

Temporary exhibition

Keith Haring, Tate Liverpool

This retrospective of the American artist's vibrant work highlights the political urgency of his message, says *Vid Simoniti*

Left: Keith Haring (1958-1990) seated in a New York subway car, c.1983

Below: Crack Down! poster, 1986, by Keith Haring

Keith Haring's art typically presents a joyful, doodled mishmash of human figures, dogs, robots and penises. Whether ink drawing or murals, there is an almost-kinetic giddiness to it.

His work embodies New York City in the 1980s, a city that was covered in graffiti, plagued by crime, and filled with leather-clad, moustachioed coppers who looked like the pop group the Village People. All too soon, though, that vibrancy would be ripped apart by the HIV epidemic, which hit Haring's own LGBT community especially hard. Haring's energy was therefore to be channelled into activism, before his own life was claimed by the virus.

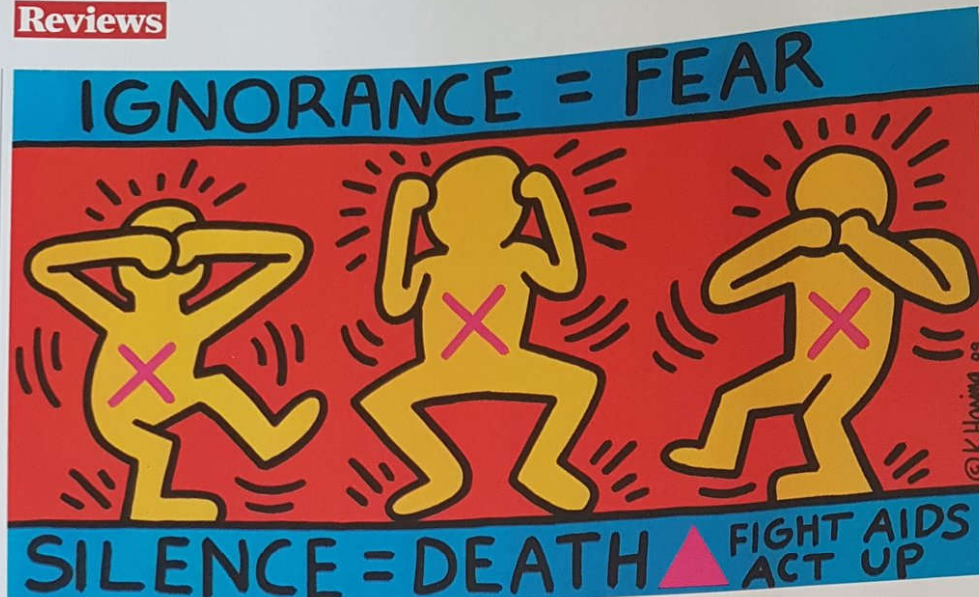
The Keith Haring retrospective at Tate Liverpool highlights the political urgency of the artist's work. This is crucial as Haring's carefree visual style might make visitors overlook the seriousness of his concerns. Rising to the challenge, curators Darren Pih and Tamar Hemmes boldly balance Haring's work with video displays showing interviews, documentaries and protests. Here is an exhibition that captures the gravity of Haring's life and times without weighing down the artist's visual brilliance.

The street and the club

The first hurdle for the exhibition, though, is to show work that hardly belongs to the gallery space. Haring was an urban street artist first and foremost. What ►



Reviews



Above: Keith Haring's *Ignorance=Fear* poster, 1989

initially made him famous were his drawings on the New York subway: he would draw figures in white chalk over the black paper used to cover up expired advertising. Not much of that original material is preserved, let alone in a form that could command presence in Tate Liverpool's mammoth, white cube galleries. So, how do you show it?

After the obligatory "early work" section at the entrance, the difficulty is addressed in a space dedicated to Haring's street art. One of the white chalk drawings is shown under glass; there is also a door of a yellow taxicab, covered in marker-pen squiggles. Aside from these two artefacts and a few ephemera, the curators had little to work with, but they counterbalance the sparsity of

materials with the prominence of display. They show the works in a large, darkened space, framed by corrugated metal, and side-by-side with videos shot around the New York graffiti scene. Although sparse in content, the display successfully showcases the grittiness and excitement of street art.

Further through the exhibition, a similar technique is used to present Haring's participation in the East Village club culture. Again, corrugated metal and low lights are used, cordoning off a section showing Haring's performances on a video projection. On one, *Lick Fat Boys* (1980), he is heard repeating words like "sin, boy, art, fat, lick" in various permutations.

Video was not in fact a big part

Focus on Displaying street art

As soon as he arrived in New York, Keith Haring immediately recognised that the city streets were not only a source of inspiration and material, but were legitimate spaces for showing art. Between 1978 and 1980 he created his earliest street works, presenting small debris-like fragments of his abstract paintings as well as collages made using newspaper headlines in public locations. Haring also famously made thousands of his New York subway drawings, which he executed in chalk on blank black papers used to cover expired advertisements.

Haring's engagement with the streets of New York and direct

interaction with the public are key elements of his practice and it was important to represent this at Tate Liverpool.

In the Art for the Street section of the exhibition visitors will see three two-metre-high subway drawings still in their original frames, his political newspaper collages and a New York taxi hood that Haring and graffiti artist LA II (Angel Ortiz) collaborated on using black marker to cover it in their signature lines and symbols. We worked with exhibition designers Joana Filipe and James Mason at InterestingProjects to create a space to present these works in a way that conveyed the atmosphere of 1980s

New York. Rather than replicate the streets and subway, the design incorporates raw materials such as corrugated metal and chipboard. Similarly, the lighting design is atmospheric and immersive. Archival imagery and sound form an important part of the show, creating the vibrant context of the 1980s. A projected slideshow of archival photographs showing Haring making his street works (taken by his friend Tseng Kwong Chi) blends right in. And *Wild Style*, an American 1983 hip hop film with a prominent soundtrack, also plays to evoke the energy of the time. Tamar Hemmes is co-curator of Keith Haring at Tate Liverpool

of Haring's practice, but here it is given prominence to structure the space, and evoke that nightclub feeling – particularly that of the legendary Club 57, where Haring often showed his work. One wall is plastered with facsimiles of Haring's fliers for his exhibitions. On the wall, they retain a sense of chaos and fun that they would have lacked in display cabinets.

Art world limelight

By the age of only 24, Haring was making five-figure sums through the sale of his art. A protégé of Andy Warhol's, he had a stratospheric rise through the art world. Haring's relationship with the commercial side of art was uneasy, though. Once his guerrilla subway drawings started to be peeled off for their monetary value, he stopped drawing them (Banksy take note). Instead, he made T-shirts and other merchandise, sold at his "Pop Shops" for an affordable price. Here is late Pop Art at its best: accessible, democratic and engaged, rather than caught up in ironic posturing.

Of course, Haring did not shun the art world entirely. He also made gigantic acrylic paintings for the art market, which inevitably fill up much of the show at Tate Liverpool. Still, these do not stand up on their own as artworks. Filled with his doodles, they are fun to look at, but are more or less indistinguishable from each other. It is therefore fitting that the show gives prominence to Haring's T-shirts, street art and activism. In doing so, the retrospective almost seems to save Haring from his own commercial success.

Aids: a political crisis

Haring was diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1988, and died of Aids in 1990, aged 31. The epidemic especially affected already-oppressed communities: gay men and transgender people, as well as black and Latino populations. But while the disease sowed death and grief in the New York LGBT community, it also united it.

Under the auspices of the Act Up group, activists produced an impassioned response to the inaction of Ronald Reagan's government. The slogan "Silence=Death" aptly summed up the fact that it was not until 1987,



after almost 40,000 people had died in the US, that Reagan publicly acknowledged the disease. Raising awareness on safer sex was left to community groups, and Haring contributed to the effort. His own "safe sex!" poster retains the characteristic playfulness: a smiling, anthropomorphic erect penis holds up a condom.

Crucially, the curators show Haring's activist work side-by-side with a large installation featuring some of the protests: in some we can see Haring's work on posters. The most poignant of the protests shown is perhaps the "ashes action" of 1992, in which protestors scattered ashes of the Aids victims onto the lawn of the White House in Washington DC. Rather than being tucked away, the video of protests is shown in a large, blue installation, the sheer size of which makes palpable the urgency and grief of the work.

While his activism remained pointed, Haring's art canvases responding to the HIV crisis took a turn towards the macabre. In a series of drawings he personified the virus as dark, devilish

Above: Untitled, 1982, by Keith Haring, on display in the Keith Haring retrospective at Tate Liverpool

Below: Untitled, 1982, Untitled, 1981, Untitled (Russian Doll), 1982 and Untitled 1982, shown in InterestingProjects' vibrant exhibition design

spermatozoon. In other works, Haring presented mangled-up imagery of deformed forms that look like a modern-day vision of Hieronymus Bosch's hellscapes.

I thought it poignant that the exhibition ends with three such large canvases. The final one, executed in black line on a yellow background, transforms Haring's vivacious style into an image of

death: disembodied heads float above a weeping, disfigured face.

There can be no redemption for the US government's callous failure to act in the face of so many young lives extinguished by that catastrophic disease.

Vid Simoniti is a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Liverpool

Project data

Cost Undisclosed

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Exhibition design Tate Liverpool; InterestingProjects

Marketing materials

Tate Design Studio

Exhibition trailer

Tate Design Studio

Interpretation Tate Liverpool

AV Tate Liverpool

Lighting Tate Liverpool

Exhibition ends 10 November

Admission Free entry for Museums Association members

