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Beyond the Body: Finding Liberation in Basquiat's Lines

Madighan Crowley

It did not occur to me at the time, but looking back on my experience, I imagine that every twelve year old is uncomfortable in his or her body. On the other hand, not every twelve year old can so intensely locate this discomfort to such a specific, tangible place on their body--though, again, perhaps it does feel that way to many kids. Still, my anxiety told me I was different, and that only magnified my embarrassment. It was not until later that I discovered my discomfort had a name: pectus carinatum.

"It's not a medically concerning condition, but..." the doctor began--and my shame had long since familiarized me with where this sentence was going-- "...many patients feel uncomfortable about it and want it addressed." The doctor's choice of "uncomfortable" struck me as a gentle euphemism for the depth of awfulness I felt.

"You have three options: undergo surgery, wear a twenty-four-hour brace, or choose to deal with it." Those choices replayed in my mind as my mother and I left the surgeon's office. "Mom, I need this thing gone," I exhaled.

"And would you prefer the painful brace or the metal bar screwed into your chest?" she asked. My heart raced under the protrusion on my chest, knowing she was right. felt as if a repulsive parasite had invaded my body, fed by my anxiety. So began

my long struggle to come to terms with my pectus carinatum. "Deal with it" was an easy option for a doctor to list, but a seemingly impossible task to accomplish. For years my motto was: hide, ignore, forget, repeat. Until I encountered Jean-Michel Basquiat.

I saw Basquiat's *Horn Players* for the first time in Art History class: three panels connected by scrawled white words: "DIZZY," "ORNITHOLOGY," and "ALCHEMY." The painting's figures are jarring, uncanny, and disproportionate: one a head atop a spine of music, one with a phantom shadow of an arm, and one a disembodied head disrupted by incongruous lines appearing from nowhere. I was captivated. Basquiat dissolved the coherence of bodies, leaving strange and vibrant figures in their place--fragments, shapes, chaotic lines, pulsating colors. Feeling my long-held anxiety dissipate, I sensed Basquiat freeing his bodies from their restrictions, unleashing the power of their raw physicality. I felt myself exhale. Entranced by Basquiat's style of physicality, I realized my repulsion at my pectus carinatum had deep roots in my understanding of bodies as having a simple composition, defined with averageness as virtue. This understanding melted away in the face of the strange gift of Basquiat's bodies and the possibilities for embodied

life they showed me.

This engagement with Basquiat left me with a transformed understanding of the meaning of academic work. I was often intrigued by my school work, but studying *Horn Players* revealed that a curriculum could speak directly to my sense of self, my uncertainties, and my great bodily insecurity. We learned that Basquiat grappled with his physicality after a car accident, and that, after the removal of his spleen, he worked through his art to visualize the human body differently — bringing out its vitality by deconstructing its form. I came to see Basquiat's art as an expression of his struggle to comprehend his body and life with it. The stakes of struggle are real to Basquiat in his art, which made the stakes of Art History concrete for me. My time with Basquiat revealed a significance to academic study beyond the abstract accumulation of knowledge, one that led me to appreciate Art History as a series of stories about human beings who grappled with their bodies, selfhood, and encounters with the world. I felt the presence of art as an expression of human uncertainty and insecurity, an expression that I felt in myself as well. Looking to my undergraduate studies, I yearn to deepen this understanding of intellectual work, pursuing it in Art History and finding it anew in other disciplines.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Horn Players*, 1983, acrylic and oil stick on three canvas panels mounted on wood supports, 243.8 x 190.5 cm (The Broad Art Foundation) © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat