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ARTNEWS

'It Was Just a Gift from a Friend': An Old Basquiat Associate Sets Out to Authenticate a Drawing

BY [Robin Scher](#) POSTED 10/17/17 4:36 PM

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Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled (Geese +)*, 1984, oil stick and charcoal on paper.
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY KIM REEDER AND POBA

It has been a big year for the growing legacy of Jean-Michel Basquiat, with a touring retrospective attracting crowds in London and one of his paintings setting the record back in May for the priciest work by an American artist ever sold at auction.

Given the red-hot state of the Basquiat market, those holding his works are taking the necessary steps to secure their pieces, updating insurance policies and the like. One thing they cannot do, though, is obtain an official judgment from the Basquiat Authentication Committee, since that body ceased operations in September 2012.

The committee—whose members included the artist’s father, Gerard Basquiat, and collector Larry Warsh—operated for 18 years, and shut down at a time when many authentication groups, like that of the Andy Warhol Foundation, were facing legal action from collectors contesting their judgments.

Some who did not submit their work to the Basquiat committee and other such dissolved authentication boards are now searching for ways to certify their holdings; among them is Kim Reeder, a Basquiat friend and former flight attendant who says that she received a work by the artist in 1984 and has never displayed it beyond her living room.

“I was dating his roommate, so we were in the same house all the time,” Reeder said in a phone interview, recalling the heady days she spent in the company of Basquiat and her then boyfriend, Selwyn O’Brien, at a home owned by Andy Warhol on Great Jones Street.

“We were always together, like the Three Musketeers,” Reeder said, remembering the long hours they would spend “drinking Cristal at Mr. Chow’s” and hanging in the studio late into the night as Basquiat finished works that would be ready for pick-up by his gallery the next morning.

(Reeder, to be clear, is not the flight attendant who appears in Phoebe Hoban’s Basquiat biography, telling the artist, who had poured a “quarter-ounce of coke . . . on a cocktail plate, ‘You can’t do that on a plane. The authorities are going to be waiting for you.’” As Larry Gagosian tells the story, Basquiat replied, “Oh, I thought this was first class.”)



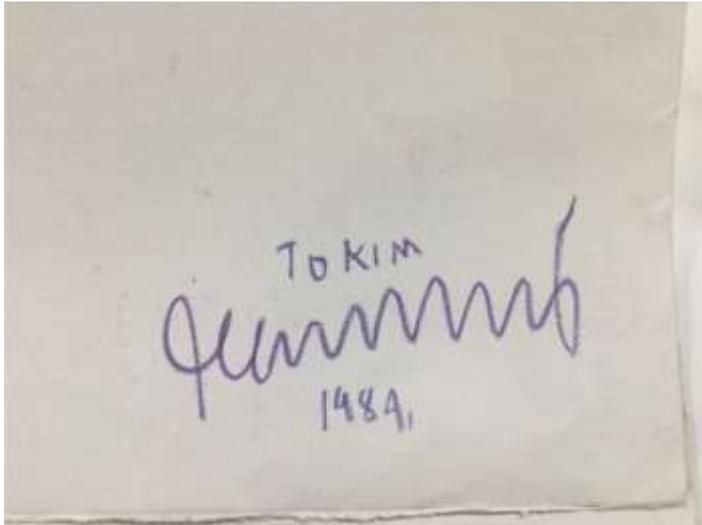
Kim Reeder in her apartment in 1994 with the work.

“If there was ever anything I liked, Jean told me I could have it,” Reeder said. She eventually settled on a drawing she felt was suited to her home—“just the right size.” The drawing contains a bird (identified in Basquiat’s distinctive handwriting as GEESE) perched above some hieroglyphic-like symbols—a motif the artist later xeroxed and incorporated into another series of works focusing on iconography from ancient Egypt.

“It wasn’t controversial like some of his other pieces,” said Reeder. “It was just Jean, something that he did and I loved it. It really resonated with me.”

Reeder, who is now a freelance makeup artist, recently found herself preparing Jennifer Cohen, the co-managing director of the arts nonprofit POBA, for a *PBS* interview, and during their conversation, mentioned her Basquiat that she had never had authenticated. Cohen thought that POBA, which works with collectors, artists, and estates to preserve the legacies of artists and to authenticate work, might be able to help.

In order to establish the provenance of Reeder’s drawing, POBA took the drawing to Alvarez Fine Art Service, a New York–based conservation company. There, the work was removed from its frame for the first time since it was prepared by Joseph Framers, a fact that was established courtesy of the company’s stamp as well as tape that was contemporaneous to that time period. The real clincher, according to POBA, was the rare inclusion of a personal inscription scrawled in purple crayon on the bottom right corner, which included the words “To Kim,” Basquiat’s signature, and the work’s date, 1984.



A signed inscription found on the back of the work.

“That was one of the ways Basquiat prevented people from using him,” said Regan McCarthy, a fellow director at POBA who assisted Reeder with the authentication process. “He personalized works for his most important friends, as an indication that he intended the work as a gift. Basquiat gave it to her because he knew she would keep it.”

POBA then approached Richard Polsky, an author and Warhol aficionado, who has developed a business authenticating works by Warhol, Basquiat, and Keith Haring. (Official boards for all three artists have shut down.)

Between the Alvarez assessment and photographs of the drawing in Reeder’s apartments throughout the years, Polsky signed off on the work’s provenance.

Reeder is not sure what she eventually plans to do with the work, which is currently being stored in New Jersey. In her view, though, Polsky’s approval has, in some sense, changed the work. “Now that it has value, I don’t even know how to wrap my head around that,” she said. “For me to think of my piece other than what it is, is hard to see. It was just a gift from my friend.”

Update, October 18: Details about the order of events in researching the drawing have been corrected in the post.