



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Irony of Negro Policeman*, 1981, £6,000,000–8,000,000

PHILLIPS de PURY & COMPANY IS PROUD TO PRESENT TO THE MARKET JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT'S SEMINAL PAINTING FROM 1981 'IRONY OF NEGRO POLICEMAN'

EVENING AUCTION 28 JUNE, 2012 7PM

VIEWING: 21 -28 JUNE Phillips de Pury & Company, Howick Place, London, SW1P 1BB

AUCTION LOCATION: Phillips de Pury & Company, Howick Place, London, SW1P 1BB

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

London – 8 JUNE 2012 – Phillips de Pury & Company are proud to present to the market Jean-Michel Basquiat's seminal painting from 1981 'Irony of Negro Policeman' at £6-8million. Fresh to the market and having been exhibited at major Museum shows including the Whitney Museum of American Art, Foundation Beyeler, Brooklyn Museum and Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, this piece importantly underlines one of the central themes that underpins much of Basquiat's work – that of race.

The work, lot 12 of the Evening sale will headline the London June Contemporary Art auctions which will feature 278 lots with a combined pre-sale low estimate of £21,236,000/\$33,097,857 and a pre-sale high estimate of £29,883,000/\$45,579,507.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Irony of Negro Policeman*, 1981, estimated at £6,000,000–8,000,000 \$9,500,000–12,660,000. In the majestic *Irony of Negro Policeman* from the pivotal year of 1981, Jean-Michel Basquiat

expounds upon the most important theme in his oeuvre, the issue which underlines his entire artistic premise: race. As an artist of mixed racial origin, the plight of black people in America fascinated Basquiat throughout his tragically short but highly prolific career. Whether in dealing with sports stars, musicians or himself, Basquiat constantly placed the black figure at the centre his artistic dialogue. His figures are heralded, commemorated and honoured as kings, heroes and martyrs valiantly battling against the odds to overcome the cynical oppression of the white man and his oppressive establishment. In this work Basquiat brilliantly depicts man at his primal core with all of his complexities, paradoxes and inner most demons laid bare for the world to see.

Against a stark white background, a black man emerges dressed in a midnight blue police uniform. His face is like a mask upon which his cap acts like a cage imprisoning his identity. This is Basquiat's depiction of a fellow African American who has sold out to the white establishment. Basquiat's traitor has joined an institutionalized form of whiteness, collaborating to enforce the exact laws created by whites to enslave blacks. By titling the work "IRONY OF NEGRO PLCEMN" next to the black face and also inscribing what may be read as 'PAWN' in the lower right corner, Basquiat is clearly suggesting that he deems it ironic that the oppressed should wear the uniform of the oppressor.

Painted in the same year and executed in the same size and format, *La Hara* is a companion work to *Irony of Negro Policeman*. However, instead of depicting a slouched and dazed black officer it depicts a brutal looking skeletal of a white cop whom Basquiat has entitled 'La Hara', Puerto Rican pejorative slang for the police. Basquiat's black policeman in *Irony of Negro Policeman* with its huge round eyes, gaping mouth and grid like cage around its face certainly looks more like a deer caught in headlights entrapped in an unfamiliar position, body and place than a fearsome law enforcer. Having committed the ultimate sin, the Judas-like betrayal of his race, one can sense the heavy, psychological burden weighing on Basquiat's anonymous black policeman. However, in light of Basquiat's infamous journey through the 1980s art world we must ask ourselves if this figure is not just an anonymous black man but rather a self-portrait.

With his oeuvre as the ultimate testament, it is no secret that Basquiat's greatest existential fight in life was his identity and his struggle for acceptance as a black man in a white art world. An examination of Basquiat's short adult life reveals that *Irony of a Negro Policeman* can be read as profoundly biographical. Basquiat's artistic career began in the mid 70s when just a teenager along with his friend Al Diaz he graffitied poetry and imagery under the pseudonym SAMO © in lower Manhattan. The art of graffiti was on the rise and Basquiat rode the wave making a name for himself in a very short period of time but soon he would turn his back on the movement by taking his raw expression from the streets to the gallery. With one foot in the art world, Basquiat developed a relationship with the curator Diego Cortez who managed to include him in the seminal New York/New Wave group show at PS1.

In 1981 Basquiat was working directly with the New York gallerist Anina Nosei. Nosei provided Basquiat with a stable studio space in the basement of her gallery and an endless supply of materials allowing Basquiat to create some of his most important masterpieces including the present lot, *Irony of a Negro Policeman*. It was 1981-82 and Basquiat was working at the height of his powers exercising his inner most demons in compositions layered with meaning and imagery derived from a seemingly endless stream of consciousness and from an unrivalled ability to comprehend, digest and synthesize the history of art and the world around him.

- END -

Contacts:
London
Giulia Costantini
Worldwide Head of Communications
gcostantini@phillipsdepur.com
+ 44 20 7318 4010

Fiona McGovern
Communications and Marketing
fmcgovern@phillipsdepur.com
+44 20 73184010