

Art

Return of the Crawling Baby

Brooklyn Museum looks back at Keith Haring's early career

'Keith Haring: 1978–1982'

Brooklyn Museum
200 Eastern Parkway
718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org
Through July 8

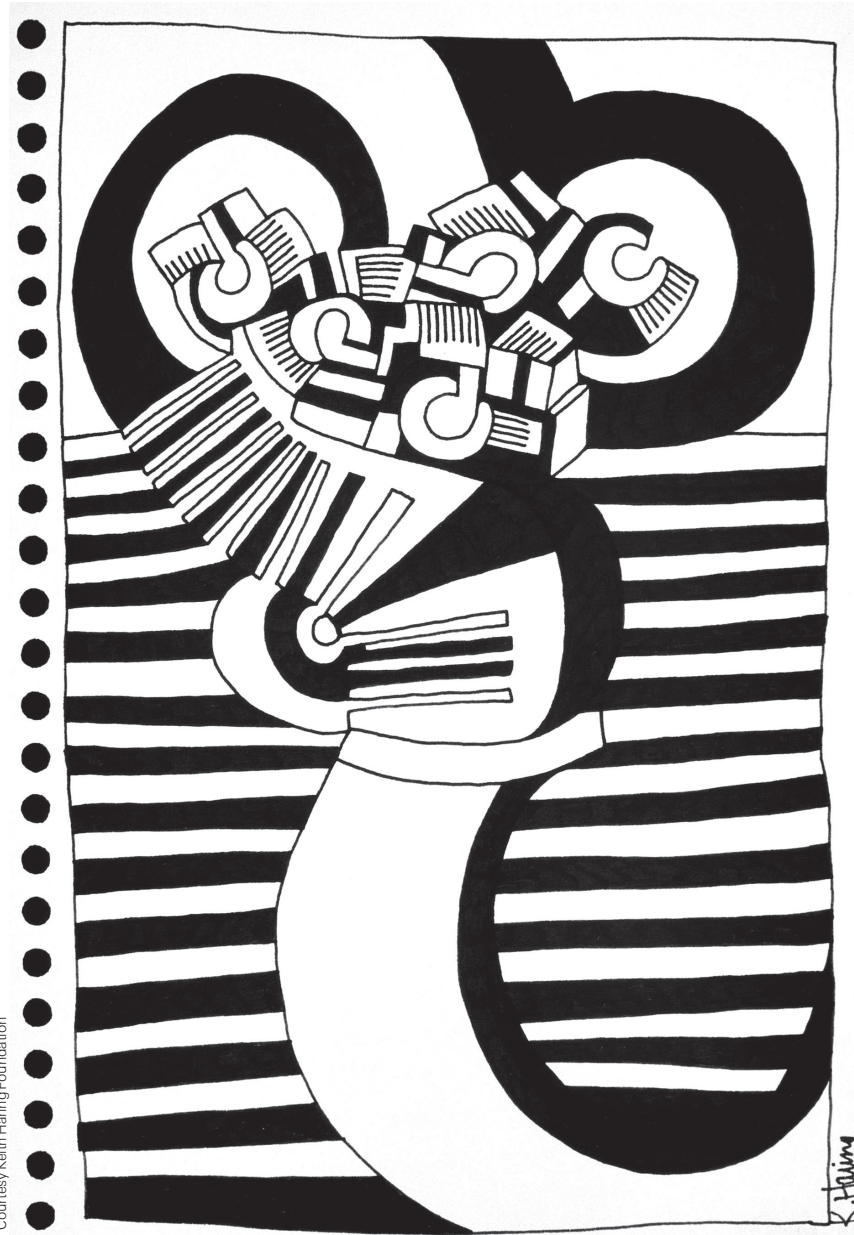
BY R.C. BAKER

Keith Haring (1958–90) was cursed to live in interesting times. His generation partied feverishly but was decimated by a plague made worse by official neglect. Sincere and industrious, he created art that could be engagingly celebratory or polemically pissed, but which, as it progressed, too often slid into one-note turgidity. The Brooklyn Museum's "Keith Haring: 1978–1982" surveys the start of his career, from college endeavors to his legendary guerrilla posters in the New York subways.

The kid who left Kutztown, Pennsylvania, to attend New York's School of Visual Arts certainly showed promise. A 1978 group of abstract compositions on letter-size paper, which opens the show, segues between the sinuously organic and the crisply geometric. Untitled (as are the bulk of works here), these vibrantly asymmetrical ink drawings are enlivened by imaginative patterns created from lines of widely varying weights. But as his ink paintings increased in scale, they became more simplistic, sacrificing subtlety for billboard bombast. Cartoon pyramids, crawling babies, barking dogs, nuclear reactors, and other symbols from his personal iconography came to dominate, all rendered in the same monotonous brushstroke.

Although Haring studied the abstract expressionists, the only thing he seems to have taken away from their grand canvases was horror vacui—he often covered every inch of every surface with a mark. While splatters of flung paint provide a literal record of Pollock's *pas de deux* with the canvas, and Motherwell's yard-long, sweeping brushes can be felt in his huge, nuanced shapes, a 1979 video of Haring actually painting reveals the artist hunched over and taking short, crabbed steps across his carpet-size sheets of paper. Each of his laborious strokes would easily fit on the much smaller scale of a sketch pad.

In 1978, Haring wrote in a journal entry about "body-involvement" painting, an attempt to "unify my movements so that I can paint consistently at a very high rate of speed." While he indeed cranked out numerous large paintings during these years, his stuttering application wrings any fluidity or grace from the cluttered compositions. One massive mural bristles with featureless figures who crawl, swim, dance like Egyptians, and generally cavort, all highlighted by



Courtesy Keith Haring Foundation

Before the
monotony
kicked in:
Untitled, 1978

"motion" dashes, a visual trope long before rendered DOA by generations of bad cartoonists. This grandiose hodgepodge delivers neither the snappy frisson of a sharp magazine graphic nor any sense of that gravitational pull a resolved, large-scale painting exerts on your own body. To be sure, the intrepid museumgoer can invest time in deciphering what such symbols as a six-eyed behemoth brandishing a crucifix or a TV-headed mom-to-be might mean. But cryptic content is beside the point when conveyed in the visual equivalent of logorrhea.

Still, Haring was wise to eschew color, texture, tonality, and other basic elements in his paintings because his occasional forays into sophistication met unhappy

ends. In a medium-size painting from 1978, he began with a sumi-ink drawing of a vague grid of figures, which he spray-bombed with muddy colors capped by splatters of red, the whole mishmash arbitrarily turned upside down. (Amusingly, at the opening, "Tony Shafrazi &" had been scrawled in blue ink on the wall label for this capsized work, an addendum to the official notation, "Courtesy of Mugrabi Collection." Seems the infamous art huckster—and occasional vandal—is still doing everything he can to cash in on Haring.)

Haring was only 20 when he made that particular piece, so it's not surprising that he was out of his depth. But

the problem here is inflating these five early years of his career into a major museum show. Critic Robert Hughes once described an overheated art market's "fetish about the infallible freshness of youth." That was certainly the dynamic back then with Haring. But as this show reveals, his work was all too fallible.

One of Haring's guerrilla-art projects involved combining cut-up newspaper headlines into quasi-political statements. If the wit of *Reagan Slain by Hero Cop* (July 1980) seems a tad elusive, Haring gets credit for calling bullshit on the sunny mendacity of the Great Communicator, even before he was elected. An out and about gay man and budding activist, Haring had no illusions about how the ruling powers—from the cop on the beat to the commander in chief—viewed him and his friends.

Around this same time, though, Haring unfortunately stuck some of those friends in a tedious video, one that featured a choppy soundtrack and bland typography against flat, pastel backgrounds. He was in need of a lesson from Mark Morrisroe, an almost exact—though much less famous—contemporary, who, like Haring, died of AIDS and whose photographs of friends and lovers were compellingly posed and strikingly lit.

Some of the most fascinating materials here are not Haring's art at all but flyers for shows he curated, party snapshots, and videos of such scenesters as the eccentrically talented Klaus Nomi, one of downtown's earliest AIDS victims. Perhaps this show should have been pared down to a few of the strongest paintings and these archives, then combined with info on the eight years remaining to Haring, when he donated artwork to hospitals, day care centers, and charities; painted his famous "Crack Is Wack" mural in East Harlem; and collaborated with the likes of Madonna, William Burroughs, and Grace Jones. It would make a great historical survey up at the main library.

Haring's heart was always in the right place. In 1978, he wrote that it was crucial for artists to realize that "the public needs art, and not to make bourgeois art for a few and ignore the masses." This unfeigned belief leads to the most engaging section of the exhibit, a slide show of Haring's white chalk drawings done on the black paper that subway authorities used back then to cover unsold advertising space.

Haring was often dodging the cops and was sometimes cheered on by passersby as he whipped out these drawings. Amid that underground hurly-burly, his stripped-down icons make perfect sense—the photos document commuters pausing to take in images like an anthropomorphized clock rushing past a barking dog. Haring was competing with posters for Hollywood movies, Broadway shows, and all manner of alluring corporate come-ons, and calibrated his graphics to snag and briefly entrance scurrying eyeballs. In that context, he succeeded masterfully, the charms of his winged mermaids, dancing boomboxes, and radiant babies not yet dissipated under glass on the museum wall.