

Alexandra Jacobs, "A New Keith Haring Biography Draws the Most Complete Picture Yet,"
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NONFICTION

A New Keith Haring Biography Draws the Most Complete Picture Yet

In his thoroughly researched "Radiant," Brad Gooch considers the short, blazing life of the '80s artist, activist and man about downtown.



By Alexandra Jacobs

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Keith Haring at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts in 1978, in front of his untitled painting. Credit...The Keith Haring Foundation

RADIANT: The Life and Line of Keith Haring, by Brad Gooch

Modern art can baffle and intimidate. Keith Haring strove to democratize it.

Haring, who died at 31 of complications from AIDS after a brief but dizzyingly productive international career, drew and painted for the masses and the kids, sometimes getting handcuffed and fined for his trouble. In the garbage-and-graffiti-weary New York of the 1980s, his creations — first chalked on blank advertising boards in subways, then bolder and more enduring, like the safety-orange "Crack Is Wack" mural that still stands in an East Harlem handball court — were like a fresh new roll of wallpaper.

As his canvases and sculptures began selling to private collectors for big bucks, he carried on doing public work, notably for a children's hospital in Paris.

He loved children, and his more G-rated drawings — with faint inflection of Robert Hargreaves's Mr. Men and Little Miss series — have been grafted onto many books for them, one by his sister Kay Haring. (All four siblings were given "K.A.H." initials after their parents' alma mater, Kutztown Area High in Pennsylvania, which the son — Mr. Famous — found screamingly funny.)

There have been oodles of ink spilled previously about the artist for adults too, including from his own pen. Haring's journals, published in 1996, are still in print, and he's been the topic of multiple monographs and a Lives of the Artists installment by the former Barneys fixture Simon Doonan.

The authorized biography (more of an oral history) that soon followed his death, by the critic, composer and photographer John Gruen, is harder to locate, and the disco-dotted musical it inspired was a bust. Gruen's memoir, with the delightful title "Callas Kissed Me ... Lenny Too!," describes how his daughter, Julia, came to be employed as Haring's assistant and studio manager, and then executor of his estate and director of his foundation — maybe a little cozy.

Finding a chronicler with the proper combination of familiarity and detachment can be like going on a series of bad Hinge dates, but in Gooch, Haring has met his match. "Radiant," referring to both Haring's recurrent drawing of a crawling baby and his own fast-burning star, is a faithful retracing of his steps, with over 200 people interviewed or consulted: devoted and probably definitive. (The word "magisterial" is too stuffy to apply to its subject, who favored jeans, sneaks and bared biceps.)

Gooch, himself an energetic multihyphenate, has written biographies of Frank O'Hara, Flannery O'Connor and Rumi. He is a poet, which shows in phrasing at once shrewd and evocative. "His radiant baby was a trademark, a brand," he writes of Haring's signature image, "but also a warm compress of meaning."

"Smash Cut," Gooch's memoir, detailed his own arrival from Pennsylvania to the late-70s Manhattan club scene, and his love affair with the filmmaker Howard Brookner, who also died in his 30s of AIDS. He writes of originally intending to do Haring's life as a novel; this endeavor, published less than a year after a big retrospective at the Broad museum in Los Angeles, is obviously more dutiful — it's hard for prose to keep pace with Keith's primary-colored kapow — but nonetheless a public service. Facts ~~are~~ not wack.

Born in 1958, the same year NASA launched its first spacecraft, Haring wanted to be an artist from pretty much the moment he could clutch a crayon. He was plainly influenced by Disneyland, television and other boomer eye candy. His father, Allen, an electronics technician, amateur cartoonist and basement ham radio tinkerer, was in the same Marine squadron as Lee Harvey Oswald ("That's Ozzie!" he exclaimed, seeing him shot on TV); his mother, Joan, sewed little Keith a bat-eared hat to watch "Batman." (Later, with terrible poignancy, she would help sew his memorial panel for the AIDS Memorial Quilt.)

In perfect sync with his much-hyped generation, Keith turned on, tuned in and would drop out of two art schools; he was a workaholic, but on his own terms. He adored the Monkees more than the Beatles and was briefly a Jesus freak. His homosexuality emerged gradually and was not much discussed with his parents, even after he became a prominent member of ACT UP.

He always liked being part of something bigger. “It was never just Keith; there was always a circle around him,” the curator and reliable bon mot generator Jeffrey Deitch tells Gooch. “He was like a Pied Piper.” Starting at around 15, and later at the Paradise Garage, Palladium et al., Haring did an unholy amount of drugs.

Once he gets to Ed Koch’s Gotham, it’s black and white and bled all over. The artist Kenny Scharf, a friend, rival and onetime roommate, describes the stabbing victim who wanders into one of their parties: “People thought it was an art performance and just watched him wander around.” Gooch likens Haring’s homage to Michael Stewart, a Black graffiti artist who died after police brutality, to Edvard Munch’s “The Scream.”

Such highbrow comparisons have been late arriving. Haring may have out-Warholed Warhol, a mentor and collaborator, in enjoying celebrity friends — “there goes the neighborhood” The Village Voice captioned a photo of him with Brooke Shields — and the Concorde. But he was less cool than hot, eager and earnest: handing out free buttons and selling cheap merch at his prescient Pop Shop but fretting about his place in the canon and firing off indignant letters to editors.

Time magazine’s influential critic Robert Hughes emerges here as a particular Joker to his Batman, likening Haring and his friend Jean-Michel Basquiat to “those two what’s their names on ‘Miami Vice’” and calling them “Keith Boring” and “Jean-Michel Basketcase.” (Good lord!)

“They come out fast, but it’s a fast world,” Haring said of his squiggles to Charles Osgood in 1982, and that was before we all uneasily merged onto the information superhighway.

With licensing and replication now turbocharged — you can buy Haring wares on the sale rack at Uniqlo— Gooch’s book insists readers slow down and consider the artist’s legacy. And its cover feels like a secret handshake, done in the colors of an old-fashioned New York City taxicab.

RADIANT: The Life and Line of Keith Haring | By Brad Gooch | Harper | 512 pp. | \$40

Alexandra Jacobs is a Times book critic and occasional features writer. She joined The Times in 2010. More about Alexandra Jacobs