Keith Haring (American, 1958-90 – Artist Resources

The Keith Haring Foundation: biography, essays and press, interviews, artworks

In 1980 *Rolling Stone* interviewed Haring while the artist was at work on a 500 ft mural with high school students in Chicago. Haring discusses his upbringing and education, relationships with Andy Warhol and Jean-Michele Basquiat, and AIDS crisis and his relationship with the disease. Speaking of his symbolic pictorial language, Haring remembers “trying to figure out where this stuff came from, but I have no idea. It just grew into this group of drawings. I was thinking about these images as symbols, as a vocabulary of things….Suddenly it made sense to draw on the street, because I had something to say.”

In addition to subway drawings, paintings, public sculpture, and art activism, Haring was a prolific muralist.

Haring speaks about his subway drawings in a brief interview for a local tv program in 1983 while at work on a mural for the Marquette University Campus in Milwaukee, on the construction site for the Haggerty Museum.


*The Guardian* remembered Haring’s “radical joy” in 2019 with a profile celebrating his consistent relevance, and a collection of memories from fellow artists and friends. “He was unique,” explains Carlos Rodriguez, a graffiti artist who worked with Haring. “The vernacular of his art was so appealing, with a quality of entertainment. But it was also a tremendous, beautiful response to the activism of the time… the really unusual thing about Keith is that he felt he could be of service.”

Artist Karey Maurice Counts looks back on his friendship with Haring and celebrates an enduring influence in conjunction with Haring’s first retrospective in the UK, at Tate Liverpool.

Haring, 1986 at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam Photograph: Nationaal Archief

Haring, 1984, Photograph: Stuart William Macgladrie/Fairfax Media via Getty Images
After moving to New York in 1978, Keith Haring quickly rose to prominence with an extensive series of subway drawings inspired by the authenticity, technical skill, and creativity embodied in the graffiti, hip hop music, and break dancers that enlivened his East Village neighborhood. The bright colors, playful patterns, and cartoon-like figures populating Haring’s canvases are deceptively simple, a personal language of symbols and motifs repeated with variation that generate a complex commentary on gay culture, AIDS, drugs, consumerism, and race in late twentieth-century America. This untitled canvas depicts the artist’s interpretation of the “tree of life” – a symbolic archetype common to mythological, religious, and philosophical traditions throughout history. Haring offers a vision of joyous gratitude and a celebratory worship of knowledge, community, and creativity open to anyone. “When I paint, it is an experience that, at its best, is transcending reality,” Haring commented in 1989. “When it is working, you completely go into another place, you’re tapping into things that are totally universal, of the total consciousness, completely beyond your ego and your own self. That’s what it’s all about.”

On view September 23 – December 27, 2020
Keith Haring (American, 1958-90)

*Untitled*, 1990

Sumi Ink on board

Private Collection; L2019:155.1

Keith Haring moved to New York in 1978, beginning a short but prolific career inspired by the city’s rich outpouring of masterful urban graffiti, its flowering hip-hop culture, and the conceptual gap between “high” and “low” art. Haring developed a deceptively simple pictorial language in which he rendered form, setting, and emotional energy through little more than line and monochromatic accents of color. An AIDS diagnosis in 1988 did little to deter the artist’s creative output. *Untitled* features dozens of Haring’s iconic characters, who seem to dance in a celebration of life, contorting wildly to music we cannot hear. Completed shortly before the artist’s death, the painting demonstrates Haring’s professional and personal ambition to infuse art with commentaries on global issues like the AIDS crisis. Haring saw his disease as a reason to celebrate living, not to fear pain or an inevitable end. Wishing to accept his impending death without regret and limitation, Haring explained, “No matter how long you work, it’s always going to end sometime. And there’s always going to be things left undone…. If you live your life according to that, death is irrelevant. Everything I’m doing right now is exactly what I want to do.”

*On view January 29 – May 3, 2020*