Keith Haring (American 1958-1990), *Self-Portrait*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 in. Art Bridges. © Keith Haring Foundation

Keith Haring

Self-Portrait, 1985

Keith Haring grew up in Kutztown, Pennsylvania. While at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, he began drawing in chalk on unused advertising panels in the subway, joining the alternative art scene flourishing outside the gallery and museum system. Sometimes creating dozens of drawings in a day, Haring developed the rapid lines, simplified figures, and iconography that became central to his work exploring ideas around social issues and the environment.

Keith Haring at work in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Photograph by Rob Bogaerts, the Dutch National Archives via Creative Commons.

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Keith Haring

Keith Haring's career skyrocketed in the early 1980s, at the same time the AIDS epidemic was emerging in the United States. Haring, a White, gay man, lost many friends to AIDS before testing positive himself just a few years after making this self-portrait. His life seriously changed with "the horror of AIDS," the artist recalled in his biography. Before his death from AIDS-related complications in 1990, Haring established the Keith Haring Foundation, using his art to inspire activism and awareness about AIDS.

Haring created a visual language of repeated images including radiant babies, dancing figures, barking dogs, and hearts. Although a wildly prolific artist, Haring made only a few self-portraits. In depicting himself, Haring uses the bold lines typical of his style, but offers a more realistic portrayal of the figure than in many of his other paintings. Haring uses the number "85" to indicate the year the work was made, documenting how he chose to represent himself at that particular point in his life and career.

© Keith Haring Foundation

Radiant Baby:
Innocence
Potential

© Keith Haring Foundation

Heart:
Love
Acceptance

© Keith Haring Foundation

Barking Dog:
Abuses of Power
Authority

Discussion Questions

- What do you notice about this painting?
- What do you notice about the figure? The facial expression?
- How many kinds of lines can you find? What mood do they evoke?
- Why might an artist include numbers or letters in their work?
- What might Keith Haring be trying to communicate?
- What are some reasons that artists create self-portraits?
- How might a self-portrait be a work of activism?

Follow this QR Code to a *MADE IN PA* Educator Resource to learn about more artists in this exhibition, including Devon Shimoyama, Barkley L. Hendricks, and Holly Wilson. Find lessons, activities, curated video links, and more.

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