

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Galloway, David. "Drawing the Line: The Graphic Legacy of Keith Haring", *The Keith Haring Show*, 2005.

Drawing the Line: The Graphic Legacy of Keith Haring **David Galloway**

With few exceptions, critical interest in an artist's drawings has depended on achievements in other and, by implication, more "serious" genres like painting or sculpture. As a more immediate and spontaneous form, the drawing potentially reveals aspects of signature that may be partially concealed in the elaborated work. Like so much we encounter in his brief, comet-like career, the role of the drawing in Keith Haring's oeuvre reverses this traditional pattern. Indeed, it was a series of drawings in the New York subway that first brought him to the attention of the art world - and of the New York Police Department. They also led to the paintings produced for *The Times Square Show* of graffiti art in 1980, where Haring and his friend Jean-Michel Basquiat were singled out for special attention. The first major gallery presentation followed in 1982.

Haring's discovery of the subway's unused advertising panels, papered in black, was a classic instance of *felix culpa*. "I immediately realized that this was the perfect place to draw," he recalled. "I went above ground to a card shop and bought a box of white chalk, went back down and did a drawing..."¹ Furthermore, chalk itself proved an ideal medium for the "continuous line" that was the artist's objective. Words like "flow" and "fluidity" are ones he used repeatedly in reference to his own work. Those who watched him draw were regularly astonished by the speed and accuracy of his line, whether he was drawing on dollar bills, ersatz Greek vases, the body of Grace Jones, or a youthful fan's skateboard. And like Matisse, he never erased or corrected.

What Brion Gysin once described as Haring's "carved line"² informs all of his work: the drawings, the paintings, the sculptures, and the prints. Yet the drawings are never studies for works in other mediums, but completely autonomous creations, including thousands of works on paper that the artist created between 1980, when he found a distinctive "signature," and his death in 1990. Only an insignificant percentage of these have been published or exhibited. They constitute an oeuvre of immense skill, authority, and diversity, incorporating all of the familiar Haring pictographs and themes, but also introducing aspects of form and content considerably less familiar to viewers.

Keith Haring began to draw extensively and with uncommon engagement by the age of four, encouraged and sometimes instructed by his father, himself an amateur cartoonist. And he was scarcely twelve years old when he produced a drawing measuring five meters in width for a comic strip entitled "Peterson & Company." This childhood passion never dimmed, and it often acquired an element of performance, as in the famous/infamous subway drawings. In an interview published in *Flash Art* in 1984, Haring commented, "I find the most interesting situation for me is

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when there is no turning back. Many times I put myself in situations where I am drawing in public. Whatever marks I make are immediately recorded and immediately on view. There are no 'mistakes' because nothing can be erased."³ While studying at New York's School of Visual Arts, Haring enjoyed working in a room open to the street; he covered the entire floor with paper and executed a single, overall drawing there while exchanging news and views with people passing by - a forerunner to the hasty but almost always supportive encounters with his subway public.

The "Radiant Baby," Haring's most familiar pictograph, evolved out of drawings he produced for Club 57, a kind of hip-hop clubhouse in the basement of a Polish church on New York's St. Mark's Place. Here, the short-lived East Village revolution found a multimedia focus. Working on cut-up sheets of oak-tag paper, Haring began with the abstract configurations in which he was working when he moved to New York in 1978, but figures soon emerged - animals, flying saucers, androgynous human silhouettes - as though demanding to be given a life of their own.

In those formative years, the recurrence of various pictograms suggested the crazy-quilt fragments of a never-ending story involving dolphins, crawling babies, television sets, barking dogs, serpents, angels, dancers, flying saucers, pyramids, and ticking clocks. The narration implicit here clearly owes a debt to Haring's childhood fascination with Walt Disney and Dr. Seuss, as well as animated figures like Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. But one should not ignore the element of discipline involved here. Barbara Schwartz, who taught drawing classes at the School of Visual Arts, would vividly recall the seemingly endless rolls of paper on which he drew, and the fact that he seemed to work "nonstop." When she suggested her students keep sketchbooks in order to learn to see objects from different angles, her star pupil presented one filled with 300 drawings of penises - "all well done and with piff!"⁴

Haring's uncanny ability to tap into some primal energy through his performances and drawings had numerous sources: his experiments with hallucinogens, his teenage obsession with born-again religion, his frank homoeroticism, his reading of William Burroughs, the study of semiotics, and the continuing friendships with graffiti writers, break-dancers, and other street-people. The individual style that emerged also has more conventional art-historical sources, including Haring's interest in the early moderns and in Japanese calligraphy and sumi painting, as well as his youthful discovery of the work of Pierre Alechinsky. Haring admired the fact that the latter had evolved such a distinctive style without ever having formally studied art, and he faulted his own first solo show (at Pittsburgh's Arts and Crafts Center in 1978) because he had failed to achieve "the fluidity of Alechinsky's abstract stroke."⁵ Later, Haring would relate this graphic flow to the dynamics of sexuality and see both as an aspect of a "universal connection"⁶ that he hoped his work would further.

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Thanks to their replication on everything from T-shirts to carpets, pictograms like the "Radiant Baby" and "Barking Dog" have shaped the popular image of Haring's style. Indeed, one could reasonably argue that no other artist has ever imprinted his personal signature so distinctly on a decade. Yet these crisp, clean-lined forms, often executed with felt-tipped markers and clearly derived from the "simple contours" Haring admired in Disney cartoons, is only one aspect of his graphic achievement. There is also an expressive and poetic "dripped" line with echoes of Chinese calligraphy, typically rendered with sumi ink. And one can discern a third category as well: a gestural, surrealist distortion of figurative forms, sometimes reminiscent of Alechinsky's agitated graphism. There are also maze-like overall drawings that directly relate to the furniture and vases Haring ornamented with intertwining neo-baroque patterns.

What we can learn from a more discriminating appraisal of the drawings is that Keith Haring was a far more complex artist, both formally and thematically, than he is sometimes regarded to be. There are still commentators who seem to resent the fact that (like his friend and sometime-collaborator Madonna) he made a sudden leap from street to stardom, ignoring the establishment's conventional rites of passage. And because his life and work can be seen as emblematic of popular culture in the eighties, his achievements are sometimes derogated as charming, but light-weight. Such over simplifications are resoundingly refuted by the artist's versatile and richly textured graphic legacy.

Footnotes

1. Quoted in David Sheff, "Keith Haring," interview in *Rolling Stone* (July 10, 1989) p. 63
2. See Bryion Gysin, "The Sculpted Line," introduction to *Keith Haring*, catalogue of the exhibition at CAPC", Mus...e d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux (1985-1986), p.9
3. see Keith Haring in *Flash Art* (March 1984), p. 22
4. Quoted in John Gruen, *Keith Haring, The Authorized Biography* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991), p.38
5. *Ibid.*, p.29
6. See Daniel Drenger, "Art and Life: An Interview with Keith Haring" in *Columbia Art Review* (Spring 1988), p.45

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