



## You Don't Know Keith

*CAC show of Pop Art icon Keith Haring's early work is a revelation*

**MATT MORRIS** // MAR 2, 2011

Keith Haring's iconography of silhouetted figures, pointy-eared dogs, swelling hearts and televisions — produced in an instantly recognizable style of heavy black outlines filling jumbled compositions — is synonymous with the Pop Art and street culture of the 1980s.

That was the milieu in which he worked until his early death in 1990 at age 31 due to AIDS-related complications. His cartoonish scenes have remained highly visible expressions of his homosexuality, his concerns about society's increasing dependence on technology and frank representations of social injustice at a time when these issues were just surfacing in public debate.

The *Keith Haring: 1978-1982* exhibition, now at Contemporary Art Center through Sept. 5 and curated by CAC Director Raphaela Platow, is a look at Haring's early years. The CAC show — co-organized by Vienna's Kunsthalle Wien — is the exhibit's first (and so far only) scheduled U.S. stop. It shows and tells stories of how Haring's rigorous art practice evolved into his well-known style and also how that practice fit into his broader community efforts as performer, curator, poster designer and activist.

During a walk through the exhibition, Platow talks about curating work by a well-known, deceased artist.

"You don't do it to repeat what has already been done," she says. "The opportunity we have now is to look again and reconsider."

This is resoundingly the experience offered through the Haring exhibition. More than 250 works are on view and more than half have never been previously exhibited. The show includes sketchbook pages and other archival ephemera, video works, posters, paintings and drawings. By seeing what led up to the emergence of his recognizable graphic style, Haring's life work is shown to be much more complex than many originally thought.

Although born and raised in rural Pennsylvania, Haring is associated with downtown New York City, where he lived and worked starting in 1978 when he enrolled at the School of Visual Arts. The exhibition begins in 1978, with drawings that bear only a faint resemblance to the bold cartoon figures he went on to invent. In his early work, Haring was wildly experimental. Sometimes the work is totally abstract and at other times more literal. And still other times, he took cues from Conceptual Art and writers like William Burroughs to make text-based works.

A series of "Untitled (Variations)" from 1978 feature some of the uncovered gems in the exhibition. Each work on paper features one deep-red polygon painted in gouache. They are reductive and minimal, reminding the viewer of the age of High Minimalism that had been the rule in the art world for a decade prior to Haring's practice. He meant for these to function as a system of shapes that could interlock into complex patterning. To look at nearby sets of drawings, one can see his implementation of these forms, like puzzle pieces inspired by Jean Dubuffet, Gustav Klimt and Paul Klee.

Another set of 1978 drawings features surrealistic scenes full of penises more clearly depicted than the phallic doodle Haring went on to use in many works. In "Misplaced

Heads,” the head of the penis is shifted away from the shaft and balls so that a lively pattern of deconstructed penises fills the page. Many of these works are playful, but occasionally Haring uses the phallus as a symbol of ego and masculine power, such as in “World Trade Center,” in which the two towers have been replaced by erect penises.

This is a perfect example of Platow’s “look again and reconsider” philosophy — the drawing has a new, different connotation because of 9/11. It reminds us that the World Trade Center once was controversial and criticized. Though it might sting our patriotism now, Haring’s drawing calls out the architecture for the inherent hubris and overcompensation of such a structure.

Concurrent with his explorations, Haring was actively fostering a sense of community within the downtown arts scene by organizing exhibitions, writing press releases, designing flyers, planning dance parties, video-recording performances and even producing Xeroxed booklets for visitors to take away from the shows. His generosity and genuineness fueled his belief that art should be a shared common experience among all people.

I have particular added admiration for Haring, having learned about his multiple roles in the arts. It takes a sincere love for art and for the community to be willing to stretch yourself so thin while also maintaining a studio practice.

He wrote in one of his journals, which Platow quotes in an essay in the exhibition catalogue, “To think that they — the public — do not appreciate art because they don’t understand it, and to continue to make art that they don’t understand and therefore become alienated from, may mean that the artist is the one who doesn’t understand or appreciate art and is thriving in this ‘self-proclaimed knowledge or art’ that is actually bullshit.”

Haring’s exhibition is one of several at the CAC in the past 10 years that looks at street art for its potential to challenge convention and take art outside the institution. Think of 2004’s *Beautiful Losers*, the giant group exhibition of street and graffiti artists, or last year’s Shepard Fairey behemoth, the remains of which are still visible on wall murals in the CAC’s lobby and around town. No other institution I can think of has returned to street art in the contemporary art narrative more often than the CAC.

The CAC parses labels with Haring, pointing out that he was not strictly a graffiti artist. When he did make renegade public artworks, they were always temporary and easy to remove. In the early 1980s he would tape up small fragments of paintings on walls, street posts and even the sides of trash cans, or do chalk drawings in the subway at varying scales that could just be wiped away afterward.

A slideshow of more than 1,200 of Haring's subway drawings is included in the exhibition, accompanied by a selection of music from the club scenes of Haring's day, curated by Scott Ewalt.

As the CAC did with Fairey, plans are currently in the works to create public projects to accompany the exhibition. Since Haring is no longer living, the CAC will invite artists from around the globe to create in his stead. Platow says she wanted to figure out, "How can we create a glimpse of the energy that Haring had?"

During just the handful of years covered in the exhibition, Haring was clearly energetic, tireless and rapidly evolving. One of the last 1982 works in the exhibition is an untitled painting on paper that measures 72-by-112 inches. Three nearly life-sized men with triumphantly erect cocks gather around a pulsing DayGlo pink heart. Squiggles and marks that recall those early deep-red polygon shapes fill the entire composition with an all-over energy. The picture seems like an anthem for Haring's vision of a community beyond the reach of social, political and technological oppression.

Haring was a heartfelt populist. Through his activities and imagery, he offered glimpses of a world that celebrated queerness, empowered humanity and used art as a communication method for all peoples.

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**KEITH HARING: 1978-1982 continues through Sept. 5 at the Contemporary Arts Center.**

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13012378/you-dont-know-keith>