

Keith Haring: Subway Drawings

Brattleboro Museum & Art Center, Brattleboro, VT • brattleboromuseum.org • Through June 11, 2023

Walking into the Center Gallery at the Brattleboro Museum, one can almost hear the undertones of Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five's White Lines "Fine baby, fine/rich baby, interesting/Freeze! /Rock" and imagine Keith Haring crouching in the subway, his chalk flying on the surface of the walls. The radiant baby at its best. The Brattleboro Museum & Art Center is the perfect setting for the exhibition, as it was originally Brattleboro's train station; this gallery, the baggage wing. New York City subway signs direct viewers through the doorways and into the adjoining Center and South galleries.

Haring's famous icons "and style were built as a visual vocabulary in this laboratory"—the NYC subway—says Museum director Danny Lichtenfeld. Haring created over 5,000 chalk drawings over a five-year period, from 1980–1985. A typical day underground brought 100 drawings to life, weaving through New York City on trains—jumping off, drawing, and diving through between the sliding doors for the next stop—on a literal public platform. Haring wanted a dialogue with people and even hired a photographer to shoot every drawing. In the subway, art could communicate to the masses, to those who might never enter a museum. Haring believed that art should be as accessible—proven in this subway series as well as his graffiti art in streets and with his public murals.

"The subway drawings were, as much as they were drawings, performances. It was where I learned how to draw in public. You draw in front of people. For me it was a whole sort of philosophical and sociological experiment. When I drew, I drew in the daytime, which meant there were always people watching..." Keith Haring (quote from Rubell, Jason "Keith Haring: The Last Interview" Arts Magazine, September 1990. Courtesy of the Brattleboro Museum).

Both Haring and these drawings are an integral part of the 1980s' street art, urban, hip hop and dance culture. The chalk drawings became popular—some were stolen, the black paper ripped right off the walls. He truly "used his art for awareness, to live as totally and as com-

pletely as you can," *Street Art Boy*, PBS "American Masters Series," 2020.

The most powerful aspect of the exhibition is the pure physicality of the pieces—torn from the subway walls—ragged edges intact, floating in frames. Looking closely, viewers can see traces of other street artists tagging on the work as well as edges of paint from other wall paintings and even spots where old movie posters show through the drawings. The drawings themselves form a living tapestry of the pulse of New York City in the '80s. The tactile quality of the chalk lines and smudges are expertly preserved—there is such confidence and immediacy in the work. Seemingly simple forms project

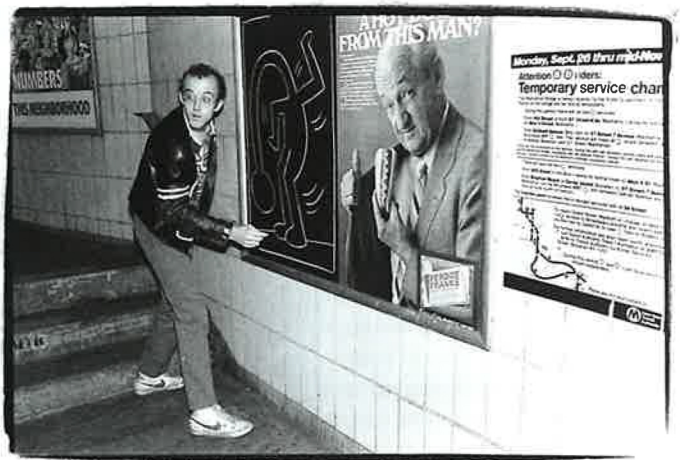
a loud voice, creating a dialogue between art, politics, and the global community.

Keith Haring: Subway Drawings is on loan from the private collection of Alex Trimper. "Even though Keith passed away when I was still only 16, reading about his life in art publications, watching inter-

views he did about his various murals all over the world, and seeing him fight for LGBTQ+ rights and AIDS awareness have kept me in awe my entire life." Alex Trimper (courtesy of the Brattleboro Museum).

Another aspect of note is a video installation of some of Haring's interviews from a CBS News special, broadcast once he had become an international star. There's a chalk board alongside a movie poster, inviting visitors to create their own subway drawings during their visit.

Top, right: American artist Keith Haring (1958–1990) drawing on a subway platform in New York City, ca. 1982. **Photo:** Laura Levine/Corbis via Getty Images. **Above, left:** Keith Haring, *Untitled (Subway Drawing)*, chalk on paper, 44 x 60". **Courtesy of Alex Trimper.** **Right:** Keith Haring, *Untitled (Subway Drawing)*, ca. 1980–83, chalk on paper, 45 x 32". **Courtesy of Alex Trimper.**



In the South Gallery are more of Haring's better known commercial works, such as Lucky Strike, "Painted Man" exhibition poster from the Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York, 1984, buttons and stickers—all amplifying the experience.

"I am interested in making art to be experienced and explored by as many individuals as possible with as many different individual ideas about the given piece with no final meaning attached. The viewer creates the reality, the meaning, the conception of the piece." —Keith Haring, *Keith Haring Journals*. The Subway drawings are the embodiment of this goal. — *Kelly Holt*

