



KEITH HARING

13 March - 13 June 1999 City Gallery, Wellington



DJ, 1983, ink on paper, 584 x 740 mm, Collection: Estate of Keith Haring



Untitled, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 2438 x 2438mm, Collection: Eli Broad Family Foundation, Santa Monica, California



Untitled, 1981, sumi ink and acrylic on paper, 2718 x 4724 mm, Collection: Estate of Keith Haring



Untitled, 1982, vinyl ink on vinyl tarpaulin, 3084 x 3084 mm, Private Collection



Untitled, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 3048 x 3658 mm, Collection: Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

Keith Haring transcended the confines of the art world to become an international phenomenon. More than any other artist, Haring

captured the vitality of New York in the 1980s in a way that continues to be accessible and engaging to a wide audience. Seen on New York's streets, and in its bars, clubs and tenement neighbourhoods, Haring's vibrant public artworks articulated the energy of the city, picturing its human joys, triumphs and frustrations.

Haring was very much a product of his time and of his environment. He was born in the small, conventional community of Reading, Pennsylvania in 1958. A child of the TV generation, he produced flipbooks and drawings of popular cartoon figures such as Mickey Mouse and other characters which he created himself. He was also fascinated by photographs from NASA and the dreams of the nation as it made its first forays into outer space. These hope-filled explorations into the unknown paralleled Haring's own dreams of travel and the big city which beckoned to him.

Haring moved to New York in 1978 as a scholarship student at the School of Visual Arts. After leaving school in 1980, Haring began drawing with chalk on blacked-out advertising panels in the New York underground. His motifs of dancing figures, space-craft, pyramids and barking dogs were soon appearing all over the inner city. Haring found that his captive audience was also an enthusiastic one, and included people from many different strata of society.

Haring believed that good art was inherently democratic and should break down barriers between people, dismantling hierarchies. This philosophy, as well as Haring's embrace of popular street idiom and urban themes contributed to the appreciation his work received from the Latino and African-American communities in New York and, later, from people he met during his extensive world travels. 'Adieu Euro-American insularity, hello world beat,' as one critic noted.

Although Keith Haring believed the meaning of his artworks should remain open-ended—to define my art is to destroy the purpose of it—at the same time he offered verbal insights into such images as the ubiquitous dog: 'It's really a four-legged animal rather than a dog. It's a basic symbol for animal life or for nature... When the animal is bigger than the man, it stands for nature, or a predator... The scale is often manipulated to give things different meanings. When the animal is small, it could be the man's pet.'

'CHALK IS A GREAT MEDIUM, CLEAN, ECONOMICAL, FAST; JUST STICK IT IN YOUR POCKET,' KEITH HARING SAID IN 1981. 'I WILL DRAW AS MUCH AS I CAN FOR AS MANY PEOPLE AS I CAN FOR AS LONG AS I CAN. DRAWING IS STILL BASICALLY THE SAME AS IT HAS BEEN SINCE PREHISTORIC TIMES. IT BRINGS TOGETHER MAN AND THE WORLD. IT LIVES THROUGH MAGIC.' KEITH HARING, MARCH 1982

For his first gallery show in 1982, he transformed part of the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in New York's SoHo into a night club. This was characteristic of Haring's attitude towards the established art world: he

retained his street savvy, shrewdly incorporating elements of the urban experience with the formal exhibition installation, achieving explosive results.

Haring wanted his art to remain accessible while the prices for his paintings soared. In 1986 he established the Pop Shop, selling all manner of motif-covered merchandise: flip-books, baseball caps, clothing, condom-holders and his famous inflatable babies. Haring continued with his philanthropic activities, producing public artworks and billboards protesting drug abuse, Apartheid and AIDS, among other social ills.

Haring lived his life in the full glare of New York's big city bright lights. Always retaining some of the awe of the small-town boy, he relished his encounters with the rich and famous, even when he himself was a successful celebrity. He carried his polaroid camera with him to parties and events, vigilantly recording his up-close moments with his idols. Those adored by Haring included both his long-time heroes such as Andy Warhol and his pre-fame friends who also found fortune, like Madonna and the B-52s.

'THE TV AND TELEPHONE HAVE SIGNIFICANCE IN MY DRAWINGS JUST AS EVERYDAY THINGS THAT HAVE SO MUCH POWER OVER OUR LIVES. PEOPLE WHO GREW UP IN THE 'MODERN WORLD' TEND TO TAKE THESE THINGS FOR GRANTED, WITHOUT STOPPING TO THINK THAT THEY ARE NEW AND THAT THE WORLD EXISTED WITHOUT THEM FOR SO LONG. WE CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT ACKNOWLEDGING THINGS ARE DIFFERENT NOW.' KEITH HARING

At the same time, the Haring brand gained commercial popularity and he designed record covers, advertisements and Swatch watches. From his mentor Andy Warhol, he learned to ignore distinctions between fine art and commercial art. 'Andy set a precedent for the possibility of my art to exist. He was the first public artist in a holistic sense and his art and life changed the concept we have of "art" and "life" in the 20th century.'

Haring's linear designs have been assimilated into fashion, magazine graphics and

'A LOT OF THE DRAWINGS ARE ABOUT POWER AND FORCE: THE TRANSFER OF POWER, POWER BEING USED FOR DIFFERENT REASONS. ONE OF THE BIGGEST ISSUES IN THE WORLD NOW IS THE AMASSING OR BALANCE OF POWER, SUPPOSEDLY TO AVOID TOTAL DESTRUCTION. THE FLYING SAUCERS REPRESENT AN ULTIMATE POWER — THE UNKNOWN.' KEITH HARING, 1981

advertising. His 'radiant baby' has become one of the few truly innocent and optimistic visual icons of the late 20th century.

The debates surrounding his reputation as a serious painter have continued since Haring's death. While his dismissal of many traditional 'Fine Art' values alienated some prominent critics, he did achieve recognition in the art-historical arena as well as the commercial. Edward Lucie-Smith described him as 'one of the major figures in the New York school of the 1980s', pointing to his 'deliberately hard-edged, inflexible way of treating images [which] had a widespread impact on other artists.'

Keith Haring painted prolifically and partied hard. The geeky kid who had dabbled with Christianity and hippie culture in the 1970s was quick to pick up on two of the emerging trends of the 1980s—celebrity worship and hip-hop culture.

'Haring showed us that the art and dance of the blacks and Latinos, if woven into the "art of New York", could establish that city as a world creative centre beyond belief... As one of the deepest portions of this achievement, Haring poetically translated electric boogie and the break dance into his special idiom... he established a down-to-earth humanism, idealizing human beings in the richness of their moves and affirmations.' Robert Farris Thompson

He socialised and collaborated with the Warhol milieu and with the singer Grace Jones, and remained friends with peers who also found major success, such as musicians Madonna and the B-52s, and artists including Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Haring lived his life through his art—illustrating his concerns and contradictions. While his works were appearing as murals in children's hospitals and day-care centres, they were also gracing the walls of Paradise Garage, his favourite underground dance club, and gay venues around the city. Haring's art is imbued with the high-spirits of the pre-AIDS era, with its rampant, unabashed hedonism. Haring was an

Keith Haring spent his childhood evenings drawing with his father or alone, both copying well-known cartoon figures such as Mickey Mouse and creating new characters of his own. He was very much a child of the TV generation, and his ambition was to work as an animator for Walt Disney. The funky, fluent asexual figures in his work were inspired by the cartoon stars of the 60s and 70s such as Gumby and the half-human animals like Snoopy and Bugs Bunny. Although some of his images are irreverent parodies of cartoon innocence, Haring retained his affection for Disney.

important figure in the New York gay scene of the 1980s and some of the work is blatantly, and often ironically, erotic.

Music and dance fuelled Haring's life-blood. As he painted he would move to the rhythm, infusing his figures with the syncopation and cadence of whatever he was listening to. 'He'd come in [to his studio] and put his stereo on full blast and later there would be several finished canvases,' a friend recalled.

During the last years of his life the works became increasingly anguished and angry, reflecting the blight of the AIDS epidemic. Haring had said that his art and his life were dominated by sexuality, and this now took on a new and sadder meaning. As he watched his friends die, Haring entered a nightmarish world in which his

beloved cartoon figures were transfigured into demons and victims. By the second half of the 1980s the party was, if not completely over, certainly winding down. Diagnosed HIV-positive in 1989, Haring painted with undiminished vigour and invention right up until his death. He became a zealous activist, creating protest artwork for the Gay Men's Health Crisis and ACT-UP, also donating imagery for safe-sex education and funding for

'THE REASON THAT THE "BABY" HAS BECOME MY LOGO OR SIGNATURE IS THAT IT IS THE PUREST AND MOST POSITIVE EXPERIENCE OF HUMAN EXISTENCE. CHILDREN ARE THE BEARERS OF LIFE IN ITS SIMPLEST AND MOST JOYOUS FORM.' KEITH HARING, 1986

AIDS care. His public deeds and art practice continued until his death on February 16, 1990.

In 1989, Haring established the Keith Haring Foundation. The Foundation's charter is to provide funding and support to AIDS organisations and children's charities; to promote the work of Haring, both in fine art and commercial fields; and to underwrite art education programming in schools and museums.

'Haring, no matter where you're coming from, has been a major player since he shut down the eighties, his purchase on history tightened by a brief, radiant life and a passionate, exemplary death.' Robert Pincus-Witten

'I AM MAKING THINGS IN THE WORLD THAT WON'T GO AWAY WHEN I DO' KEITH HARING

Keith Haring believed in art. He believed in its power to transform lives; perhaps more important, he also believed that art was capable of engaging and enriching the spirit.

David A. Ross

A belief in the transformational power of art is a key principle for the City Gallery, Wellington. Our focus is on artists who have made a significant contribution to the development of 20th century art; whose works enrich and empower their viewers. The City Gallery is delighted to present a retrospective exhibition of work by Keith Haring—an artist who believed in the potent role of art in enriching and affirming daily life.

Keith Haring's iconic images of life, love and death pulse with the energy of the city. He used New York as his canvas, producing many public works of art like a 'giant walkthrough cartoon-show all over the city'. Haring's work bridges the various contexts in which it was created—the art world, the club scene, and the streets. He moved from the subway walls to the major museums of the world, believing that 'art gains power through imagination, invention and confrontation.'

Over his tragically short career Haring assembled an extraordinarily powerful body of imagery. He conveyed essential human concepts with the simplest of symbols: glowing babies, energy waves, hearts, barking dogs. His unique and utterly accessible imagery has become a universally recognised visual language of the late 20th century. With his groundbreaking art practice and tireless community work on behalf of AIDS awareness, nuclear disarmament, anti-racism and gay

rights, Haring ensured that a wide range of people gained power from art.

Perhaps the most authoritative presentation yet of the life and work of this important late 20th century figure, the City Gallery, Wellington is the only Australasian venue for *Keith Haring*. The Keith Haring retrospective is organised by the Whitney

Museum of American Art, New York, and supported by The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation. We thank both organisations

for enabling this important exhibition to travel to New Zealand. The City Gallery, Wellington is committed to developing such partnerships with leading international art museums, resulting in opportunities for New Zealand audiences to directly experience the power of significant international works of art in their own country. It is a privilege for City Gallery staff to work in conjunction with the Keith Haring Foundation, to create such a dynamic context for the presentation of Haring's work in New Zealand. We also acknowledge the generosity of the many lenders to the exhibition in

making their works available. We have no doubt that the presence of Keith Haring's life-affirming works of art will reward and enrich visitors to this remarkable exhibition.

Paula Savage

Paula Savage
Director, City Gallery, Wellington



Keith Haring is organised by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Support for this exhibition has been provided by The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation. Artworks © The Estate of Keith Haring. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Top left: *Untitled*, 1990, acrylic and felt tip marker on terracotta, 609.6 x 279.4 mm, Collection: Estate of Keith Haring

Bottom left: *Untitled*, 1982, liquid marker ink and acrylic on found canvas, 2184 x 2184mm, Collection: Angela Ho

Top: *A Pile of Crowns for Jean-Michel Basquiat*, 1988, acrylic and enamel on canvas, 1829 x 1829mm, Collection: Estate of Keith Haring

Bottom: Keith Haring by Michel Weyhe 1989

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