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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT ARTS FEATURED

Keith Haring, Under the Influence, at NSU Art Museum



By John Thomason April 15, 2022



In an untitled early work from legendary Pop Artist and activist Keith Haring on display at NSU Art Museum, we have to take it on faith that the painting was indeed conceived from Haring's hand. A sprawling horizontal abstract vision punctuated by furious spasms of paint, it's the visual equivalent of an id unleashed. It hardly forecasts the clean lines, bold primary colors and graphic humor that would become the artist's signature.

But in context, we get it. As the museum's revealing exhibition "Confrontation: Keith Haring and Pierre Alechinsky" explores, Haring was then in thrall to the latter artist. Alechinsky was—and is, considering he is still alive, and sharp, at 94—a Belgian iconoclast from the European postwar avant-garde. At least a generation younger than this formative influence, Haring attended a life-changing Alechinsky

retrospective at age 19, immersing himself in some 200 pieces. The untitled painting mentioned above betrays Haring's infatuation; it's indebted to the freedom of Alechinsky's approach, which only later would Haring refine and crystallize into his own style.

Marvelously curated, "Confrontation" jumbles works by Haring and Alechinsky together on the same gallery walls, illuminating their similarities across space and time. There is no reason to believe Alechinsky took the same sort of inspiration from Haring's work, and yet the artists seem connected, like entangled particles in a quantum field. In Alechinsky's lithograph "Where Are You?," Haring-like shapes emerge from a visual cacophony. A piece by Haring, in which a sexually erect figure dances on a television, requires the viewer to decipher familiar shapes amid a chaotic clamor. It's a striking similarity to Alechinsky's approach, where figures hide among visual clutter. Both artists required active participation from their audiences to separate the signal from the noise.



"Poids Plume (Featherweight)" by Alechinsky

Likewise, both artists were subversives, for whom nothing was sacred and everything was a canvas. Alechinsky, who studied calligraphy, worked on rice paper and India ink, and integrated readymade antique books into new sculptural contexts. In one of his more pointed series, he created work on

banknotes rendered worthless by his nation's financial crisis, and he transformed a map of Sikkim, an autonomous region in northeastern India, into the blueprint for one of his maximalist visions.

Similarly, Haring drew one of his stretchy humanoids onto an old parchment reproduction of the Declaration of Independence, and inked an anti-nuclear-energy drawing onto a German newspaper article about the Chernobyl disaster. As with Alechinsky's embrace of multiple mediums, Haring extended his vision to encompass vinyl ink—the perfect material, it turns out, for a swaying, six-armed figure (pictured at the top of this blog) that appears divined out of some forgotten myth—and even plywood, on which Haring carved a falling figure with a router drill.

I suppose the Alechinsky portion of the exhibition should constitute its more revelatory half, as his work remains far more obscure in the States. But it's also inscrutable and sober compared to Haring's bold comic strip-inspired visions, and as much as Haring is now a pop-culture brand, he is seldom exhibited in South Florida museums.



Untitled 1984 work by Haring



And so even Haring's half of the show brims with fresh insights—into his relationships and collaborations with counterculture figures from Timothy Leary to William S. Burroughs, and into the way he saw himself. In his painting "Animals," he comes across as a literal dark horse among his pale-pink peers, an outcast in more ways than one, whose anger and activism risk being lost amid the commercialization of his more benign iconography.

I prefer to remember Haring less for the "cute" images of UFOs beaming up yapping dogs than for his blasphemous "Apocalypse" series in conjunction with Burroughs. In one collage, a figure urinates upwards, defying gravity; in another, a robot appears set to lobotomize a mother tending to her child. In my favorite piece, an erupting phallus becomes a mushroom cloud exploding atop an image of the Mona Lisa, her eyes crossed out with exes. There's no better metaphor for this upstart blowing up the old guard—and re-establishing Haring as a voice of the radical underground.

"Confrontation: Keith Haring and Pierre Alechinsky" runs through Oct. 2 at NSU Art Museum, 1 E. Las Olas Blvd., Fort Lauderdale. Admission costs \$8 seniors/military, and \$12 adults. Call 954/525-5500 or visit nsuartmuseum.org.