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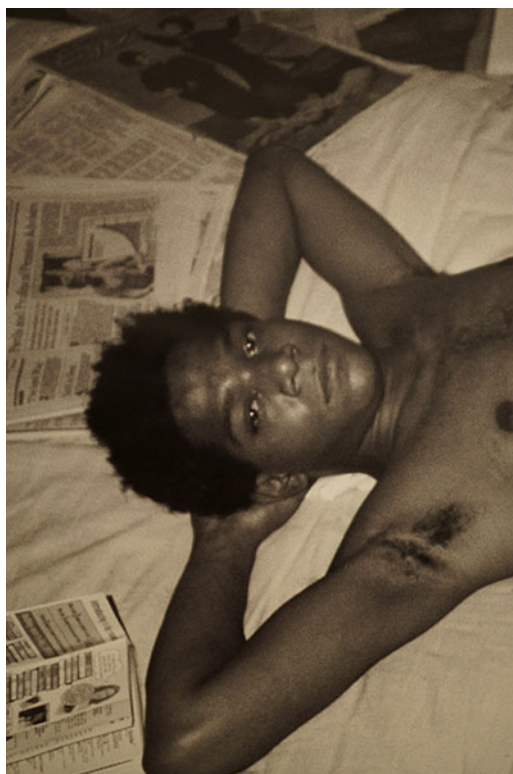
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Wed, January 22, 2014

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What's it Like To Date Jean-Michel Basquiat? We Asked Paige Powell

by [SHANNAN ELINOR SMITH](#)

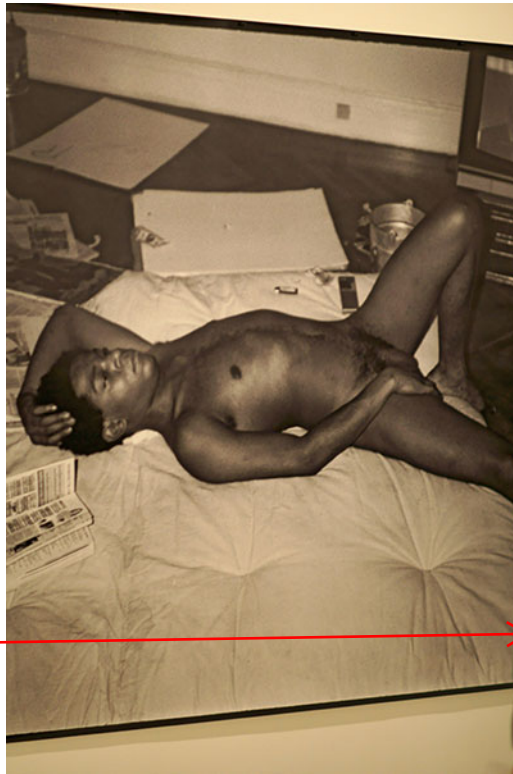
Ever since I first laid eyes on the vivid and tumultuous faces painted by Basquiat, I've been completely fascinated with the artist and the scene that surrounded him in the 80s. I always imagined him to be like he was portrayed in the 1996 Julian Schnabel movie, an eccentric painter. But the newest exhibition at the [SUZANNE GEISS COMPANY](#), *Jean-Michel Basquiat Reclining Nude*, offers a rare glimpse of Basquiat as something different—a friend and lover. The series of black and white 35mm nude portraits shot on a Canon camera come from photographer Paige Powell, who dated the artist for two years. Taken in 1983 in Powell's Upper West Side apartment, the candid photographs are the first installment from Powell's comprehensive archive, approximately 40 boxes of negatives and memorabilia.

The images on display depict Basquiat sprawled naked on a mattress watching TV with newspapers, paint buckets, cigarettes, and dollar bills littered around him. This barren apartment is also where Powell exhibited some of the artist's first works. (Last year a receipt for one large Basquiat painting was found in her archive; it was purchased for \$5,000.) Several of these paintings are visible in the background of the photographs at the exhibition. Today, you can't buy a Basquiat for \$5,000 dollars (try [\\$48.8 MILLION](#)). Which goes to show that twenty-five years after his death, Basquiat is as culturally relevant as ever. Last Friday night's opening drew a large crowd, not to mention a lot of Basquiat-inspired looks (think painted denim and spiky-dreaded hair).

Powell is a long-time fixture on the New York art scene. When she moved from Portland in 1980, she fixed her sights on working for *Interview* and landed the job almost immediately, eventually becoming a close friend of Andy Warhol. Though her days of partying at the Factory have come and gone, at the opening she was elegant and down-to-earth, clad in a sheer black top and chunky wedges. Paige answered a few questions for us below.

Please see page 2 for a reference to my work as the archivist for photographer, Paige Powell. This more traditional engagement with photography and photo archiving is an influence on the way that I think about art history and the document, image making, and images as objects.

Shannan Elinor Smith: I read a funny story about your first



date with Basquat. Can you tell me about it?

Paige Powell: [The story] you are referring to is in *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, although that wasn't our first official date. The first official date started when we heard the chimes of the Mister Softee truck from Jean-Michel's loft and decided to go down for ice cream and walk around Soho. The [story] that Warhol refers to was more of a "roots" adventure in Brooklyn that started at 4 AM. Jean-Michel wanted to give me a tour of his neighborhood. We started off at his Crosby Street loft and drove to Brooklyn in a large U-Haul truck that he loaded with paintings, which he took to my place where I was planning on showing them. We hung out on the stoops of St. Ann's where he attended school, then to the old house supply store that his Dad had owned, on to White Castle for hamburgers, and finally to his family's townhouse because he wanted to introduce me to his family. It was so late he didn't want to wake up his family so we kept waiting for the lights to go on. We got so tired from waiting, that we ended up going back to Manhattan over the Brooklyn Bridge just as the sun was rising.

Have you found anything in your archives you didn't expect or remember?

Yes, the reclining nude images while working with the archivist, Blair Saxon-Hill thanks to my mentor, friend, and sponsor Thomas Lauderdale. Also, I came across some performance art mini-videos I filmed of myself doing Haitian-style dances. Ouch. We still have a couple years to go archiving my materials.

When you were hanging out with Andy Warhol and going to the Factory did you have any inkling that you were participating in something legendary?

Not at all. I thought that it was just life as usual in NYC.

Every article I've read about you mentions your incredible fashion sense. Why do you find it important to express yourself through your clothing?

As a visual person, I love style and fashion. It's somewhat like disposable art, although many designed pieces are collectable works of art too. I find that people with the least amount of financial resources are usually the best dressed. Look at the *Grey Gardens* ladies! Wow, so chic. I love the way they wrap a beautiful piece of fabric around their bodies or hair. The Haitian men and women in Port-au-Prince, Haiti are always impeccably dressed. It was stunning to see the people in the ravaged [city] after the horrible earthquake looking so beautiful despite having lost everything. Also, the women working in the agricultural fields in India are totally exquisite dressers. So effortless and interesting in the way they drape saris. I find it incredible how they combine these patterns with their jewelry.

New York is completely different from when you lived here in the 80s. What advice do you have for young creatives trying to make it today?

Focus on truth and content, get out of your comfort zone, and always have compassion [for] and listen to others. I also think it's important, especially in a city like New York, to schedule in a little time to devote to volunteer work at an animal shelter, school, human rights organization, retirement home, or environmental group on the side. You will be surprised by the enlightenment.

Photographs by [JER ROBERT PAULIN](#)

Through February 22, 2014

THE SUZANNE GEISS COMPANY
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New York, NY 10013

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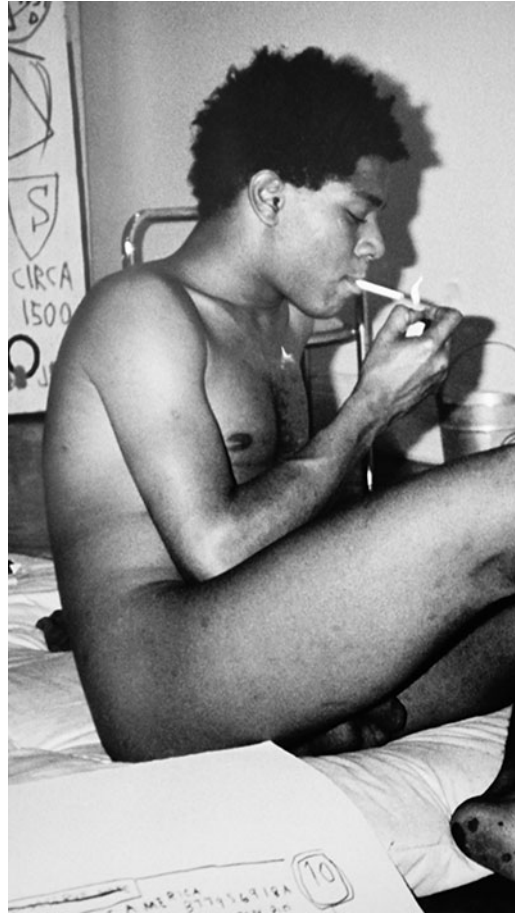
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Photographer Paige Powell

