

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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## Keith Haring review: the political side of a pop-art legend

**De Young Museum, San Francisco**

Famous for his ebullient street art, Haring's art had a much tougher, activist element, which this show brings to the fore



📷 **Untitled (Apartheid)**, 1984, by Keith Haring. Photograph: Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam/Keith Haring Foundation

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[Keith Haring: the Political Line](#), an exhibition of the late artist's work, opened at San Francisco's De Young last week just days after [the GOP swept the US midterm elections](#). This coincidence is hard to overlook while viewing Haring's wildly familiar and celebrated paintings of the 1980s, works driven by his sense of difference and, as the exhibition emphasizes, a fervent political consciousness with which he pushed back at the Reagan-Thatcher conservatism of his time.

Haring's work, made during his condensed, prolific career – he died at 31 from Aids complications - entered into broad cultural consciousness with neon colors, energetic line work, and an urban pulse, though these attributes, the show argues, were just a facet of the artist's interests and achievements. The Political Line, then, serves both as an art historical reconsideration of the artist's popular output, as well as a welcome celebration of art with activist inclinations.



Reagan: Ready to Kill, 1980. Photograph: Keith Haring Foundation



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The exhibition, organised by guest curator [Dieter Buchhart](#) and the De Young, trades the ebullient, candy-colored pop sensibility usually associated with Haring for graver images and somber colour schemes. The works on view tend toward black, ochre and red, with occasional bursts of more vibrant hues punctuating thematic sections. These organize Haring's work according to various political and cultural concerns: sections of the show are organized by themes of greed, racism, ecological disaster and disease.

If the last major museum show devoted to his work, organized in 1997 by the Whitney, focused on the public, convivial nature of his work, even including the muted thump of club music in the background, *The Political Line* has a more solemn, silent vibe - a room containing small, glowing black light paintings, for example, evokes a darkened catacomb rather than a disco.



📷 Untitled, 1981. Photograph: Courtesy of Museum der Moderne Salzburg/Keith Haring Foundation

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The show begins with a human-scaled fibreglass Statue of Liberty, her robes painted crimson and entirely inscribed with Haring characters, line work, and tags contributed by graffiti artist [LA II](#). This 1982 work is set in the centre of a room, in front of a large painting of black-lined figures fleeing an alien ray, and adjacent to a seemingly blood-spattered early drawing expressing a meat is murder message, adding to a passionate critical opposition to ominous forces of political power.

The show goes on to provides humanizing context with works and ephemera that speak to his position and range. His 1978 Manhattan Penis Drawings for Ken Hicks, works he made in public places as a display of gay sexuality are seen here, as are ransom note-like collages made in 1978 from newspaper headlines, many referring to Reagan and cultural unease. There is a case displaying Polaroids taken by Haring's pal Andy Warhol, and spiral-bound journals in which Haring has handwritten his influences and insecurities. With these inclusions, it's almost impossible not to be swayed by the heartfelt ethos.



📷 Silence=Death, 1988. Photograph: Keith Haring Foundation

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This is evident throughout the exhibition, in his infamous subway drawings, in numerous works that depict surprisingly grisly, almost surrealistic acts of torture, some bringing to mind the photographs from Abu Ghraib, and in large, orgiastic images of crowds turned into patterns of primal violence. Of note is a recurring figure with a circular hole in its center, a form inspired by the 1980 assassination of John Lennon.

Haring seemed unstoppable at the time. His prolific work ethic, some conjecture, was driven by a sense that his life would be cut short. An abundance of material then seems a fitting attribute for surveys of his work, though within this vast show, the inclusions sometimes feel repetitive. But then again, Haring's targets haven't been reconciled - making his persistent sense of resistance worthy of this platform.