

Mark Hudson, "Keith Haring review, Tate Liverpool: a vivid journey through Eighties New York,"  
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Untitled (1980), Keith Haring (detail) CREDIT: KEITH HARING FOUNDATION

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### Keith Haring review, Tate Liverpool: a vivid journey through Eighties New York



[Mark Hudson](#), ART CRITIC

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Keith Haring's funky cartoon images are some of the most ubiquitous of the past half century. The Pennsylvania-born painter, political activist and entrepreneur burst onto

the New York art scene in the mid-Eighties with an exuberant graphic style that is instantly recognisable and so apparently simplistic it makes Andy Warhol, the principle NY scene-maker of the previous generation, look like Michelangelo in comparison.

Thick lines describe Haring's round-headed figures, while dashes and squiggles intended to emphasise movement bring an irrepressible energy to art that feels like a kind of upmarket graffiti. Endorsed by fashion designers and pop stars as much as art critics, he came to epitomise the turbulent New York Eighties of underground club culture and the AIDS epidemic that killed him in 1990. Yet while his imagery makes a fantastic impact on album covers, posters and, not least, the clothing sold in his Pop Shop chain of boutiques, it's been difficult to assess its value as art, as there has never been a proper exhibition of his work in this country – until now.

It's apparent from the very beginning of this hugely entertaining show at Tate Liverpool that Haring was far more complex as an artist and much more than the illustrator or street artist with presumptions that many including, I admit it, myself, have taken him for.

A freely improvised and rather beautiful brush and ink drawing from 1978 suggests an influence you'd never expect from this master of brittle high style: abstract expressionism. In works such as *Untitled* (1983), with its free-form, hieroglyphic like brush-strokes, he feels not so much the heir to Warhol – a role he's often assigned – more the Jackson Pollock of the hip-hop era. His desire to create a universally comprehensible art that would speak to people beyond the elitist art gallery was inspired as much by the utopian visions of the great French modernist Fernand Leger, as by pop art or the graffiti scene.

As Haring's paintings become tighter and more illustrative during the early Eighties, combining an ever more explicit homoeroticism with a startling violence – stabbings, kickings and even castration – the images fairly bounce off the wall with a sort of toilet-wall, kinetic energy. Featuring signature images such as the wolf-headed dancer and the crouching baby with its radiant halo of lines, paintings such as *Untitled* (1983), and *Untitled* (1984) – sorry, most of his works are called *Untitled* – may be none too subtle, but boy does Haring know how to create a sense of movement.



Keith Haring's 1986 cover for Emanon's The Baby Beat Box

Haring's underlying theme is the male – specially the male homosexual – struggle for identity and self-realisation. And this appears a traumatic business. There are moments of tenderness, certainly: *Untitled* (1983), with its pair of faceless, round-headed lovers reaching towards each other might be seen as an emblem for our gender-fluidity concerned times – without gender attributes the pair can become equal.

Yet this idyllic and quite small image is overpowered by more troubled works in which the male form is harassed and abused, and does the same to others. In *Untitled* (Apartheid), 1984, a huge black figure with a cross shedding red rays boots a small white figure out of the frame in an image presumably promoting the Anti-Apartheid cause. A self-confessed teenage "Jesus freak", Haring reacted against his parents' evangelical Christianity, though his attitude to religion remains ambivalent. There are almost as many "radiant" crosses in this exhibition as there are phalluses – and there are very many of the latter.

The show takes us on an atmospheric journey through Eighties New York, with slides and films of the bespectacled, nerdy-looking Haring drawing in the subway or dancing preposterously for the camera, alongside images of bizarrely dressed clubbers and AIDS protests.

A typical work such as *Untitled* (1983), showing an upright male figure apparently threaded through a horizontal male figure, combines a throwaway punk aesthetic with the decorative energy of an Australian aboriginal bark painting; and Haring cites African and Native-American art as influences. Yet it's also inescapably "Eighties" in a way that's all of a piece with Memphis furniture, clunky post-modern teapots and indeed with the knitted women's jumper and skirt we're shown here by Malcolm Maclaren and Vivienne Westwood, emblazoned with brilliant pink Haring imagery. While brilliant in its way, it brings a skin-crawling reminder of the horribleness of Eighties fashion.



*Untitled* (1983) CREDIT: LAURENT STROUK

Yet the best of Haring's work has kept its freshness through sheer gonzo invention: *The Matrix* (1983), a riot of phantasmagoric figures – a pregnant woman with a TV showing a \$ sign for a head, a man with babies cascading down his arms – unrolling over a 30 foot long sheet of paper, the whole thing apparently improvised with brush and ink live in front of a gallery audience, is an extraordinary tour de force.

The show makes much of Haring's role as an "activist", citing his involvement in good causes from the Anti-Apartheid Movement to protesting against the American government's failure to deal with the AIDS crisis, as though he was the first artist to have a social conscience. But in the show's final works created at the height of the AIDS crisis, when he was aware that he was himself HIV positive, the politics and the art come together in a truly hellish way. Two large square paintings on yellow canvas and tarpaulin, both called *Untitled* (1985), show a nightmarish sprawl of monsters morphing into human genitalia or excreting tumbling piles of "Haring" men. Bringing to mind

Bosch visions redrafted by the notorious underground illustrator Robert Crumb, they might seem quite crass if their sense of self-disgust wasn't so painfully real.

I went into this exhibition a Haring sceptic, and came out feeling I'd seen one of the shows of the year. Haring's paintings aren't all equally brilliant, but his world is evoked with a richness that gives even the slightest works a compelling aura. We're given a vivid sense of how Haring illuminated a period that feels both very recent and hauntingly remote.

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