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Cash Crop, 1984

Acrylic and oilstick on canvas

72 by 96 inches (182.9 x 243.8 cm)



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Signed, titled and dated 'Jean-Michel Basquiat "Cash Crop" 1984' on verso

Provenance: Gagosian Gallery, New York
Private collection, New York
Sotheby's, New York, *Contemporary Art Part II*, November 18, 1998,
lot. 162
Private collection
Phillips de Pury & Company, London, *Contemporary Art Evening Sale*,
February 12, 2010, lot. 18
Private collection
Private collection

Exhibition: Vienna, KunstHausWien, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, February 11 - May 2,
1999, p.87, illustrated

Künzelsau, Germany, Museum Würth, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, October 6,
2001 - January 2, 2002, p.88, illustrated

Literature: Richard D. Marshall, Jean-Louis Pratt, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Paris, Galerie
Enrico Navarra, 2000, vol. II, 3rd ed., p. 214, no. 2, illustrated in
color.

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information provided above, confirmation of these facts may not always be possible due to the unavailability of primary sources. Please be advised that the work of art described above is subject to changes in availability and price without prior notice.

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Featuring the graphic lyricism and expressive rawness that have become synonymous with his oeuvre, *Jean-Michel Basquiat's Cash Crop, 1984* presents the viewer with an abstracted landscape, juxtaposed with historically charged imagery.

A deep passage of earthy brown pigment sweeps diagonally across the bottom half of the canvas, while washes of soft blues, delicate pinks, and scumbled whites complete the painting's structural base. However, this abstract reverie is interrupted

by two clearly rendered forms on either side of the partitioned canvas. On the left, a safe-like black box inscribed with the word "SUGAR" appears in stark contrast against a pale blue background. Basquiat's allusion to the fraught and loaded history of sugar production (particularly prevalent and exploitive in his father's home country, Haiti) is inextricably linked with colonialism, plantations, and the slave trade, while the sugar cane plant on the right side, with the words "CANE FIELD" crossed out above it, may refer to the horrors of colonial agriculture. Curator Richard Marshall observed: "These frequent references... reveal Basquiat's interest in aspects of commerce – trading, selling, and buying. Basquiat is scrutinizing man's seizure and monopolization of the earth's animal and material resources and questioning why and how these resources, that are ideally owned by all of the world's inhabitants, have become objects of manipulation, power, and wealth at the expense of the well-being of all mankind" (Richard Marshall, 'Jean-Michel Basquiat and his Subjects' cited in: Enrico Navarra, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Paris 2000, p.43).

With its title "Cash Crop", and the equally evocative words "SUGAR" and "CANE FIELD" scrawled on the surface, references to the inequities visited upon the global south by Western countries' greedy attempts to extract resources from their disenfranchised neighbors are unavoidable. Regarding the paintings of 1982-85, Richard Marshall remarked that the works: "reveal a confluence of his many interests and energies, and their actual contents – the words – describe the subjects of importance" to the artist. "He continually selected and injected into his works words which held charged references and meanings – particularly to his deep-rooted concerns about race, human rights, the creation of power and wealth..." (Jean-Michel Basquiat, Whitney Museum, 1992, p. 21).

Basquiat was known for painting over earlier iterations of his final works, thus concealing his initial musings from the viewer. He once remarked about his oeuvre, “[m]ost of the pictures have one or two paintings under them (interview with Henry Geldzahler in: *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Museum Wurth, Künzelsau, Germany, 2001).” In the present work, an Ultraviolet light examination revealed further words, phrases, and figures which highlight the horrors of the slave trade: The term “SLAVE SHIP” is scrawled under the black box on the left side of the painting, providing further resonance to the safe or cell-like impenetrability of the ominous black shape, while inscribed under the center of the canvas is the word “TRADEMARK,” frequently deployed by Basquiat, and here possibly alluding to the notion of binding ownership behind colonial exploitation. The truncated sentence “THOSE FOLK ARE CLOSE TO THE...SOIL” can be seen beneath the lower quadrant of the picture. This phrase could be read as a reference to the victims of the colonizers and their grueling work on the plantations, as well as their innate connection with the land, in contrast to their oppressors. Perhaps supporting this interpretation, three arrows float under the surface, a common visual motif for the artist and a famous sign used by anti-fascist groups for decades. To the left of the black box is a ghostly face and figure who, like the victims of colonialism, disappears behind the products of their stolen labor and land. *Cash Crop* is, without a doubt, a conceptual and formal work that provides new meaning even beyond the picture plane.

By the end of 1982, Basquiat had become an international success, feverishly preparing for upcoming exhibitions in New York, Los Angeles, and Europe. Some of the best work of his career was produced during this period, in a spacious loft on Crosby Street in SoHo. He explained, “I had some money; I made the best paintings ever. ... I was completely reclusive, worked a lot...” (J.-M. Basquiat, quoted in R. Marshall, ed., *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, exh. Cat., Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1992, p. 241).

Similar paintings to *Cash Crop* can be found in museums around the world, including *Hollywood Africans*, 1983, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and *Untitled*, 1984, Des Moines Art Center.



Hollywood Africans, 1983, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



Untitled, 1984, Des Moines Art Center