

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Kavner, Lucas. "Keith Haring Exhibit at Gladstone Gallery in NYC Sheds Light On the Iconic Artist", Huffington Post, May 6, 2011

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Keith Haring was never one to shy away from an audience. He wanted to give his work to everybody, any way he could. Even after his death in 1990 at age 31 from AIDS-related illnesses, his iconic images continued to represent life and hope, becoming symbols for AIDS activism around the world, and receiving countless international retrospectives.

At the Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea, Manhattan, many of his earliest sketches are currently on display, as are three larger works on paper, which were originally created as part of a series of duets with Bill T. Jones, the choreographer and dancer.

The pieces are being loaned from the Keith Haring Foundation, and the exhibit's opening drew a wide array of Haring fans, friends and beneficiaries, who have followed his work from the 1980s and beyond.

Jones, wearing an impressively embroidered fedora, wandered the gallery space on Wednesday night, laughing with admirers, and revisiting an old friend.

"It's really a revelation; I was under the impression that they were gone," Jones said, trying to recall the feeling of that night in 1982 when the pieces first came to life.

"I remember the sound, the *swsh, swsh*, in the bucket, and me dancing, this dual rhythm," he said, and pointed to the drawings on the wall. "The work there is a marker, but I suppose I also became a marker, myself. An artifact. A very fragile one, but I'm an artifact of that night."

Jones thought for a moment about how best to describe what he was feeling. "One of the duets was called 'Long Distance,' and I guess that's how I feel right now," he said. "A very long distance."

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The larger, black-and-white pieces indicate a genesis of what the world already knows about Haring – his gestural images, with playful yet forceful lines and cartoonish, explosive qualities, covering every inch of his chosen canvas.

But the more intimate sketches on display are far more scaled down and personal. They're also hilarious. A series of "Manhattan Penis Drawings For Ken Hicks," from 1978, feature such works as, "Fire Hydrant Penis," "Drawing Penises In Front of Tiffany's," and "Drawing Penises Waiting for a Yam."

"I love these," said Roscoe Betsill, a food stylist, perusing the sketches. He remembered the days when Haring could paint up to 40 pieces a day underground, on the walls of the New York subway platforms. "I'd been living in Paris for a bit and when I came back to the city I heard about Keith's work, and actually got to watch him paint one of them. He was iconographic, unlike anybody."

Indeed, Haring was known, in his early days, to draw everywhere he could – on floors, ceilings and walls of rooms, literally painting himself into corners because he couldn't contain himself.

"You'd pop into his studio and he'd just draw something for you," said Christine Visca, a nightclub empresario who knew Haring well. "You'd be wearing a piece of clothing and he'd sketch all over it."

"The whole point was to make art accessible to everyone," said Jonathan Williams, who wrote his undergraduate thesis on Haring's later years and now works in development at Planned Parenthood. "He made it for the purpose of having people view it. As much as possible."

In one corner of the gallery, Haring's parents, Joan and Allen, stood with friends. The night of the opening – Wednesday, May – also happened to be Keith Haring's 53rd birthday, and Joan, who wore a bright scarf with a Haring print, grew emotional as she spoke of her son.

"The last six or eight months of his life, he started making things smaller, with more detail and more color," she said, tearing up a bit. "I think he was becoming more serious. He knew the end was near, and he wanted to get a bit more serious."

Haring's father, Allen, dapper and lively in a gray suit, remarked on just how much Haring drew, and how prolific he was.

"Being from Pennsylvania Dutch country, we tend to measure the success of our kids by how much work they've done," he said, with his arms outstretched. "So, this is amazing! He must have been drawing and painting the whole time, and every time you turn around there's more and more and more."

In 1985, Haring famously opened the Pop Shop in Soho, Manhattan, selling everything from prints to memorabilia, hoping to include not only his many famous friends entrenched in the art world (Madonna, Yoko Ono, and Andy Warhol, among them), but also kids from the Bronx.

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"Everyone was welcome at the shop," said Jose Lopez, who at 16 was a Pop Shop employee.

"Keith told me I had to get my diploma or I couldn't work there."

"Jose always wanted to be a policeman!" Allen Haring piped in.

"And now I am! I'm an NYPD detective," Lopez said, taking out his phone to check an email about a supposed stabbing in the Bronx. "I have one of these phones, and the mayor has one, too."

"Are you close with the mayor?" Joan Haring asked him.

"Well, I've met him, but it's not like he's calling me on the phone, saying, 'Hey, Jose, how's it going?'"

A few representatives from the Gay Mens Health Crisis (GMHC) were also there to pay respects and see the work. The Keith Haring Foundation, which Haring founded the year before he died, has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to the GMHC, and one of his designs adorns their dining hall.

"One of our clients said he felt like a prince sitting in that room," said Janet Weinberg, the COO of the GMHC.

Barbara Gladstone, the gallery's owner, talked about what this occasion meant to her, as she was one of the original commissioners of Haring's work back in 1982.

"We were going through his calendars and notebooks from that time, and one entry says, B Gladstone, 12 o'clock, Saturday," she said. "It's interesting now to see a more intimate side, as well as the larger works on paper. But the lines always controlled him. He was overcome by them."

She looked toward one of the three larger drawings, noting that Haring had gone back in 1984 to add a shadow of red to the stark black-and-white ink. "I think he wanted to add more complexity," she said.

One of Haring's line sketches under glass at the gallery features the title: "Why didn't you finish it?"

Haring answers his own question below the sketch, writing: "There are places you can stop drawing and call it finished. But it is never really finished until time and space itself are finished."

Indeed, that might be the perfect summation of his legacy -- an unfinished work that continues to fill edges and corners the world over, both in his art and enduring philanthropy.