

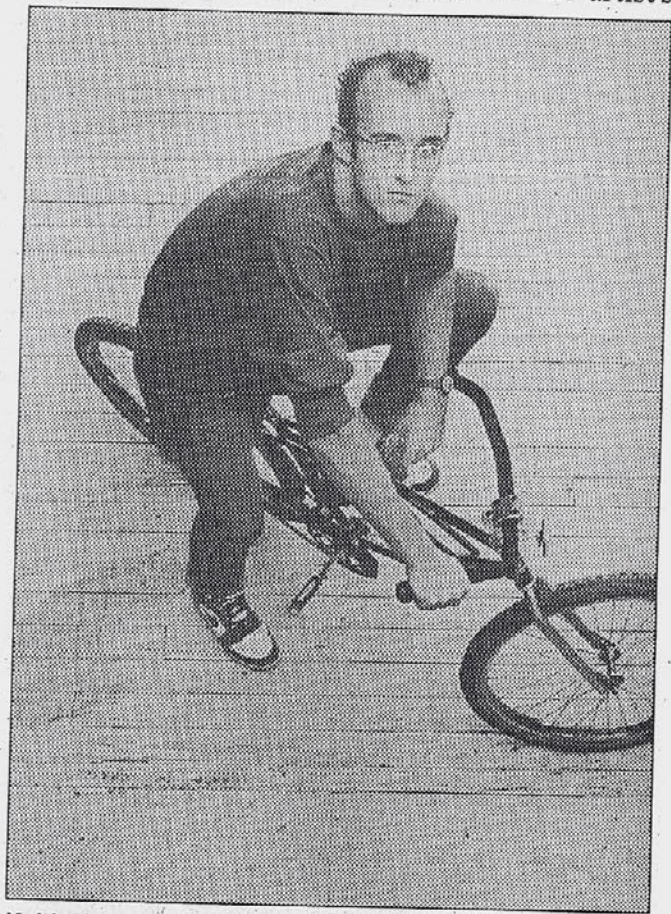
Haring - from

JAN 7, 2002

By Elphina Magona

The fact that a cross section of the community

attended the Keith Haring lecture on Tuesday, 8 January was indicative of the artist's



Keith Haring. Photo: Dmitri Kasterine

subway graffiti to art eminence

broad generational appeal.

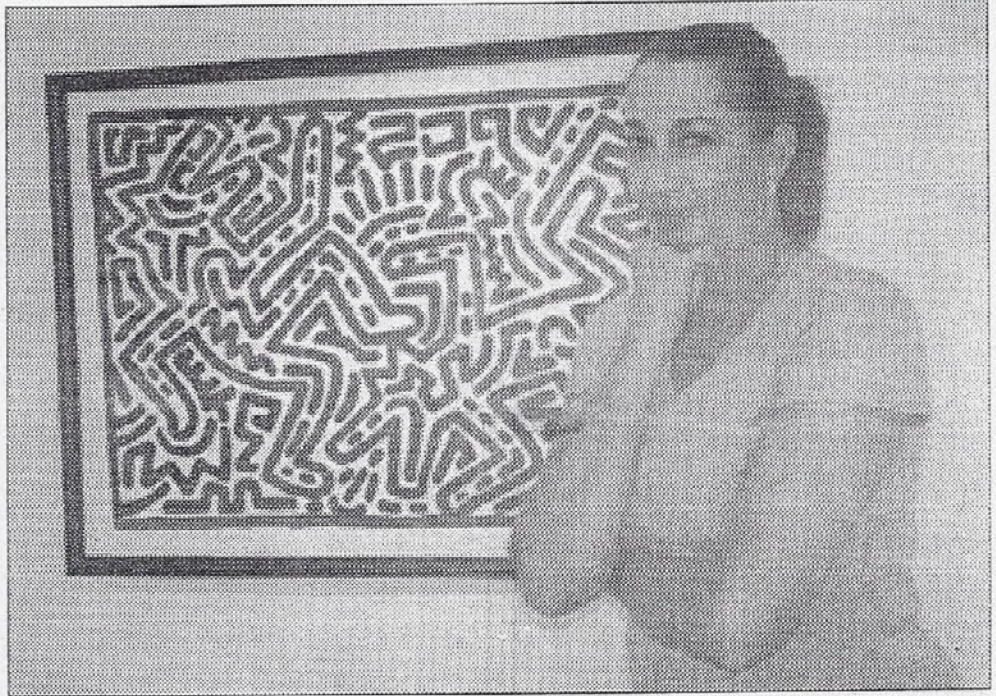
The presentation, including a short video by Haring and a question and answer session, was given by executive director of the New York based Keith Haring Foundation, Julia Gruen. She gave an insider's view of the artist whose immense global reach belies his brief 10-year career.

Having worked alongside Haring as his studio assistant for six years, Ms Gruen was also able to give a contemporary historical overview of the artist, his influences and the impact of his energetic and vibrant works.

A small town childhood in Pennsylvania gave way to the artistic awakening of the young student in New York's School of Visual Arts. It was there Haring was first introduced to the influences of African art, Aboriginal art and iconography.

Let loose in the excess and hedonism of eighties New York, and influenced by other emergent artists; anti-establishment in both content and delivery, Haring first brought his art directly to the masses using the unlikely setting of New York's public subway system. There, amid the crowds and competing adverts, he soon found critical notice, if not acceptance.

Along the way and using a variety of media, Haring developed an iconographic shorthand. His pictographic work, with its recurrent themes (radiant baby, barking dog, leaping figures of indeterminate sex, spaceships and pyramids) often eliciting a visceral response. Haring's rapid unprepared style and 'one-off' subject



Executive director of the Keith Haring Foundation, Julia Gruen and an untitled 1987 Haring lithograph currently on loan to the National Gallery of the Cayman Islands. Photo: *Alphina Magona*

matter, appear to have done little to diminish the works' populist appeal.

A product of his times, this social conduit drew indiscriminately from an array of influences, preferring to leave many pieces untitled, to allow for individual interpretation.

The stridently social content of much of his imagery concerning AIDS, child education and apartheid reflected, in part, the *zeitgeist* and in so doing gave a voice to those on the margins of society.

Having gained only a measure of acknowledgement from the art establishment towards the end of his career, Haring was bitter at the perceived snub. He spent his life largely bypassing the cliquish art power structures, adding to his immediacy and public appeal.

Another way Haring brought art to the people was by opening his Pop

Shops, merchandising outlets in New York and Tokyo. This was some time before branding became commonplace.

More acknowledged in Europe than in the US, Haring gained many high profile international commissions, including painting part of the Berlin Wall and several major advertising campaigns.

A friend of Pop Artist Andy Warhol, Haring courted the media and adored the recognition and star treatment attached to fame. Sharing his vision with the world, he also bared his soul in public. Having told his family of his homosexuality as a teenager, Haring chose *Rolling Stone* magazine to disclose his HIV positive status some years later.

Some months before his death, on 16 February 1990, Haring appointed Ms Gruen the executive director of the foundation bearing his name. The

foundation raises money for AIDS charities and children's educational projects, by loaning Haring works throughout the world.

Haring's work continues to blur the boundaries of low and high art and is widely viewed as some of the most powerful art imagery the eighties produced. The artist's US stature as one of the country's pre-eminent artists of the 20th century was solidified when the Whitney Museum of American Art held its *Haring Retrospective*.

According to the national gallery's director, Leslie Bigelman, the current Haring exhibition will be the first show to occupy the gallery's new location at Harbour Place on South Church Street. It is expected that the move to its purpose-built offices and exhibition space will be in late February to early March 2002.