Cultural Daily

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Keith Haring Show Celebrates Art for Everybody

Stephen West · Friday, June 9th, 2023

The first thing you notice about the Keith Haring exhibition that just opened at the Broad Museum in Los Angeles is how bright, how saturated, how intense the colors are. The reds and yellows and greens practically pop off the wall, and they look as fresh as if they were painted yesterday.

The second thing you notice is how by 1982, when Haring was still in his early 20s, he's already found his iconic imagery: the colorful, cartoonish dancing human figures, the barking dogs, the flying saucers, the snakes, the penises. And they're outlined with his signature thick black lines, confidently laid down by a painter who's clearly in a hurry.

Keith Haring, *Untitled*, 1982, baked enamel on metal; © Keith Haring Foundation, courtesy of the Broad Art Foundation; photograph by Douglas M. Parker Studio, Los Angeles.

In *Untitled* of 1982 – most of Haring's works are untitled – one of two yellow dancing dogs is zapped by some sort of cosmic radiation emitted from the flying saucer overhead. The dogs themselves are really just blocky outlines with no distinguishing features, not even eyes. One has brown spots all over, the other has red ones. The flying saucer, which resembles a sombrero or perhaps a round 1960s modernist bank branch, has no color at all. Yet the painting projects a cheerful, infectious energy that's hard to resist. Whoopie, let's dance!

Haring was born in 1958 in Reading, Pennsylvania, and grew up nearby, moving to New York City in 1978 to study at the School of Visual Arts. He soon became part of the downtown, often gay, art culture of the city, what might be called the Andy Warhol School of pop art, along with other acolytes such as Jean-Michel Basquiat. Haring began making the first of thousands of chalk drawings in New York subway stations and started showing his paintings in more formal gallery shows. By 1982 he was invited to participate in the prestigious Documenta 7 exhibition in Kassel, Germany, along with heavyweights like Gerhard Richter, Anselm Kiefer, and Warhol.

The Broad show, *Keith Haring: Art Is for Everybody*, covers Haring's full career, from his early, exuberant works like the dancing dogs to his later, more political and message-driven ones. With more than 120 paintings, drawings, sculptures, and supporting videos, the cleanly installed, sprawling show certainly demonstrates his remarkable energy and productivity. One wall label quotes him as writing that "My contribution to the world is my ability to draw. I will draw as much as I can for as many people as I can for as long as I can."

The exhibition's spacious second gallery showcases fully 37 paintings, drawings, and sculptures, mainly from 1980-82, many of them quite large and hung on top of each other. On one wall (top image), the horizontal *Untitled* of 1982 features an appropriated Mickey Mouse, a pair of dancing figures, a radiating heart, and a pair of dice. It's displayed next to several near-abstract paintings of colored line patterns on bright yellow or red backgrounds. Together they show the range of Haring's visual tool kit that will stay with him throughout his career.

Installation view, *Keith Haring: Art Is for Everybody;* Artwork: *Untitled*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, private collection, courtesy Galerie Enrico Navarro, Paris; photograph by Stephen West.

The tone of the show becomes more serious in the galleries that focus on works with political and social content. Haring campaigned through his art for gay rights, for peace, against nuclear proliferation. One enormous painting more than 23 feet wide, *Untitled* of 1984, depicts a red snake with blue polka dots devouring a yellow human figure on the left. In the center, an orange mushroom cloud from a nuclear explosion rises in the background. To the right, a sinister green skull-like face is eating the snake's tail. It's a powerful, unsettling image.

Keith Haring, *Ignorance=Fear, Silence=Death,* 1989, ACT UP poster, © Keith Haring Foundation.

In the decade of the 1980s, of course, Haring's downtown world was overshadowed more than anything by the AIDS epidemic. He responded with a range of works including posters and paintings that promoted safe sex and denounced the hostility of much of the straight world toward gays. In *Ignorance=Fear, Silence=Death* of 1989, three dancing figures with red X marks on their chests – targeted victims, apparently – cover their eyes, ears, or mouth as if to deny what's happening to them. At the bottom right is the slogan FIGHT AIDS / ACT UP.

Haring was diagnosed with the fatal disease in 1988, and it claimed him as a victim in 1990.

Keith Haring: Art Is for Everybody runs through October 8 at The Broad, 221 South Grand Avenue, Los Angeles. It then travels to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, where it will be on view from November 11 to March 17, 2024, and to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis from April 27 to September 8, 2024. An extensive catalog is published by The Broad and DelMonico Books.

Top image: Installation view, Keith Haring: Art Is for Everybody, *second gallery. Artwork at bottom right:* Untitled, *1982, Sumi ink and acrylic on paper mounted on canvas; private collection, courtesy the Brant Foundation, Greenwich, Connecticut; photograph by Stephen West.*

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