



Jean-Michel Basquiat, Bird on Money, 1981 / Photo: Courtesy of Rubell Museum DC

“A Palace of Education”: The Socially Conscious Exhibitions at the New Rubell Museum in Washington, D.C.

Located in a former schoolhouse, the museum uses contemporary art to focus on social issues

by Douglas Markowitz
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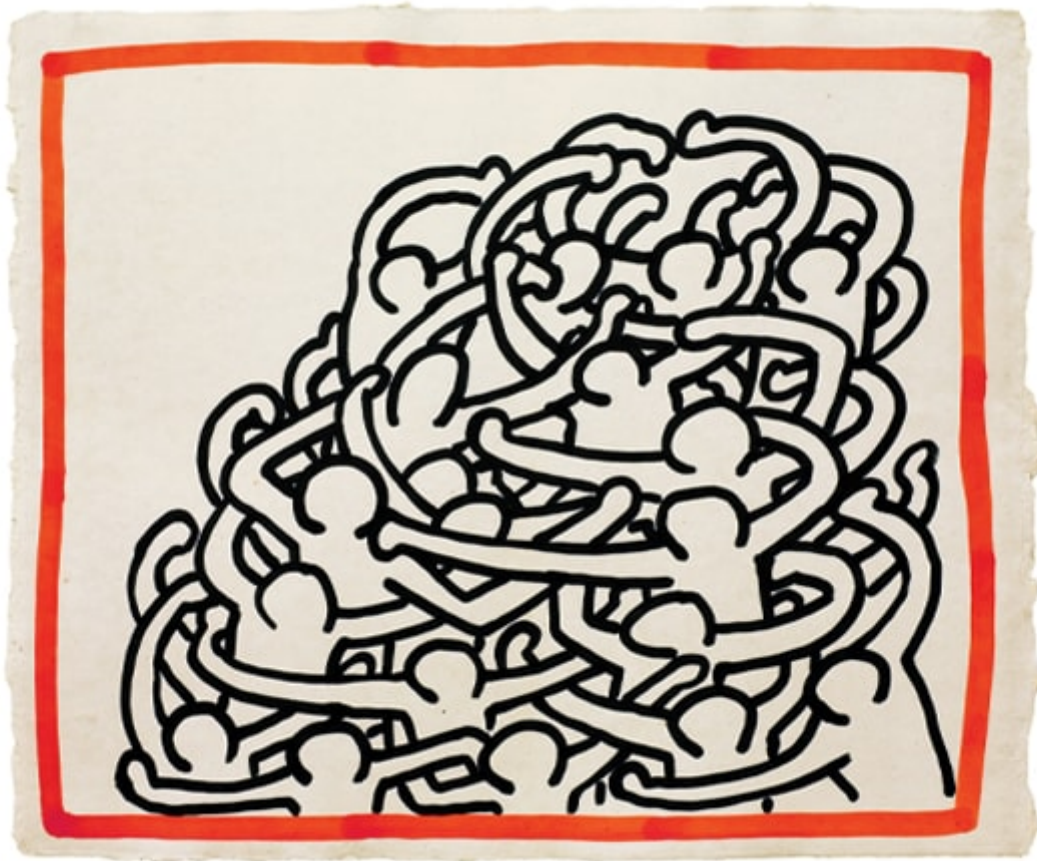
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If there's a single work that defines the new Rubell Museum in Washington, D.C., it's a collection of drawings by Keith Haring, whose stick-figure paintings became world-famous in the 1980s, before his early death caused by AIDS. Working in his New York studio on a crisp October day in 1989, the artist grabbed a bottle of Japanese ink and rapidly sketched 20 dramatic, comic-like panels. Far from the colorful murals he's best known for, the black-and-white images are shocking and apocalyptic: feet treading on knives, a globe being deflated like a balloon, human beings streaming out of wounds like little drops of blood.

Taken collectively, the 20 prints, titled *Against All Odds*, form one of Haring's last major works, reflecting his state of mind as the disease began to take its toll. As he painted, pondering the social ills of the world he was about to leave, he had a record on the turntable: Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*. Hailed for introducing a socially conscious perspective into commercial Motown soul, it was recently declared the greatest album of all time by *Rolling Stone*.



Keith Haring, *Untitled (Against All Odds)*, 1989 / Photo: Courtesy of Rubell Museum DC

“Sometimes music is a ‘background’ for the drawing, but sometimes it becomes an essential part of the creation of the work,” Haring wrote about the drawings when they were published as a book in 1990. “These drawings are about the Earth we inherited and the dismal task of trying to save it—against all odds.” This musical background has also become an essential part of the Rubell Museum, located in the former Randall Junior High School building, where in the early 1950s a music teacher encouraged a young Gaye to seriously pursue singing by joining the school’s glee club. “It’s a very tender story about how a single teacher can change a life,” says Mera Rubell, one of the collectors behind the new museum and herself a former teacher. For the art-collecting Rubell family, the chance to link a favorite artist with the music that inspired his work was too good to pass up. Haring was a close family friend. The Rubells bought many of his earliest paintings, and the artist dedicated *Against All Odds* to Steve Rubell, owner-operator of the legendary Studio 54 nightclub, who died of AIDS in July 1989, just months before Haring painted the work and before the artist would pass away from the same disease. Rubell describes

the pre-WWI building as a palace of education, which enticed them to select it for the museum's D.C. location. In addition to hosting schoolchildren, it served as a career-counseling center, artist space and homeless shelter at various points in its long history. "The architecture of the building is very dynamic," says Rubell. "The universe of teaching was so intimate, and the position of teacher was clearly elevated to the kind of respect that they had in those days."



Kehinde Wiley, *Sleep*, 2008 / Photo: Courtesy of Rubell Museum DC

The debut exhibition for the museum also aims to educate. Named after the Gaye album, "What's Going On" features an array of timely contemporary art that grapples with the same social issues that are being discussed mere blocks away on Capitol Hill. The museum's curatorial team has drawn on the family's vast holdings of contemporary art—more than 7,400 objects from over 1,000 artists—to showcase pieces that address race, immigration and other topics.

Poised to become one of D.C.'s major cultural institutions, the museum will spotlight stars such as Haring and Obama presidential portrait painter Kehinde Wiley alongside artists such as Josh Kline, Mickalene Thomas, Cecily Brown and Vaughn Spann. The D.C. scene will be represented by the likes of Sylvia Snowden,

whose thickly painted canvases relate to the daily lives of residents in the museum's Southwest Washington district.

The building itself is also a work of art following a \$20 million restoration. Though a new glass and steel entryway has been added, the Rubells have kept what they love about the historic building, with plenty of exposed brick, clean white walls and floor-to-ceiling windows allowing plenty of natural light. (An attached café-bakery will also open on-site.) With only 24 galleries, the Rubell Museum D.C. is smaller than their hangar-like main museum in Miami, housed in a former warehouse. But the history of the building, preserved and enhanced in the renovation, gives it a charm all its own. “What you’ll experience is much more intimate work in much more intimate spaces,” says Rubell.

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