

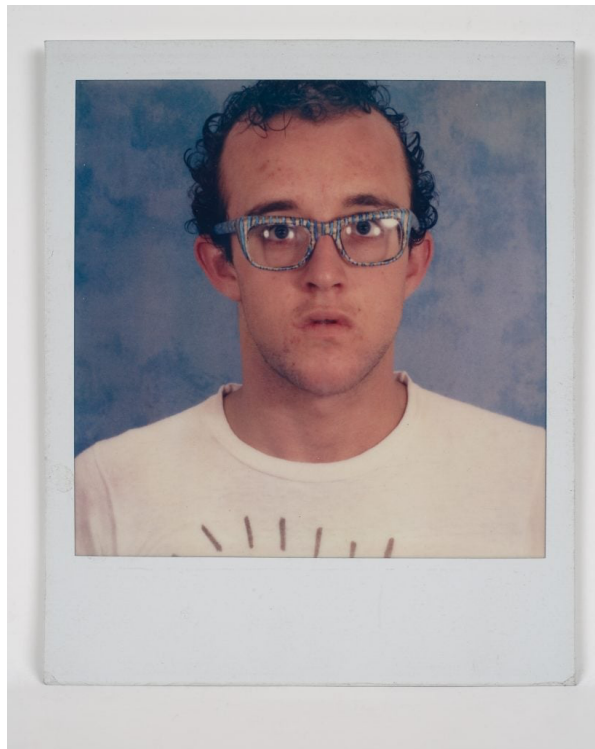
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William Van Meter, "A New Show of Keith Haring's Last Paintings is An Uplifting Elegy," *Artnet*, September 19, 2025.

Art & Exhibitions

A New Show of Keith Haring's Last Paintings Is an Uplifting Elegy

At Gladstone Gallery in New York, Keith Haring's monumental paintings offer vivid invocations of joy and loss.



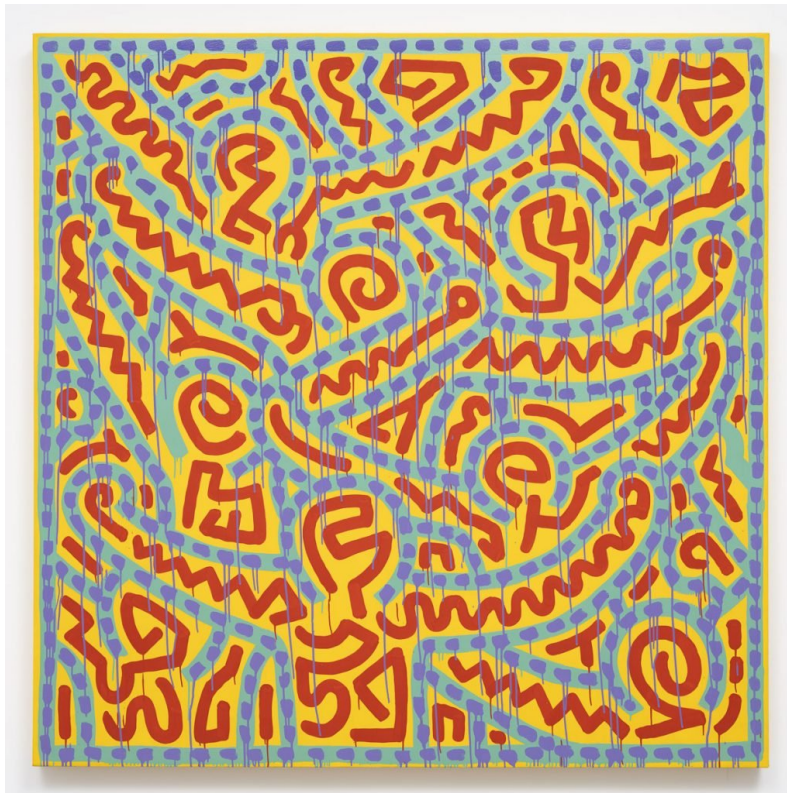
Keith Haring Self-portrait wearing glasses painted by Kenny Scharf, Polaroid, circa 1980, Courtesy Keith Haring Foundation

by William Van Meter

September 19, 2025

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Earlier this week at Gladstone Gallery in New York, partner Caroline Luce was standing in front of a six-foot-tall painting unmistakably by Keith Haring. A conflagration of bodies in rapture, it could have been a blissful dance floor at Paradise Garage—packed forms, arms outstretched, caught mid-motion. Brash yellow and red shapes vibrate against a pulsing field of electric blue, the surface alive with passionate drips of purple and syncopated rhythm. For all its liveliness, this radiant depiction of community was in fact the last studio painting Haring ever completed. He finished it in November 1989; three months later, in February 1990, he was gone.



Keith Haring, *Untitled* (1989). Courtesy of the Keith Haring Foundation and Gladstone Gallery.

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“Every time I see it, I get chills,” Luce said. “What’s really fascinating is that it hearkens back to so many of Haring’s earlier motifs—bodies in poses of dancing, joy, exaltation—and what you have here is a community of people. As an activist, as an artist, as a friend, as a member of a family, the idea of joy at a time when he was so sick and knew that he only had but so long to be in this world—that the last image is one of togetherness, celebration, vitality. Even the palette is sunny and uplifting. In this single work, it shows the balance Haring was able to strike—to hold all the joy and love and beauty at the same time as the pain, suffering, and loss.”

Haring’s paintings take center stage in “Liberating the Soul,” on view through November 1. It is a tight edit of eight works, but they’re monumental in scale, uplifting in spirit, and elegiac in tone. Made between 1984 and 1989, they confront both life and mortality with brash color and unrelenting energy. They are also studies in communication: Haring’s signature line, deceptively simple, conveys complex messages about sexuality, activism, and community with disarming clarity. Many are painted not on canvas but on industrial tarps—vast, unconventional surfaces that amplify their urgency and rawness.

“He started using tarps in 1981 to find a different medium that was outside of a traditional painting practice,” Luce said. “He continued to use tarps throughout his body of

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work. The grommets, the sheen, the fact that the material maintains its integrity and becomes a part of the work rather than being overpainted is all very much a part of it. The size of these tarps evidences how compelling he was at scale and how his language was really able to evoke emotions and energies in a very signature, singular way.”



Keith Haring, *A Pile of Crowns for Jean-Michel Basquiat* (1988). Courtesy of the Keith Haring Foundation and Gladstone Gallery.

Another startling work is *A Pile of Crowns for Jean-Michel Basquiat*, a triangle-shaped canvas that depicts a disheveled mountain of his fellow artist’s motif. “Haring painted it almost immediately after Basquiat passed away in August of 1988,” Luce said. “It’s on raw canvas, so it feels a little bit different than the other ones. It’s a monument, and the paint has actually seeped into the

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surface of the material. It's poetic and quite moving to take in. He was friends with Basquiat throughout the '80s. They met when Keith was a student at SVA in 1979, so they were in each other's lives for that entire decade."

Tree of Life is another elegy for a lost friend. "She was a student at Columbia and it was a tragic car accident. She passed away at 20, so on the back, the signature in it, he says 'In memory of Maria Dahlin.' Christian iconography runs through his work, so here the *Tree of Life*, is certainly a biblical reference that he would've been aware of. And as always with Keith, it's quite open to interpretation."

The painting *Safe Sex* harnesses vibrant color to capture the spirit of the decade and nods to Haring's AIDS activism. *Brazil* could be an ecstatic beach scene of overlapping bodies or a cartographical study. A jumble of intricate hieroglyphs crowds an orange mass pressing towards a cerulean expanse in the corner.

"He spent a lot of time in Brazil," Luce said. "You could kind of imagine it—the coastline of Brazil, the density of the rainforest. Again, very open to interpretation. Formally, this has a really interesting connection to another major work from the end of his practice, which is called *Unfinished Painting*, which leaves some blank space open and dripping. And that kind of empty space—is it the Atlantic

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Ocean? Is it something more cerebral? As always with Haring, he doesn't want to pin you into one reading of it."



Keith Haring, *Untitled* (1985). Courtesy of the Keith Haring Foundation and Gladstone Gallery.

A real wild card in the show is an untitled 1985 painting. It's not shocking that it's by Haring, but it's not as immediately recognizable as the rest. At its center coils an abstracted, bound phallus, while his familiar motifs seem absent. Instead, the composition channels the extremes of the decade—the totally 1980s design and color sense of a Memphis-style squiggle and bolt, and beneath it, a grim subtext. The result is mysterious, colorful, and unsettling, a work that shows Haring's range as well as his edge. A

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spectral hand surfaces too, grasping and ambiguous — divine, human, or both. Could this be another safe sex screed with a less clear message? Who knows. “It feels universal,” Luce said, “but also very ’80s.”



American artist Keith Haring paints a section of the Berlin Wall in 1986. His bright yellow mural, with red lines and figures including the Statue of Liberty, became a symbol of hope and unity before the Wall came down. (Photo by Patrick PIEL/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

For Luce, assembling the show in collaboration with the Keith Haring Foundation was a rewarding journey, one that brought her closer to the artist’s vision. “I’m inspired by Keith’s ability to hold joy and love and pain and suffering in the same breath,” she said. “These threads of community and love, activism and then just joy and sexuality and dancing and being together, they all come through. And that’s why his legacy endures, and why he still feels so present and resonant today.”

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*“Liberating the Soul” is on view through November 1 at
Gladstone Gallery, 515 W. 24th Street, New York, NY
10011.*