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By Brett Sokol

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1. In Orlando, 25 Mysterious Basquiats Come Under the Magnifying Glass
By Brett Sokol
https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/16/arts/design/basquiat-painting-orlando-mumford-museum.html

2. F.B.I. Investigates Basquiat Paintings Shown at Orlando Museum of Art
By Brett Sokol
https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/29/arts/design/fbi-basquiat-paintings-orlando-museum.html

3. Orlando Museum Director Loses Job After Disputed Basquiat Show
By Brett Sokol
In Orlando, 25 Mysterious Basquiats Come Under the Magnifying Glass

Vibrant paintings on cardboard said to be by the artist were found in the storage unit of a Hollywood screenwriter. Will a museum show resolve questions about their authenticity — or raise new ones?

By Brett Sokol
Published Feb. 16, 2022 Updated March 1, 2022

It seems like a story too good to be true, and for some in the art world, it is. Last weekend, 25 Jean-Michel Basquiat paintings were publicly unveiled at the Orlando Museum of Art before several thousand V.I.P.s. All of the paintings were said by the museum to have been created in late 1982 while Basquiat, 22, was living and working out of a studio space beneath Larry Gagosian’s home in Venice, Calif., preparing fresh canvases for a show at the art dealer’s Los Angeles gallery.

According to the Orlando museum director and chief executive, Aaron De Groft, the vibrant artworks — layers of mixed media painted and drawn onto slabs of scavenged cardboard ranging in size from a 10-inch square featuring one of the artist’s iconic crowns to a nearly five-foot-high disembodied head — were sold by Basquiat directly to the television screenwriter Thad Mumford. The price? A quick $5,000 in cash — about $14,000 today — paid without Gagosian’s knowledge.

The 25 artworks then disappeared for three decades, the museum said, only resurfacing in 2012 after Mumford failed to pay the bill on his Los Angeles storage unit, and its contents — the Basquiats tucked in amid baseball memorabilia and TV industry ephemera — were auctioned off. William Force, a treasure hunting “picker,” and Lee Mangin, his financial backer, who both scour small auctions for mislabeled items, saw photos of the colorful cardboards and eventually snagged the lot — for about $15,000.
Mangin provided receipts of the purchase and recounted the thrill of the hunt: “It’s sort of a deep hook that goes inside of you,” he said, likening it to being an art world Indiana Jones digging for lost artifacts. It certainly sounds like a tale straight out of Hollywood, or perhaps a script by the Emmy Award-winning Mumford. Indeed, Gagosian, in a response to this reporter about the 1982 creation of these Basquiats, said he “finds the scenario of the story highly unlikely.” Gagosian’s concerns were echoed by several curators known to write widely on Basquiat’s work, who have greeted the Orlando museum’s show with a stony public silence.

De Groft, the OMA director, bristled at such skepticism. “My reputation is at stake as well,” he said in an interview. “And I’ve absolutely no doubt these are Basquiats.” Beyond his own trained eye — he has a Ph.D. in art history from Florida State University — he cited a battery of reports commissioned by the artworks’ current owners.

These include a 2017 forensic investigation by the handwriting expert James Blanco which identified the signatures that appear on many of the paintings as being Basquiat’s; a 2017 analysis by the University of Maryland associate professor of art Jordana Moore Saggese, author of “Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art,” in which she attributed some of the paintings to Basquiat; and signed 2018-19 statements from the late curator Diego Cortez, an early supporter of the artist and founding member of his estate’s now-dissolved authentication committee, which declared each of the paintings to be genuine Basquiats. In light of the imprimatur Cortez’s name carries with historians, his certifications were accompanied by photographs showing the curator mid-signature.
But the foremost proof in De Groft’s mind was a short poem by Mumford in 1982 commemorating the artworks’ creation and the meeting that the owners say occurred between Basquiat, then an artist on the rise, and Mumford, then one of the few Black screenwriters working within network TV and riding high as a producer and writer for the top-rated “M*A*S*H.”

Lines from the poem seem to refer both to Mumford’s ’70s work voicing a “Dr. Thad” for “Sesame Street,” his upcoming script for the “M*A*S*H” series finale, the “25 paintings bringing riches,” and the two men’s shared spirit as “no longer outsiders, Industry insiders golden crowns receiving … We film, we write, we film, we paint.”

It is said to have been written and typed up by Mumford, then initialed in oilstick by Basquiat (and confirmed as genuine by Blanco). The poem was not in Mumford’s storage locker contents, according to Mangin, but was handed to him by Mumford in 2012. After buying the paintings, Mangin said he and Force tracked down the screenwriter, who told them over lunch how he had bought the Basquiats in 1982 as an investment on the recommendation of a friend.
"The poem is almost like a receipt, it refers to the works, it refers to the inscriptions in the works, it refers to the time," De Groft said. "I’ve absolutely no doubt."

Before his death in 1988 from a drug overdose, Basquiat is believed to have made approximately 2,100 artworks, from small drawings to a paint-adorned refrigerator door, according to the Brooklyn Museum. Could these slices of cardboard have been among them? While it’s certainly difficult to imagine Gagosian, living just one floor above Basquiat and keeping close tabs on his studio progress, or Basquiat’s gallery-employed studio assistant and de facto chauffeur, John Seed, not noticing the creation and sale of 25 detailed paintings on canvas, those painted on cardboard are more easily concealable.

Seed has written about driving Basquiat to an appointment with a doctor whose medical bill was paid with drawings. And as noted by Phoebe Hoban in her 1998 biography “Basquiat,” “Anybody with the right attitude and the right amount of money could purchase something from the painter, who was constantly in need of cash to support his various habits.”
Gagosian himself conceded to Hoban that his own accounting methods with Basquiat were hardly traditional: “It was the way he chose to be paid, in cash, or in barter, or with clothes, or like he’d say ‘Well, buy my girlfriend a trip to Paris’.”

More than just professional reputations now rest on the question of these paintings’ true background. The value of Basquiat’s work has soared: In 2017 one of his paintings sold for $110.5 million at Sotheby’s — the current auction high for an American artwork. If the 25 Mumford-purchased paintings are authenticated as actual Basquiats, Putnam Fine Art and Antique Appraisals puts their total worth at close to $100 million.

An official verdict on this whodunit by the Basquiat estate is now impossible — it closed its authentication committee in 2012 in the aftermath of a lawsuit over Basquiat artworks initially deemed fake. (Amid similar time-consuming and expensive litigation, the Andy Warhol estate closed its own authentication committee that same year.) Yet without such a stamp of estate approval, or an established provenance, major auction houses and heavyweight art dealers are reluctant to handle such works. Despite several years of being quietly shopped around the secondary art market, these Basquiats have to date found no takers, according to the owners. The Orlando museum showing could help dispel that market wariness, lending them a new air of institutional legitimacy.
Sotheby's declined to comment on the authenticity of these paintings. Several art world professionals were similarly gun-shy, citing the experience of the estate's authentication committee and their fear that publicly weighing in could embroil them in a lawsuit with the paintings' current owners. One dealer who personally worked with Basquiat and saw photographs of the paintings in the Orlando museum said, “the way Basquiat places elements in the composition has an interior logic which is missing in these images.”

In addition to Force and Mangin, partial ownership of the artworks now lies with one of Los Angeles’s most prominent trial lawyers, Pierce O’Donnell, famed for successful litigation against a veritable who's who of the city’s glitterati, from the actor Brad Pitt (on behalf of his ex-wife Angelina Jolie) to the former Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling.

O’Donnell told The New York Times that he purchased an interest in six of the 25 paintings after Force, who had read about his authentication efforts on behalf of a disputed Jackson Pollock painting, approached him for help with the Basquiats. It was news coverage of this same Pollock legal standoff that also led the OMA's De Groft to contact O’Donnell and then offer to exhibit the Basquiats. If Force and Mangin are seeking a payday, and De Groft hopes for a blockbuster exhibition, O’Donnell seems driven by the courtroom-like drama of it all.
“I treated these paintings as a client,” the lawyer explained. “I believe I could win this case nine and a half out of ten times with a jury. I'm not bragging. I'm just saying the evidence is compelling.” He cited the various reports done on the paintings, and, like De Groft, the Mumford-penned and Basquiat-signed poem that definitively sealed his case. “That poem is so revealing, and Basquiat’s initials are on it,” he continued. “It’s autobiographical and you can't make up this stuff, you just can't.”

Except that sometimes you can. As early as 1994, seemingly beautifully executed Basquiats later deemed to be well-made fakes — accompanied by bogus letters of provenance — were in circulation. And just this past July the F.B.I. arrested a man in New York City it said was trying to sell artworks he falsely claimed were collaborations between Basquiat and Keith Haring, also complete with forged letters of provenance.

O’Donnell had no patience for such comparisons. “You would have to have a big old conspiracy that would rival the Jan. 6 insurrection for these things not to be authentic,” he scoffed, adding that it just didn't make sense. “A forger who wanted to make big hay over Basquiat would paint one extraordinary Basquiat, or maybe two or three, all large on canvas. He wouldn't just go out and get cardboard from a supermarket or liquor store and create 25 paintings.”

What of Mumford’s family, who only learned of the museum’s exhibition of “The Thaddeus Mumford Jr. Venice Collection” from this reporter? “It’s all very strange,” said Jeffrey Mumford, Thad’s younger brother, a Guggenheim fellowship-winning classical composer and music professor at Lorain County Community College, near Cleveland. Not only did Thad never
once mention to him buying the Basquiats, “he was someone who didn't really go to art galleries very often, was often intimidated by the idea of going to them because he felt he had to have a degree in art in order to appreciate the work.”

Moreover, if Thad had ever wanted to discuss a promising new artist, he could have spoken with Jeffrey's wife, Donna Coleman, an accomplished painter who had lived in New York City at the same time Basquiat was first making a name for himself. Coleman, in an interview, recalled walking in downtown Manhattan in 1978 “when I would see his SAMO graffiti on the wall fresh from the day before.”

Coleman, who helped settle Thad's estate upon his death in 2018, said it seemed believable to her that he had simply stopped making payments on his storage unit “because he didn't care about these works, or he didn't recognize their worth, or maybe he was tipped off that they were not real.” The last years leading up to his death “were very, very fraught,” she said. His career in television had essentially dried up, he was severely depressed and in poor health, and “he was just letting go of a lot of things.” But if by 2012 he no longer cared about the paintings, then why did he hold onto a poem about that same artist for all those years? “It does seem odd, doesn't it?” Coleman mused.

One clue to the paintings’ authenticity may lie with the cardboard on which Basquiat would have applied his layers of paint, crayon, and oilstick. Mangin said he consulted several paper experts to confirm its age, but was told that the composition of cardboard from the 1980s was impossible to differentiate from that of recent years. “Nobody had an answer,” Mangin explained. “Cardboard is cardboard.”
Yet flip over one of the works and you'll find that it was painted on the back of a shipping box with a clearly visible company imprint: “Align top of FedEx Shipping Label here.” According to Lindon Leader, an independent brand expert consulted by The Times, who was shown a photo of the cardboard, the typeface in the imprint was not used by Federal Express before 1994. He should know: that was the year he personally redesigned the company’s logo and its typefaces while working as senior design director at the Landor Associates advertising firm.

“It appears to be set in the Univers 67 Bold Condensed,” Leader said of the label’s distinctive purplish font. In 1982, “They were not using Univers at that time.”

So the piece of cardboard could not have been produced until 12 years after Basquiat supposedly painted on it and six years after the artist's death.
According to a person close to the Orlando museum, who asked to remain anonymous because they were not authorized to reveal internal discussions, its curatorial staff expressed their concern to De Groft that the FedEx text did not seem to be from 1982. “This show raised red flags for them,” the person said, but the director brushed off their concerns.

The corporate typeface on the cardboard was created in 1994, according to its designer, not 1982, as the paintings’ owners assert. This discrepancy has some questioning the authenticity of the paintings.

Asked about his staff’s reaction this week, De Groft insisted, “The cardboard is legit.” He added, “I believe deeply these are authentic Basquiats. I can’t answer the question on FedEx, there’s an anomaly there.” But he said the evidence provided by the artworks’ owners — from the Basquiat-signed poem to the Cortez report — was credible.

Yet as O’Donnell, the lawyer, has himself argued in a catalog essay for Orlando’s Basquiat exhibition, one small discovery can undermine a seemingly rock solid claim: “Over my four decades in the trenches, cases have been won or lost based on a single piece of evidence.” The key to winning, he concludes, is “finding a ‘smoking gun’ document buried in millions of pages.
of records. If this sounds like Perry Mason, it is.”

Asked this week if the FedEx-imprinted cardboard was that veritable “smoking gun,” O’Donnell remained unshaken. “If there’s a question about one painting, it doesn’t cast doubt on all the other ones.” He called the typography question “a subject of expert debate”— one he almost seemed to relish and was confident he would win. “If I presented all this evidence to a jury— including this thing about FedEx — I have no doubt how it would come out.”

A correction was made on March 1, 2022: An earlier version of this article described incorrectly Jordana Moore Saggese's work. While she attributed some of the 25 artworks to Jean-Michel Basquiat, she said she was unable to attribute nine of the paintings to Basquiat.
F.B.I. Investigates Basquiat Paintings Shown at Orlando Museum of Art

A subpoena raises questions about an exhibition of works “purported to be by artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.”

By Brett Sokol
May 29, 2022

The ongoing cultural fascination with the life and work of Jean-Michel Basquiat shows little signs of dimming, whether it’s in the form of brisk sales for $29.99 Basquiat-themed T-shirts at The Gap, large crowds for Basquiat’s latest art exhibitions, or an actual canvas by the painter auctioned last week for $85 million.

To the ranks of those focused intently on all things Basquiat, you can now add the F.B.I.

The F.B.I.’s Art Crime Team is investigating the authenticity of 25 paintings that the Orlando Museum of Art says were created by Basquiat and are on exhibit there, according to a federal subpoena and several people with knowledge about the situation.

The paintings in the “Heroes & Monsters: Jean-Michel Basquiat” exhibition were said by the museum and their owners to have been recovered from a Los Angeles storage unit in 2012. The works were largely unseen before the show’s February opening. An article in The New York Times raised questions about their authenticity, reporting that a designer who had previously worked for Federal Express had identified the FedEx typeface on a piece of cardboard Basquiat was said to have painted on as one that was not designed until 1994 — six years after the artist’s death.

The paintings’ owners and the museum’s director and chief executive, Aaron De Groft, say the paintings are genuine Basquiats, citing statements from art world experts commissioned by the owners. And the chairwoman of the museum’s board, Cynthia Brumback, has publicly supported De Groft. The paintings are set to leave the museum on June 30 for public exhibitions in Italy.

F.B.I. Special Agents have interviewed people in the art and design worlds, focusing on the paintings in the exhibition and on their primary owners, who have previously said in interviews that they were trying to sell the works. Those questioned include De Groft, according to two employees of the museum.
who were granted anonymity because they said De Groft has warned the staff that anyone talking to the media would be fired.

De Groft did not respond to requests for comment on any F.B.I. questioning or on his instructions to the staff at OMA, as the museum is known.

In a subpoena to OMA dated July 27, 2021, the F.B.I. demanded “any and all” communications between the museum's employees and the owners of the artworks “purported to be by artist Jean-Michel Basquiat,” including correspondence with experts regarding the artwork. The subpoena, which has been reviewed by The New York Times, shows that the F.B.I. has also demanded the museum’s board of trustee records concerning the paintings.

The F.B.I. declined to comment on the investigation, or its status. But a person connected to the case said he was interviewed in April. If authentic, the Basquiat paintings would be worth about $100 million, according to Putnam Fine Art and Antique Appraisals, which assessed them for the owners.

The specific focus of the F.B.I. inquiry, and whom the agency is targeting, is not clear. But the intentional sale of art known to be fake would be a federal crime.
De Groft and the owners of the 25 paintings have said that they were done on slabs of cardboard scavenged by Basquiat in late 1982 while he was living and working out of a studio beneath the Los Angeles home of the art dealer Larry Gagosian, as he prepared new work for a show at Gagosian's gallery. They said the works were then sold by Basquiat for $5,000 to a now-deceased television screenwriter, Thad Mumford, who put them into a storage unit and forgot about them for 30 years — until the unit’s contents were seized for nonpayment of rent and auctioned off in 2012. (Gagosian has said he “finds the scenario of the story highly unlikely.”) The screenwriter's trove was bought for about $15,000 by William Force, an art and antiques dealer, and Lee Mangin, a retired salesman.

A third owner is the Los Angeles trial lawyer Pierce O’Donnell, who in 2016 represented Amber Heard in her divorce from Johnny Depp and Angelina Jolie in her divorce from Brad Pitt. He subsequently purchased an interest in six of the 25 works and has hired a battery of experts, several of whom have said they appear genuine. A verdict from Basquiat’s estate is no longer possible: its authentication committee disbanded in 2012, at a time when many artists' estates were ceasing to authenticate artwork because of costly litigation. Exhibiting paintings at a museum can often enhance the legitimacy of works without more established provenance.

Much of the back story establishing the paintings’ origins rests largely on the word of Mangin and Force, who have both served time in prison for felony drug trafficking under different names, law enforcement records show.
Force was arrested in 1973 under the name William Parks, and pleaded no contest to conspiring to import more than half a ton of marijuana from Jamaica to Miami by boat.

Mangin — also known to the authorities as Leo Mangan — was twice convicted on federal charges of trafficking cocaine, in 1979 and in 1991. In 1996 the Securities and Exchange Commission arrested him for securities fraud, alleging Mangan was part of a criminal ring that forged documents and illegally issued more than five million shares of bogus stock, earning him over $8 million in illicit proceeds. Mangan was convicted, and his 1999 sentencing included a lifetime ban on working in the securities trade.

The Federal Trade Commission later accused the debt consolidation companies Mangan co-owned with his wife, Michelle, of defrauding numerous consumers. In 2008, the couple paid almost $400,000 to settle the F.T.C. charges without admitting liability.

O’Donnell also has a criminal record, having pleaded no contest to violating campaign finance laws in 2006 and pleaded guilty to a second such charge in 2011, resulting in a 60-day prison sentence.

Richard LiPuma, a lawyer for Leo Mangan, said the provenance of the paintings was “airtight” and the fact that the owners were once in trouble with the law was irrelevant to the question of whether the works are genuine.
“The 25- to 40-year-old records of the owners’ ancient missteps do not reflect on the paintings themselves,” he said. LiPuma said Mangan was fully cooperating with the F.B.I., had asked OMA to do the same, and that “the F.B.I. investigation appears by us to be nothing more than a government agency doing its job by following up on a tip,” one he said was “undocumented.”

Force did not respond to a request for comment. O’Donnell said by email that “my misdemeanors for campaign finance law violations occurred about 20 years ago” and that “the paintings are authentic. Five experts conducted extensive due diligence.” He said he was eager to fully cooperate with the F.B.I.

Those at the museum who raised concerns this winter about the authenticity of the Basquiats were told by De Groft not to worry and that the subpoena was simply a formality, two witnesses reported.

Brumback, the board chair, did not respond to requests for comment. She told The Orlando Sentinel that while “we know questions have been raised about the exhibit,” museumgoers had nonetheless been reacting enthusiastically to it. “Attendance is up, diversity is up, shop sales are up,” she said. “People are enjoying themselves, which is very important to us. It supports our mission.”

Mangan said in an interview this winter that after buying the paintings with Force in 2012, the two had met Mumford in Los Angeles for lunch. It was there that Mumford supposedly told them all about his 1982 purchase of the 25 paintings from Basquiat, an encounter so memorable that Mumford had typed up a poem to commemorate the sale and had Basquiat initial the sheet of dot matrix printer paper it was typed on.
Mumford, who was said to have lost track of the 25 artworks in storage, kept the poem, Mangan said, and gave it to him at their meeting.

De Groft included the poem in the museum’s exhibition as further proof of the paintings’ authenticity. “The poem is almost like a receipt, it refers to the works, it refers to the inscriptions in the works, it refers to the time,” he said in an interview this winter.

Several of Mumford’s friends and relatives are anything but convinced. It’s not only that Mumford never mentioned an interest in contemporary art, let alone buying Basquiats.

It’s also that Mumford didn’t type, according to Sheldon Bull, a television screenwriter and producer who worked with Mumford on “M*A*S*H” at the dawn of the 1980s and later in the decade on “A Different World.”

“Thad wrote on a legal pad,” Bull recalled. “We started back in the ’70s before there were computers, and a lot of people sent stuff to typists.” That didn’t change in the ’80s, he said: “I never saw Thad type a single letter.” He added, “Thad was as technophobic as anybody I’ve ever met. He did not own a computer.”

And then there’s the cardboard on which the Basquiats are painted, including one on a shipping box with a clearly visible company imprint: “Align top of FedEx Shipping Label here.”

Lindon Leader, an independent brand expert consulted by The Times, was shown a photo of the cardboard. He said that the typeface in the imprint was almost certainly based on Univers, a font not used by Federal Express on its shipping material until 1994 — six years after the artist’s death — when Leader redesigned the company’s logo and its typefaces while working at the Landor Associates advertising firm.
The doubts about that painting have raised questions within the art world about the other 24 paintings it was reportedly created alongside — and stored with — for 30 years.

De Groft has since cited unspecified research to assert that Federal Express used various fonts on its shipping materials throughout the 1980s. Leader said in a recent interview that such a notion was “ridiculous,” because the company has long had strict guidelines for its typeface and other graphic designs. Federal Express declined to comment.

De Groft did not respond to a request this week for his source on the FedEx font usage. But he has pointed to several reports commissioned by the artworks’ owners to support the works’ authenticity, including a 2017 analysis by the handwriting expert James Blanco, which identified signatures on many of the 25 paintings as being Basquiat’s.

There were also signed 2018-19 statements from the curator Diego Cortez that declared each painting a true Basquiat. (Cortez, who died last year, was a member of the Basquiat estate’s authentication committee.)

And De Groft has emphasized a 2017 report from a University of Maryland associate professor of art, Jordana Moore Saggese, the author of “Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art.” De Groft, Mangan and O’Donnell each said in interviews this winter that Saggese’s written analysis — which O’Donnell said he had paid at least $25,000 for — had attributed all 25 artworks to Basquiat.
But Saggese later said in an interview that her report had been misrepresented by the owners, who had removed pages where she clearly stated that nine of the 25 paintings could not be attributed to Basquiat.

She said that the editing process as she prepared her report had been tense. “The more that they started to push back at me, the more I began to question their motives,” she said.

The editing process that Saggese described raised questions for other experts. Allowing an artwork’s owner to have any influence on an attribution is typically considered “unethical,” said Colette Loll, a lecturer at Johns Hopkins University as well as the founder and director of Art Fraud Insights, a consultancy that specializes in art authentication.

Loll, who has trained members of the F.B.I.’s Art Crime Team to spot forgeries, said she had been asked by O’Donnell to authenticate the Basquiats as well but declined.
As she wrote on Twitter, addressing OMA's Basquiat exhibition, “The lack of any real scientific analysis on methods and materials speaks volumes.” In another tweet, she added, “Handwriting analysis and poems don't authenticate artworks.”

Susan Beachy contributed research.

A version of this article appears in print on Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Basquiat or Not? F.B.I. Is Sizing Up 25 Works.
Orlando Museum Director Loses Job After Disputed Basquiat Show

Aaron De Groft was removed from his position days after the F.B.I. seized 25 works that had been shown in a Jean-Michel Basquiat exhibit and whose authenticity had been questioned.

By Brett Sokol
June 28, 2022

Aaron De Groft, the director and chief executive of the Orlando Museum of Art, was removed from his post Tuesday night, just days after the Federal Bureau of Investigation raided the museum and seized 25 works that had been attributed to Jean-Michel Basquiat but whose authenticity has been called into question.

Board members met early Tuesday to discuss the fallout of Friday’s F.B.I. raid. The meeting ended with the board deciding to fire De Groft, according to museum employees who requested anonymity because they had been previously warned that anyone talking to the news media would be terminated.

De Groft did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The chairwoman of the museum’s board, Cynthia Brumback, said in a statement that “effective immediately, Aaron De Groft is no longer director and C.E.O. of Orlando Museum of Art.” She added that the museum’s trustees were “extremely concerned” about several issues regarding the exhibition, “Heroes & Monsters: Jean-Michel Basquiat.”

Among them, she said in the statement, was “the recent revelation of an inappropriate email correspondence sent to academia concerning the authentication of some of the artwork in the exhibition.”

The New York Times reported last week that an affidavit filed to secure the search warrant, which was signed by Elizabeth Rivas, a special agent for the F.B.I., had quoted an email in which De Groft appeared to threaten an academic who had been hired by the owners of the artworks to assess them, and who later expressed qualms about being associated with the exhibit.
The expert was identified in the affidavit only as “Expert-2,” but an associate professor of art at the University of Maryland, Jordana Moore Saggese, confirmed to The Times that she was “Expert-2.”

Saggese, who was paid $60,000 for her written report, contacted the museum and asked that her name not be associated with the exhibition, the affidavit said. At that point, the affidavit said, De Groft sent her an email disparaging her and threatening to disclose the payment and share details about it with her employer.

“You want us to put out there you got $60 grand to write this?” De Groft wrote, according to the affidavit. “Ok then. Shut up. You took the money. Stop being holier than thou.” De Groft, still insisting the paintings were genuine, then threatened to share the details of that payment with the university: “Do your academic thing and stay in your limited lane.”

“We have launched an official process to address these matters, as they are inconsistent with the values of this institution, our business standards, and our standards of conduct,” Brumback said in the statement.

The F.B.I. raid, on June 24, came just days before the planned June 30 closing of the Basquiat exhibit, after which the works were scheduled to be exhibited in Italy.

The artworks in the “Heroes & Monsters” exhibition, which opened in February, were said by the museum and their owners to have been recovered from a Los Angeles storage unit in 2012.

The Times reported that one of the artworks being shown was painted on the back of a cardboard shipping box bearing an instruction to “Align top of FedEx Shipping Label here,” in a typeface that a designer who worked for Federal Express said had not been used until 1994 — six years after Basquiat’s death.

The search affidavit stated that “forensic information indicates that the cardboard on which one painting was made contains a typeface that was created in 1994, after Basquiat had passed, thereby calling into question the authenticity of at least one piece.”

Both De Groft and the owners of the artworks had said that the works were made by Basquiat in 1982 and sold for $5,000 to a now-deceased television screenwriter, Thad Mumford, who they said had put them into a storage unit and forgotten about them. They were discovered when the storage unit’s contents were seized for nonpayment of rent and auctioned off in 2012, they said.

But the affidavit says that in 2017, a year before his death, Mumford signed a declaration in the presence of federal agents stating that “at no time in the 1980s or at any other time did I meet with Jean-Michel Basquiat, and at no time did I acquire or purchase any paintings by him.”