

Art Now L.A.  
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Keith Haring: Art is for Everybody  
The Broad  
May 27 - October 8, 2023

Jean-Michel Basquiat: King Pleasure  
The Grand LA  
March 31 - October 15, 2023

by Jody Zellen



Both Keith Haring (1958 – 1990) and Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960 – 1988) were prolific artists active in the New York downtown scene in the 1980s. Both died young and left behind an expansive legacy. Haring and Basquiat catapulted to fame for their idiosyncratic works that not only resonated at the time, but continue to have impact now, more than thirty years after their deaths. They were crowd pleasers in many ways. Haring capitalized on that fact by creating The Pop Shop and distributing buttons, stickers and tee-shirts emblazoned with his iconic graphics like the barking dog and the crawling baby. Basquiat might have been lesser known outside the art world at the time, but his collaborations with artists like Andy Warhol eventually put him in the public eye, as well.

Two concurrent exhibitions in downtown Los Angeles showcase works by Haring and Basquiat, and create a curious conversation across Grand Avenue. At The Broad, there are more than 120 pieces on view, many selected from The Broad's own holdings as Eli and Edythe Broad were early collectors and supporters of Haring's work. The show was organized in conjunction with the Keith Haring Foundation and is the first museum exhibition in Los Angeles to present an expansive body of his work ranging from documentation of his subway interventions to ephemera, drawings, paintings and sculptures.

At The Grand LA (a new Frank Gehry-designed building complex that is not a traditional exhibition venue), is *Jean-Michel Basquiat: King Pleasure*, a large scale exhibition produced by Basquiat's estate that features more than 200 works. In addition to paintings, there are recreations of Basquiat's studio, rooms from his family home, the VIP room at the Palladium in NYC, as well as numerous videos where family members recount personal narratives. The Basquiat exhibition develops a context for his work via a timeline and trajectory that illustrates his influences, political and social concerns, education and family life. It outlines his proclivity for drawing at an early age and his interests in comics, cartoons and graffiti.

Basquiat began as the tagger SAMO and was determined to be a “star.” While his paintings continued to develop, he got involved with partying and drugs and the downtown scene. Although his work was widely shown and collected during his lifetime, there were many works left in his studio at the time of his death, and it is these pieces, as well as childhood and teenage works (all of which now belong to the estate) that comprise much of the exhibition. While Basquiat developed a personal iconography that drew from popular culture and music, his works were gritty and expressive in contrast to Haring, whose pieces were more playful, imbued with humor and joy. Haring had his “dark” side as well but for the most part the works, even when about AIDS or other politically-charged topics, radiated “fun,” as his lines danced across his compositions.

Haring’s exhibition brings smiles of remembrance to those who first saw his works in the subways of New York City, at the same time that it brings inspiration to those new to his creations. Haring and Basquiat knew each other and were included in numerous exhibitions together, but now exhibiting in two very different venues, the motivations behind the presentations direct the readings of the works in ways that are less about the why and when they were made and the scene the artists belonged to, but more about commodification and legacy. Struggling with and investigating issues surrounding racism, homophobia and celebrity, both Haring and Basquiat brought issues of art and life together. How that conversation would have continued thirty years later is at the root of these concurrent exhibitions.

Even without describing specific pieces, the names Keith Haring and Jean-Michael Basquiat elicit images, personalities and tragedy— the AIDS epidemic that took the lives of so many in the 1980s and 1990s, including Haring, and the struggles with drugs and addiction that Basquiat confronted and finally succumbed to. That being said, both exhibitions are celebrations: of life, of vision, of creativity, and of artists who followed their own paths and left large bodies of work that continue to have influence today. That the organizers are sponsoring workshops, and the galleries are filled with school children attests to these artists remarkable and long lasting legacies and importance. Both exhibitions are not to be missed.

<https://artnowla.com/2023/08/05/keith-haring-jean-michel-basquiat/>