

MARTOS GALLERY

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Keith Haring *Surface To Air*

OPENING TUESDAY, MAY 6, 2025
May 6 – July 26, 2025

Martos Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of more than thirty important works by Keith Haring, spanning the years 1980 to 1989, some presented publicly for the first time.

Keith Haring never met a surface he couldn't transform. The space between his hand and whatever it came into contact with was alive to his eye, generating an animate visual line, a line of thought made visible. While every work of art is made in real time, Haring's speed and dexterity, his energy and fluidity, allowed images to appear near-instantaneously, out of thin air. His was a form of automatic writing in an immediately recognizable iconographic language. Long after his passing, his art remains identifiable far and wide, continuing to capture the popular imagination, transcending borders, speaking universally. The origin of his phenomenon was here in New York City, in the street, in the subway—consider Haring as the first major underground artist since the 1960s—seen everywhere from nightclubs and basketball courts to public libraries, medical and childcare centers.

From 1980 onwards, New Yorkers on their way to work or to school, going about their daily routines, along with visitors to the city, tourists from the world over, encountered his art by way of his "subway drawings." Radiant babies, barking dogs, hovering spaceships, figures riding dolphins, all rendered in white chalk on the black paper covering empty ad spaces, often commenting on the ads around them—vertical blackboards for lessons in a subterranean classroom. The platform was a public gallery where Haring asserted: anyone can understand it, everyone can enjoy it. Even after being presented in numerous gallery and museum exhibitions, Haring's art never lost its sense of democracy, and was increasingly placed in the service of advocacy, addressing the AIDS and crack epidemics, apartheid in South Africa, nuclear proliferation, the growing threat of technology, the rise of religious intolerance, the overtaking of minds and bodies. That these issues were raised within a visual realm largely associated with joy emphasizes that joy, as endorsed by this artist over and over again, is nothing less than a pure expression of freedom. We can only imagine what Haring's art of public address would have to offer if he were here today.

The surfaces Haring enlivened include sheet metal, masonite, wood, rice paper, glass, Plexiglas, vinyl tarps, foam, and walls, including a mural for the Berlin Wall, even the human body—that of choreographer Bill T. Jones and the singer Grace Jones famously, each transformed into living sculpture. An idea of fluid movement, the dance of bold lines, whether angular or sinuous, and the choreography of a composition, is central to Haring's work, consistent from the very beginning. To paint and draw was to perform. Once completed, although the work was done, the images continued to perform. Bodies pass through permeable bodies. There is uplift and buoyancy, and "everything that rises must converge." One of the earlier works here, *Untitled, May 23, 1981*, features a dark human form in silhouette high above the raised arms of a half dozen figures who have sent it airborne, ready to catch it upon its fall: an image of flight and suspended animation. Among other works on view are two foam figures from 1984, with outstretched capes or wings, originally created for the New York nightclub The Peppermint Lounge. Many from the early '80s are breakdancers defying gravity. An upside-down figure in one subway drawing appears to be somersaulting over another. In a recurrent image from this period, two figures are seen racing to the top of a pyramid. In an untitled work from Haring's Tokyo Series, 1983, a seated figure with an ankh, the Egyptian symbol of eternal life, between its legs, appears to be attempting levitation. While every image is fixed, set flat to its surface, the implication of bodies in motion abounds, the artist's first of all.

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When we consider painting as performance, the artist who likely comes to mind—by way of a well-known short film of him—is Jackson Pollock, with whom we identify the animated all-over composition and the artist as a presence forever hovering above and before his work¹. Haring, born two years after Pollock's death, is also present in everything he left behind, most intensely in his own all-over compositions, where puzzle-like pieces intricately interlock, in works both large and small. An untitled drawing from 1988, measuring twenty-four by thirty-four inches, barely contains the density of energy packed tightly into its frame. A vinyl tarp measuring more than six feet square, filled from edge to edge with canary yellow lines on a fire engine red ground, black dots and dashes optically charging the composition, appears entirely electrified. Here, we fully appreciate Haring's power of immediate communication in direct relation to his deceptive virtuosity as a colorist. Chromatic contrast amplifies and defines works where he places cherry red figures in motion on a lime green ground, giving great presence to a modestly sized image, one that easily projects across the space of the gallery. Elsewhere, Haring plays jet black against bright yellow, and red off black. With drawings, Haring's choice of paper was equally well considered: Sumi ink on orange dyed paper, and on delicate baby blue sheets. Graphic and calligraphic, the palpable pulse in Haring's art, its aliveness, is equally evident in works that are intimate and those engaging public space—the ultimate stage—and thus engaging public consciousness.

Among its major works, this show includes two sections of Haring's ambitious FDR Drive frieze (1984), each nearly nine feet wide, spray enamel on sheet metal. The original work comprised about thirty panels spanning more than two hundred feet. Installed along the parkway tracing the city's east side, it was seen daily by motorists—bodies at rest or in motion, depending on traffic flow. This was art as a drive-by movie, an animated cartoon. Two years prior, Haring had created the Houston/Bowery mural, flanked at the top by his signature triple-eyed smiling face, a line of inverted (radioactive?) dancing figures between them, a pair of atomic nuclear symbols and running figures below, immersed in the glow of fluorescent color. For two months, cars, buses, cyclists and pedestrians passed by daily. If Haring understood anything about the reception of his work, it was that the audience could be anyone, whoever we are, wherever we're from, wherever we're going. His art, he himself, his city, his audience in perpetual motion. We still are.

—Bob Nickas

¹. In 1951, the Swiss photographer Hans Namuth made a short film of Jackson Pollock as he created a painting on a sheet of glass, set up so that Namuth and his camera would be positioned below, allowing for a "painting's eye view" as it came into being.