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‘Imagine how easy Keith Haring is to fake’

The dealer and author Richard Polsky explains why he is brave enough to authenticate works by Haring and Basquiat

by [JORI FINKEL](#) | 3 June 2016



Richard Polsky. Photo: Bill Kane

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Last October Richard Polsky, the San Francisco art dealer who wrote *I Bought Andy Warhol* (2003), started an authentication service for the artist's works, driven by the dissolution of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts' authentication committee four years earlier. Now, Polsky has announced that he is taking on authentication of works by Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

The Art Newspaper: There are some collecting fields, such as sports memorabilia, where fakes are said to outnumber the real thing. Can you give us a rough idea of what percentage of Warhols on the market are suspicious?

Richard Polsky: In terms of what I'm seeing for authentication, it's probably 60/40 in favour of fakes. In terms of what you see at galleries, it's probably more like 10% fakes. Warhol has never been bigger, and if you are a serious blue-chip collector, you need a Warhol. As the prices go up, more fakes appear.

What about Haring and Basquiat?

There's a much higher percentage with Haring. I would say Haring is [number] one, Basquiat, two and Warhol three in terms of volume of fakes. Haring was extremely prolific—the subway drawings, for example—he said he did thousands over the course of three years. The other thing is that Haring could do a sketch of a barking dog or radiant baby in just a couple minutes—imagine how easy that is to fake.

Are there any particularly memorable fakes that you've seen so far?

A man from North Carolina called me and said he bought a wooden carving of a cat at a flea market, signed on the bottom "Andy Warhol." I started laughing because Andy really didn't do things like that. In that case, I didn't even get involved.

How important are signatures with these artists?

I would say they are not crucial with any of them. With Warhol his assistants signed pieces, his mother signed pieces, Ivan Karp [a Pop art dealer] signed pieces. What is crucial is what the work looks like, what material was used and obviously the back story, which includes information about the artist's intent. Is this a work that Warhol wanted to be public, or something a friend fished out of the trash?

What giveaways betray works as fake Harings or Basquiats?

With an authentic Haring what you're looking for is an unbroken line. He was a savant of some sort: he could start a drawing on the left side of the canvas and keep going. If you see a "Haring" drawing where it looks like a line has been erased or reworked, it's probably not a Haring. For Basquiat you can usually tell a forgery because it won't have his spontaneity—the composition will look too perfect.

Given the current climate of fear over authentication, aren't you afraid of being sued?

That was the first question from my colleagues: half of them thought I was a genius, the other half thought I was an idiot. The answer is no. If you go back to the Warhol authentication board, a collector had to give them permission to rubber stamp in ink the word “Denied” on the back of the artwork. If you got the stamp, you were screwed, and if you asked them why, they wouldn’t tell you.

I believe in being transparent. If I turn down your painting you get a two-page letter from me outlining why. You might be bummed out, but being treated fairly tends to reduce anger. Of course I also have a lawyer and a disclaimer. And there’s just not as much financial incentive to sue me. There’s a difference between suing an estate worth hundreds of millions and suing an individual.

I can’t imagine that your authentication carries as much weight as the estates did though?

Not yet, that’s correct. I tell potential clients since we’re relatively new, I think an authentication letter from me will be helpful in private transactions. Nobody has tested the auction waters yet, but I think this is coming.