

GLADSTONE

"Liberating the Soul: Keith Haring's Canvas Carnival of Life and Loss at Gladstone, NYC (Article and Video)," *Artefuse*, November 6, 2025.

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Installation view, Keith Haring, *Liberating the Soul: Keith Haring Paintings*. Gladstone, New York, 2025.

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Keith Haring, *Liberating the Soul: Keith Haring Paintings*

Gladstone, New York

September 18 – November 1, 2025

Images courtesy of Gladstone

In its generous, eight-work presentation of late-career canvases and tarpaulins by Keith Haring, the exhibition *Liberating the Soul: Keith Haring's Paintings* at Gladstone Gallery reignites the force of an artist who channelled joy, activism, and scale into what were once subway scribbles and under-the-radar public works.

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In these works, Haring's commitment to global harmony, accessible health care amid the AIDS crisis, and the role of art as an expression of joy and communion is palpably present. The show tracks the arc of his late painting practice: from brazen loudness to elegiac celebration. One tertiary piece evokes the exuberance of a club-night dance floor, the next quietly memorializes a lost friend.



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One of the most stirring moments in the exhibition comes with *A Pile of Crowns for Jean-Michel Basquiat* (1988), a monumental tribute by Keith Haring to his late friend and fellow artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. Haring transforms Basquiat's iconic crown motif into a towering stack of black and white crowns, the somber palette and sheer scale signaling grief rather than celebration. Rendered in his

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signature thick black line on archival canvas, Haring layers crown motifs almost like tombstones, suggesting both memorial and monument—a restless, celebratory gesture caught in the grip of loss. By appropriating Basquiat's symbol of royal martyrdom and heroism, Haring acknowledges his friend's meteoric rise and tragic demise with the full force of his own pop-street vocabulary—as if to say that even in joy, mourning never quite leaves the room.



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Visually, the works dominate by sheer scale and density. Haring's adoption of tarpaulin and grommet-framed materials—originally part of his street-oriented practice—takes on a second life here as industrial canvases. The rough surface, the sheen of the tarp, the ambient drips of paint: they all underscore his insistence that art doesn't have to be polished, rarefied, or shy.

Here we find *Safe Sex* (1985), a tract-like large-scale tarp painting still radiating the urgency of its message; *Tree of Life* (1985), monumental in its biblical reference and personal commemoration; and other generative works that remind us Haring's activism and aesthetics were one and the same.

Yet the exhibition doesn't over-play nostalgia for the 1980s. Instead, it places Haring's late canvas work in a continuum: the exuberance of his earlier subway drawings evolves into something both public and private, loud and intimate, communal and individual. The result is neither solely celebration nor elegy—but something in between: life asserted in the face of mortality. The final canvases, made as Haring himself was confronting mortality, resonate with urgency.

For younger viewers—who may know Haring primarily through iconography, branded collaborations, or pop-history sound bites—this show offers a deeper, more expansive view: the artist as painter, not just graffiti genius. For collectors and institutions, it serves as a vital reminder of an under-exhibited major body of work—the first time in ten years Gladstone has devoted itself exclusively to Haring's paintings.

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In this respect, the exhibition also suggests a curatorial lesson: that even the most visually familiar artist benefits from re-orientation—when scale is amplified, material complexity foregrounded, and context shifted. The gallery space becomes a stage on which Haring's worlds—street, club, social activism, global culture—are conflated and collapsed into one continuous field of energy.

In short, *Liberating the Soul* places Keith Haring back into the arena where he always belonged: at the intersection of art and life, where accessibility meets ambition, where joy wrestles its twin, pain. It is a show that both flat-out dazzles and quietly haunts—and in doing so honors the subtlety of an artist too often reduced to simple iconography.