

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Laura Cumming, "Keith Haring review – jubilation and beauty from the message man," *The Guardian*, June 16, 2019

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Keith Haring review – jubilation and beauty from the message man



Untitled, 1984 by Keith Haring. Photograph: © Keith Haring Foundation

Keith Haring's art speaks loud and radiantly clear at Tate Liverpool in the first major UK show of his work

Keith Haring, at Tate Liverpool, is a true surprise: a show of unexpected jubilation and beauty. The American artist was only 31 when he died in 1990, and it is almost beyond belief that some of the most vital images in this enormous exhibition were painted when he was living with Aids. But for a British audience

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who know him through the instantly recognisable graphics, undimmed down the years through the use of timeless black and white on everything from T-shirts and posters to Reebok sneakers, at least part of the pleasure is the sheer power of them, writ large and in radiant colour.

Radiance – and the radiating black lines scintillating around Haring's simplified images of lovers, tellies, barking dogs and his trademark baby, crawling ever-onwards – is the overwhelming effect of this art. It is achieved entirely through line and colour. Just two elements – and even one, if you consider the original chalk drawings he made on vacant subway hoardings in New York in the early 1980s. Somehow, two of these have been preserved like chunks of the Berlin Wall and are shown here alongside fabulous photographs of the specky young Haring darting about with his chalk to the fascination of passing passengers.

He was a performance artist of every kind – dancer to DJ to action painter – from the start. A video called *Painting Myself Into a Corner* shows Haring at 21, working the paper-lined floor of his studio with dynamic black brushstrokes. He leaps off from Pollock to pop. Discarded hoardings become substrates for his dazzling paintings of a chortling Mickey Mouse and figures sprouting TV sets for heads. Workmen's tarpaulins were cheap canvases for his buzzing hieroglyphics.

And anyone visiting Tate Liverpool will immediately sense the connection with ancient Egypt. This is not far-fetched. Haring studied semiotics, and was a sophisticated consumer of world cultures from Dr Seuss to Japanese watercolours, Aboriginal drawings to African cave art. The terrific directness of

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his work is derived, at the very least, from looking at the paintings of the French modernist Jean Dubuffet as much as Walt Disney.



Keith Haring in subway car (New York), c1983. Photograph: Tseng Kwong Chi

To begin with, Haring's lexicon of picture-words seems ebulliently clear. The baby is all perfection and innocence. The dancing men are freedom, rebellion, joy, release. The cross symbols – both mathematical and religious – mean exactly what they stand for. All the television sets in a colossal ziggurat, presided over by angry gods, bear nothing but crosses on their screens: wrong, wrong, wrong. A man falling down a staircase, black on nuclear yellow, is literally a warning sign.

Haring develops diagrams of cause and effect. Sometimes they are the visual equivalent of syllogisms: money causes greed, which causes violence, which

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causes death. But not everything is quite so black and white. Flying saucers in DayGlo colours seem to have a benevolent place in his art, as if they carried exotic outsiders. Dogs – dancing, barking, glowing – are animal, human and mythical.

In a work from 1983, Haring painted a caterpillar with an early PC for a head. Perhaps it will turn into a butterfly, more likely a monster. On screen is a poor little man being caught by the tail. Haring had the strongest presentiment of the couch generation, of human beings enslaved by screens of all shapes and sizes. It seems all wrong that so many people now experience his work reduced to the size of their [iPhone case](#).



Untitled, 1983 by Keith Haring. Photograph: © Keith Haring

The big works are huge; specifically the massive black and white ink drawing *The Matrix*, a kind of fizzing-all-over collage of Haring's every emblem and symbol, which runs the full length of a gallery wall like riotous graffiti. But even more striking is the sudden scale of a political image like *Apartheid*, from 1984. A huge

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black figure, shackled, kicks over a little white man emblazoned with a burning red cross. The black figure is tellingly lifesize.

Tate Liverpool has caught the nightclub, subway, benefit gig atmosphere of Haring's milieu to perfection. You watch Haring dance to the thump of the Cure on video, or paint Grace Jones's naked body all over with his glyphs. In a gorgeous ultraviolet room, his neon paintings scintillate red on purple and green. His role as a public figure is perfectly conveyed in photographs, newsreel and documentary.

For he was the message man par excellence, always talking about racism, gun laws, drug crime, gay rights; naturally, the poster beckoned. Haring's public health warnings are surely some of the strongest ever made, particularly the Ignorance = Fear, Silence = Death poster, featuring human versions of the proverbial three wise monkeys.

Few of the paintings at Tate Liverpool are signed, but all are emphatically dated. They are signs of the times, in all respects. But as you walk through the dragonfly timespan of this show – a career of no more than a decade at most – there is also the sense of an artist counting his days.

Haring was diagnosed as HIV positive in 1988. That same year he made the staggering red picture presented here, showing an apocalyptic tornado of violence erupting from a prone and stricken body. More devastating still is the *Set of Ten Drawings*, in which the virus is personified as a kind of devil sperm with curling

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black horns, a kind of vicious mutation, in all its stark black curves, of dear old Mickey Mouse.



Ignorance = Fear, 1989. Photograph: © Keith Haring Foundation

This is graphic art at its most biting. Haring had found form, prodigiously early on, with his distinctive zip and register. It is not obvious from this show where he might have gone beyond this fundamental idiom. After his death, it swelled into a global brand, but during his lifetime Haring made his art speak for everything he wanted to say. And for all the violence he warned against, and drew, there is an equal message of love. Its essence appears in the perfectly simple image of two figures, of no race or gender, glowing in each other's embrace.

Star ratings (out of five)

Keith Haring ★★★★★