you imagine you'd be doing right now, at this age?

JMB: See, at that age, I never thought about professions or anything. That's what I mean by "naive." I never thought about what I'd be doing to make money, stuff like that I never thought about it. [...]

BJ: What kind of student were you in grade school? Or high school? What did you like to learn?

JMB: I did well in English and history. I used to ignore ... I just didn't participate in school at all. I'd just be drawing at my desk.

BJ: Really? Did you have pals or were you a real loner?

JMB: Usually the other kids who didn't have friends, I'd be friends with.

BJ: I read somewhere that you said you spent a lot of time in your teenage years in a park dropping acid?

JMB: Yeah, I never should have told the papers that 'cause it looks so terrible. I should have lied even and told them something else.... I don't think it's good to be honest in interviews, I think it's better to lie.

BJ: [...] I was just wondering why you thought sitting on a park bench doing acid was a good idea.

JMB: I was just taking a bad example from the wrong people, is what happened, I guess.

BJ: And soon after that you started doing SAMO?

JMB: That's after I went back home and started going to school again.

BJ: So can you go over the chronology of that? You left home and then you went back and then you started doing SAMO?

JMB: Ah, this is the worst time in my life, you know. It's the worst

Tamra Davis: Could you explain what SAMO is?

BJ: SAMO was his graffiti moniker. This is about what, seven years ago, Jean-Michel?

JMB: That was sort of high school stuff. High school graffiti.

BJ: But it was great, it was totally great. I remember when I first moved to New York, half the walls of down town were covered with SAMO graffiti. It was cryptic. It was political. It was poetic. It was funny. And it was always signed SAMO, with a copyright symbol next to the name, the "c" with the circle around it. There was a campaign for the entire first year that I was in New York, everyone was trying to figure out who SAMO was. And it turned out it was Jean-Michel.

TD: So SAMO was like somebody else, like a name that you used?

JMB: Yeah.

TD: What does SAMO stand for?

JMB: It was just on something like a product sort of ...

BJ: Didn't you do that with another guy?

JMB: Yeah, a friend from high school. Guy named Al Diaz.

BJ: Yeah. So at that time you were how old? You were like sixteen or so, right?

JMB: Seventeen.

BJ: Did you know at the time that you were going to stop doing graffiti and start painting on canvas? Did you have an idea that you wanted to hit the gallery circuit?

JMB: I was more interested in attacking the gallery circuit at that time. I didn't think about doing painting-I was thinking about making fun of the paintings that were in there, more than making paintings. The art was mostly minimal when I came up and it sort of confused me a little bit. I thought it divided people a little bit. I thought it alienated most people from art.

BJ: Because it needed too much theoretical ...

JMB: Yeah, yeah. It seemed very college oriented.

BJ: So what's the first piece of art you remember seeing that left a really strong impression on you?

JMB: Probably seeing the Guernica was my favorite thing when I was a kid. I liked Rauschenberg a lot when I used to live on the Lower East Side.

BJ: Did you have any idols or any heroes either in the art world or outside of the art world?

JMB: Mostly Rauschenberg and Warhol.

BJ: OK, you did SAMO and you were living in New York at that time and you were totally broke, right?

JMB: Yeah, I was living[...] from place to place.

BJ: How were you surviving?

JMB: I just was. You just end up surviving when you have to, I guess.

BJ: But did you ever take a part time job? How' d you make money? Just something as simple as: how' d you have money to live on?

JMB: Used to look for money at the Mudd Club on the floor with Hal Ludacer. We used to find it too, most times. I used to hold a ladder for an electrician.[...]

TD: I heard all these stories of-that you survived on the streets from having all these different girlfriends. Is that true at all? [...] That they helped you out a lot. That you could always-that at least you had a place to stay doing that.

JMB: That's some of it, yeah.

BJ: You had to paint on found stuff, right? You couldn't afford to go out and get a canvas and paints, could you?

JMB: No, the first paintings I made were on windows I found on the street. And I used the window shape as a frame and I just put the painting on the glass part and on doors I found on the street. And then when I first met [inaudible], I went and bought some canvas. I was living with Suzanne Mallouk at the time and I'd just finished doing that horrible movie with Glenn O'Brien and Edo Bertoglio.'

BJ: What was so horrible about it?

JMB: I got taken advantage of. [inaudible] I got taken advantage of.

TD: Were you starring in it? You were acting?

JMB: Yeah, I was the star of the movie.

BJ: Well, he basically played himself, but he went all over downtown from the Mudd Club to Danceteria. Didn't you pick up Debbie Harry at one point and take her to a loft?

JMB: Well, she was a bag lady and I kissed her and she turned into a fairy princess.

BJ: The movie showcased everybody in the downtown art and music scene, and Jean-Michel was the tour guide. And this was long before he had hit it big.

TD: Did you ever see that film?

JMB: I never seen it, no. They used to keep me out of the rushes, 'cause they thought if I saw it, I would stop doing whatever it was I was doing.

BJ: [laughs] Well, then it must have meant you were doing something really well. So who was the first person who responded to your work professionally?

JMB: Diego gave me my first show-Diego Cortez.

BJ: Was that New York/ New Wave at P.S.1?

JMB: Yeah, that was my first show. First person who bought it ... I think the first person who bought a painting was Paula [Greif]. Do you know her?

BJ: Oh yeah. So before you had a dealer, you were just selling work on your own? People would come over and look at the stuff?

JMB: I used to sell postcards for a dollar, 1 colour-Xeroxed [stuff].

BJ: You also painted on paper and sold them at Patricia Field's, didn't you?

JMB: Yeah.

BJ: So then after that show at P.S.1, didn't Diego arrange a big solo show of your work?

JMB: In Italy, yeah, had my first show in Italy. After that, about four or five months, I was living-this was more the time when I was living with the girls, around at this time. But before that when I was doing the acid and living in the park, I wasn't living with anybody, I was just, you know, more of a bum.

And then I was staying at Wendy [Whitelaw's] house, I remember, and she was about to throw me out any minute and then Diego came through with this show, which was just great, you know?

BJ: Then you did the show in Italy, and this is where collectors like [Henry] Geldzahler and [Bruno] Bischofberger picked up on you, no?

JMB: No, Bischofberger saw the show at P.S.1 and he didn't like it. And then for some reason ... I don't know, and then I was at Annina's [Nosei] for a while and then he came there and was begging me to do a show and I was being sort of, like I was playing it cool-telling him, you know, I didn't want to do it and so on and so forth.

BJ: What was your first reaction to selling work and making a little money?

JMB: I don't know. Over-confidence, I guess. Super confidence. I was just happy that I was able to stick it out and then get things I wanted, you know, after I felt like I was right, you know what I mean?

BJ: Yeah.

JMB: And ... I just felt really right. I felt like I was glad that I stuck it out and I was glad that I'd had these hard times ...

BJ: And after you started to get famous and people started talk-ing about your work, they also started talking a lot about you. I'm thinking in particular of that piece by Kay Larson in the Village Voice. after your show at Larry Gagosian's two years ago.

JMB: I've had this a lot. Most of my reviews have been more reviews on my ...

BJ: -of your personality.

JMB: -of my personality, yeah. More so than my work, mostly.

BJ: So how do you react to that sort of thing?

JMB: They're just racist, most of these people. [...] They went and said my fat her was accountant for a fast-food chain. And they talk about graffiti endlessly, which I don't really consider myself to be a graffiti artist, you know? So they have this image of me: wild man running-you know, wild monkey man, whatever the fuck they think.

BJ: [...] It seems to me that of all the painters out there, you're the one who constantly gets singled out as the enfant terrible.

JMB: But at the same time, I enjoy that they think I'm a bad boy. I think it's great.

BJ: Compare the kind of press you get to someone like Julian Schnabel or David Salle.

JMB: They attack Julian's personality also sometimes. But they usually talk about the work and make art references and stuff because he coaches the interviewers.

BJ: Right. Has anybody ever written anything about your work that you think is on the ball?

JMB: Probably Robert Farris Thompson I thought wrote the best thing-the guy that wrote *Flash of the Spirit*, which is probably the best book I ever read on African art. It's one of the best.

BJ: And he wrote a piece about you for what?

JMB: For my show at Mary Boone's gallery.

BJ: So when people ask you, do you ever comply with the request to describe your work?

JMB: I never know how really to describe it except maybe-I don't know, I don't know how to describe my work, 'cause it's not always the same thing.

BJ: Do you feel that that's important to you, though, not to be able to describe it? That if you did, it would reify or objectify the work? And you'd feel like you were stuck with a definition you didn't want?

JMB: It's like asking somebody, asking Miles [Davis], "How does your horn sound?" I don't think he could really tell you why he played-you know, why he plays this at this

point in the music. You know you're just, you're sort of on automatic ... most of the time.

BJ: Do you have a specific method of working? Are there certain hours when you always work?

JMB: I'm usually in front of the television. I have to have some source material around me to work off.

BJ: Like what?

JMB: I don't know ... magazines, textbooks ...

BJ: You don't mind having a lot of people around too while you're painting, do you?

JMB: I've discovered that I think I rather work alone, more than anything. I used to have assistants, a lot, around me. And then on days when they wouldn't come, I would be a lot more productive.

BJ: And do you work best late at night or do you have a certain time that's ... ?

JMB: Anytime is good, there's not one time better than the other.

BJ: You work all the time, too, don't you? You don't really take a break?

JMB: Depends on what time I got up has a lot to do with that, I guess.

BJ: What's the longest period of time you've ever gone without touching a pencil or a paintbrush? Have you ever taken a vacation and not worked?

JMB: I usually take paper with me when I go away, try to do as much of that as I can.

BJ: When you're watching a movie or reading a book, are there new ideas for paintings constantly popping into your head? Is everything source material?

JMB: Yeah, yes.

BJ: What music do you like?

JMB: Bebop's I guess my favourite music. But I don't listen to it all the time; I listen to everything. But I have to say bebop's my favourite.

BJ: And you listen to a lot of blues, right?

JMB: Yeah-a lot of junk too.

BJ: And what books do you like?

JMB: You know, either ones that have facts in them or Mark Twain. I like Mark Twain books a lot.

BJ: You were reading William Burroughs when you were out here the last time.

JMB: I was going to say Burroughs, but I thought I'd sound too young. 'Cause everybody [says] Burroughs all the time. But he's my favourite living author. Definitely. I think it's really close to what Mark Twain writes, as far as the point of view. It's pretty similar, I think.

BJ: Do you still see yourself as naive, the way you described yourself as a kid?

JMB: Yeah. 'Cause I'm always embarrassed of the past-always. I always feel like if I knew more I wouldn't have done that, or ...

BJ: I mean "naive" too in relation to this incredibly high-pressure, competitive art world that you're part of. Do you maintain a distance from it so that you don't tend to get cynical about it? 'Cause you aren't very cynical about it at all.

JMB: I don't see what-being cynical about it doesn't make sense. It's like being cynical about yourself, 'cause it's just you, really: it has nothing to do with them. [...] I don't think there really is an art world. There's a few good artists and then everything else is extra. [...] I really don't think the art world exists. I really don't think it exists. I mean there's people who like paintings and then there's dealers and then there's people who work at the museum, but I don't think they're collectively an "art world."

BJ: If you didn't paint, what do you think you'd be doing?

JMB: Directing movies, I guess. I mean ideally, yeah.

BJ: What kind of movies would you want to do?

JMB: Ones in which black people are portrayed as being people of the human race. And not aliens and not all negative and not all thieves and drug dealers and the whole bit. Just real stories. [...]

BJ: About three or four years ago, a wave of art came out of the East Village that was identified as being black art, graffiti art. You made a specific point of saying, "I'm not part of graffiti art. My work has nothing to do with graffiti art." Why?

JMB: The thing is that graffiti has a lot of rules in it as to what you can do and what you can't do and I think it's hard to make art under those conditions-that it has to include your name and that it has to have a certain ... I don't know.

BJ: If you look at what's happened with graffiti art, it's kind of reached a dead end right now.

JMB: It's pretty sad because to be washed up at nineteen is really ... is the worst. [...]

BJ: I want to talk more about the time when you were on the street and living in the park ...

JMB: Well, yeah sure. Again, I was a really, really naive person. And I just left home and I didn't even think how I was going to eat or anything.

BJ: And how old were you?

BJ: Was this in Brooklyn or did you go to Manhattan?

JMB: I went to Washington Square Park.

BJ: Did you just meet people there? Or were you completely alone? You didn't bother to develop friends, you were just being weird?

JMB: I was just mostly being weird.

TD: What'd you look like then?

JMB: I think I shaved my head when I left home because I thought it would be a good disguise, you know? Because they wouldn't be looking for somebody with a shaved head. And I was very hypertensive, just sort of walked around all the time.

BJ: So where did you live? How did you sleep?

JMB: When I first left I went down to this boys home that was mostly criminals and stuff. And then I went out with these guys and they mugged somebody and I was with them and then that didn't seem to be the right thing. And then I left the boys home and I was living in the park, sort of just I really don't know how I got through that. Just walking around for days and days without sleeping. Eating cheese doodles, or whatever.[...]

BJ: Did you think this was how you were going to live for the rest of your life? Or did you know you'd stop at a certain point and either go back home or ... ?

JMB: I was determined not to go home again.

BJ: But did you think: I could be a bum, forever?

JMB: Yeah, sort of I did, yeah. [...]

BJ: When you're living like that, when you're hanging out in a park, what's your vision of the world then?

JMB: Oh, I remember: everybody's rich-that's what you think. You think everybody's rich, no matter who they are. You see people in the restaurant and you're like, "Oh those fucking rich people."

BJ: And you hate 'em of course.

JMB: You say, "Oh, for three dollars I could make myself a dinner." You see people spending twenty-five dollars. Everybody just seems rich and you're really bitter and you hate everybody.

BJ: That explains why you give so much money to bums on the street, right?

JMB: I guess so, yeah.

BJ: So you went back home after that? And then you started doing SAMO?

JMB: Yeah, I went home when I was about seventeen and started going to school for a little while. I never graduated. I fucked up there again, and I went on a camping trip and I just never went home after that.

BJ: You went on a camping trip and just lammed off? □
[laughing]

JMB: Yeah.

BJ: So how did the idea for SAMO come up? You and your friends sitting around and deciding this is something we should do"?

JMB: No, it was sort of my idea, and I said let's do this, let's write these sentences.

BJ: Did you come up with the sentences and the statements?

JMB: Yeah, the sentences and the formula basically and then people had variations that were in our group.

TD: Is that stuff still around New York at all?

JMB: Most of it's gone, you know. Just my favourite ones are mostly gone. There's hardly any left, to tell you the truth.

TD: I have a friend that has one still on his door.

JMB: Oh yeah? There were some guys that went around and pulled them all off walls and stuff. And they sold them when I first started to sell some paintings.

BJ: How could you pull 'em off walls? You painted them right on brick ... ?

JMB: No, a lot of them were on signs. They had blow-torches and clippers and they went and removed a lot of them.

TD: Did that happen up here at the Roxy?

JMB: Oh yeah, somebody cut a piece of a wall out.

TD: I heard about that. And then you also painted in a sink and then they fired all the dishwashers 'cause they washed it all out of the sink.

JMB: They did? They fired dishwashers? Wow, that's too bad, that's terrible. That's at Sunset, right?

TD: They were like, "You washed fifty thousand dollars down the drain!"

JMB: Hardly.

TD: [laughing] Save the sink.[...]

BJ: I remember Steve Torton once said something about you that struck me as so bizarre but true: [...] "You know, Jean-Michel is so cerebral, he lives so much in his brain that you could put him anywhere and it wouldn't matter." It's not like you're unaware of your environment, but it just doesn't matter.

JMB: I think I have to learn more not to work around what's around me and just work with what I think, I guess. I shouldn't let what's around me affect my work at all, I think. I should just work on what I normally work on. [...]

BJ: Why is that? I think it's fascinating to see the impact a place has on an artist's work.

JMB: Hmmmm ... I don't.

BJ: So do you go out in New York as much as you used to?- You used to be out at the clubs ...

JMB: Hardly ever now, no. Not too much, no. I mean sometimes, yeah. But really not as much, not as much as the old days. It's not the way it was then, anymore.

BJ: What was it like then?

JMB: The people were pretty interesting.

BJ: In what way? They were all struggling to do the same thing? I mean they're all the same people, so why are they less interesting now?

JMB: No, they're not the same, not really. No, they're not the same people. I'm just saying it's different. You know Eric Mitchell and John Lurie ... it's not like that anymore. Danny, Vicki ...

BJ: How come you never made a Super 8 film when the New Cinema was happening and all those people were doing ... ?

JMB: Couldn't afford it.

BJ: Did you want to?

JMB: No, I was more thinking about painting at that time. And I wanted to be in one, I remember.

BJ: So, should we talk more seriously about painting?

JMB: No. No, I hate to talk about painting.

BJ: Which collector has the largest number of your paintings?

JMB: Probably my dealers. Probably one of my dealers, probably Bruno [Bischofberger], or ... I know so little about my career, to tell you the truth. I don't know who has what or anything like that really, or even what they paid for it most of the time.

BJ: But you were famous for setting up the deals that you have with your galleries, which is unusual, isn't it? I was under the impression that when you went with Mary Boone, you set the terms: you said you wouldn't be exclusive. And she had to buy the work directly from you.

JMB: Yeah, I make them buy the work right out, most of the time. [...]

BJ: You're perceived by people in the art world as being fully in control of what gets out there and how it gets out there. When you have a show, do you bring her [Mary Boone] work and she says, "I like this, let's show that." Or do you just show her the stuff and say, "This is it ... "?

JMB: Usually, yeah, it's "I like this, I like that," yeah.

BJ: And do you listen?

JMB: Usually she likes the stuff that looks like my old work, mostly.

The most identifiable things are what they [the dealers] like. I did some portraits last year and they really hated those. [laughs] But the artists like them.

TD: The artists that you did the portraits of?

JMB: No, no the artists that saw the paintings. I didn't do 'em of artists. I did them of kids mostly.

BJ: So what about Andy Warhol? You did a whole series of paintings with him.

JMB: Yeah, we worked for a year on about, on a million paintings.

BJ: How did you do the collaboration?

JMB: He would start most of the paintings. He would put something very concrete or recognizable, like a newspaper headline or a product logo, and then I would sort of deface it, and then I would try to get him to work some more on it, and then I would work more on it. I would try to get him to do at least two things, you know? [laughing] He likes to do just one hit and then have me do all the work after that.

BJ: Did you have rules, like you couldn't actually paint over his stuff or ... ?

JMB: No, not at all, we used to paint over each other's stuff all the time.

TD: Was that the first time you did a collaboration?

JMB: Yeah it was, yeah.

BJ: Well, you did the thing with Warhol and [Francesco] Clemente before that, didn't you?

JMB: That's right, yeah, right. But that was a little different because the paintings moved around. In this, with me and Andy, we worked in the same place on the same paintings, instead of moving the paintings from studio to studio as we did with Clemente.

BJ: Is Warhol the only artist you'd consider collaborating with?

JMB: I've been asked by other artists since then, so I really don't know what to do now. I don't know if I'll make it a practice. I don't know, I'll do whatever I want to do [...]

TD: What was it like working with Andy Warhol?

JMB: Well, listening to what he had to say was probably the most fun. Seeing how he dealt with things was probably the best part. 'Cause he's really funny. Tells a lot of funny jokes.

BJ: Does he talk about other artists or art a lot?

JMB: All the time, yeah.

BJ: What paintings do you have in your own collection?

JMB: I have a couple Warhols and I have a Picasso.

BJ: Really, what?

JMB: A 1922 oil painting. I took all my money and I bought that so I wouldn't spend it all.

BJ: What else?

JMB: I have a Joseph Kosuth.

BJ: One of the old ones?

JMB: Yeah, a sixties one. And I got one Robert [inaudible] painting and those [James] Van Der Zee photographs, and I have a small Keith Haring.

TD: Did you ever trade art? Did you trade something with Keith in order to get that?

JMB: Yeah, yeah. I traded with Andy. We used to trade all the time so I have a few of his paintings.

TD: You used to leave paintings lying in places where you were staying. Are you more conscious of not doing that?

JMB: Definitely, 'cause they've wound up at auction.

BJ: Yeah, I know people who've sold those things.

JMB: Like everybody I know has sold those things.

BJ: [...] If you were suddenly told that you only had twenty- four hours left to live, what would you do in those twenty- four hours?

JMB: I don't know-go hang out with my mother and my girlfriend, I guess.