



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)*, 1983.  
Photograph: Allison Chipak/Collection of Nina Clemente, New York



# Basquiat's "Defacement": The Untold Story

Past Exhibition

June 21–November 6, 2019

This exhibition took as its starting point the painting *The Death of Michael Stewart*, informally known as *Defacement*, created by Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) in 1983. The work commemorates the fate of the young, Black artist Michael Stewart at the hands of New York City Transit Police after allegedly tagging a wall in an East Village subway station. Originally painted on the wall of Keith Haring's studio within a week of Stewart's death, Basquiat's painting was a deeply personal lamentation that has rarely been exhibited in a public context. With *The Death of Michael Stewart* as its centerpiece, this exhibition examined Basquiat's exploration of Black identity, his protest against police brutality, and his attempts to craft a singular aesthetic language of empowerment. Several of the works by Basquiat presented in this exhibition illustrated his sustained engagement with the subject of state authority in the paintings depicting police figures. Other works explored his canonization of historical Black figures, especially the jazz legend Charlie Parker, who was perhaps Basquiat's favorite hero to depict on canvas. An early self-portrait, created the same year as *The Death of Michael Stewart*, suggests Basquiat's keen self-awareness as a Black artist navigating a predominantly white and often hostile art world.



**BASQUIAT'S  
DEFACEMENT**  
THE UNTOLD STORY





Michael Stewart was an aspiring artist and model when he was arrested on Sept. 15, 1983



1 A.M. THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 15. BYRON AND STUART STEWART IS  
ARRESTED AT THE TRANSIT STATION OF THE 14TH STREET 1-4 STATION  
IN STREET STATION FOR ALLEGEDLY DRIVING DRUNK.

STEWART LATER WAS RELEASED INTO CUSTODY BY 3 TRANSIT POLICE  
OFFICERS, HARRISON AND A POLICE. D.D.A.  
RECORDED BY ALPHACOMMUNICATIONS SYSTEMS IN A SMALL  
CORRIDOR BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.



**PROTEST**  
**THE NEAR-**  
**MURDER OF MICHAEL**  
**STEWART BY THE**  
**TRANSIT POLICE** / **UNION**  
**SQUARE**  
**5:30 P.M.**  
**MONDAY SEPT. 26**

Protest poster that may have inspired *Defacement*



**BENEFIT  
PERFORMANCE**

**for**



**MICHAEL STEWART**

MONDAY, OCTOBER 3  
BENEFIT PERFORMANCE FOR  
MICHAEL STEWART



**MADONNA  
3 TEENS KILL 4  
CHA CHA**

AND MANY OTHER GUEST PERFORMERS  
\$5 ADMISSION ALL NITE!  
THEN, DEEP IN THE DUNGEONS

JEAN CAFFEIN & FETISCH PRESENT  
**LOVETRAIN!**

*Danceteria*

30 W 21st NYC 10010 212.620.0790

Card for a benefit performance for Michael Stewart, from 1983





Jean-Michel Basquiat,  
*Irony of a Negro Policeman*, 1981





Basquiat, *La Hara*, 1981





Keith Haring, *Michael Stewart* – *USA for Africa*, 1985





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## Black Ghosts: Basquiat's "Defacement" at the Guggenheim

By *Tiana Reid*  July 17, 2019 1:35pm



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<https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/basquiat-defacement-guggenheim-protests-racist-violence-60187/>





# Jean-Michel Basquiat, Michael Stewart, and 'Defacement'

POSTED FEBRUARY 16, 2021 BY **SAM MOSKOWITZ**

In our new [African American History curriculum](#) for middle school students, we explore how Jean-Michel Basquiat's art also served as a platform for advocacy, addressing some of the most pressing issues of race and discrimination of his (and our) day. Basquiat was already a successful studio artist when, on September 15th, 1983, events transpired in the East Village that inspired him to create one of his most debated, dissected, and discussed works, *Defacement*. This piece has inspired generations of activists, including the current Black Lives Matter movement.

<https://www.villagepreservation.org/2021/02/16/jean-michel-basquait-michael-stewart-and-defacement/>



Jean-Michel  
Basquiat

This article is more than 5 years old

# Defacement: the tragic story of Basquiat's most personal painting

The death of artist Michael Stewart, allegedly the result of police brutality, inspired Basquiat to create one of his most impactful works

Dream  
McClinton in New  
York

Fri 28 Jun 2019 09.00  
CEST

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<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jun/28/defacement-the-tragic-story-of-basquiats-most-personal-painting>



# Basquiat's Story We Need to Hear

BY  
SAM BEN-MEIR

The Jean-Michel Basquiat exhibit currently on display at the Guggenheim does exactly what art should do: tell us a story we don't want to hear but need to, about the racist brutality so prevalent in



Jean-Michel Basquiat, Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart), 1983. Acrylic and marker on wood, framed 69.5 x 77.5 cm. Collection of Nina Clements

<https://jacobin.com/2019/08/jean-michel-basquiat-defacement-death-michael-stewart-guggenheim>



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Défiguration

Publié le vendredi 18 novembre 2016

▶ ÉCOUTER (54 min)

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Jean-Michel Basquiat, en 1983 ©Getty - Lee Jaffe

<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/affaires-sensibles/defiguration-1623227>



<https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/basquiat-defacement-guggenheim-protests-racism-violence-60187/>

<https://www.villagepreservation.org/2021/02/16/jean-michel-basquait-michael-stewart-and-defacement/>

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/02/18/how-a-protest-poster-by-david-wojnarowicz-may-have-inspired-basquiats-defacement>

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jun/28/defacement-the-tragic-story-of-basquiats-most-personal-painting>

<https://jacobin.com/2019/08/jean-michel-basquiat-defacement-death-michael-stewart-guggenheim>

<https://www.culturetype.com/2018/12/12/guggenheim-mounting-exhibition-focused-on-jean-michel-basquiat-defacement-painting-about-police-brutality/>

<https://www.johnmcdonald.net.au/2019/basquiats-defacement-the-untold-story/>

<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/affaires-sensibles/defiguration-1623227>

<https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/basquiats-defacement-the-untold-story>

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/07/08/basquiats-memorial-to-a-young-artist-killed-by-police>