



# SUMMER SUMMER AGE

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## MELBOURNE'S VANISHING *masterwork*



As one of Australia's surviving **KEITH HARING** murals  
begins to crumble, another comes to light

## COVER STORY

# Off the wall ART

A mural by a very famous artist is fading away on a Melbourne wall even as you read this. And as **Andrew Masterson** discovered, some art experts are content to let it disappear.

Photography by **Ilana Rose.**

**W**ALK into the vast gift shop inside the Museum of Modern Art in New York and pretty much among the first things you'll see are poster prints of the colorful, whimsical cartoonish paintings of the late Keith Haring.

Cross the road to the design store opposite and among the Noritake lamps, the Buckminster Fuller geodesic mini-domes and the models of Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture, you'll find yet more Haring pieces: Haring spinning tops, yo-yos, dominoes, radios, even a rocking horse.

Back in Australia, go into almost any vaguely trendy gift shop and the chances are you'll find Keith Haring designs on postcards and greetings cards in almost every trendy gift shop. Keith Haring posters will certainly be available at your local framers.

All these things will cost you money. An original Haring, should one ever come up at auction, would probably set you back more than you would pay for a fine house by the bay.

Now walk down Johnston Street in Collingwood and look at the side wall of the Northern Metropolitan College of TAFE. There you will see, at no charge, a huge, two-storey high Keith Haring mural, a lovely, very typical composition full of frolicking people and a large, centipede-like creature with a computer for a head. You will not have to look too closely, however, to notice that the paint is badly faded and the plaster beneath it cracked and eroded. It was painted a decade ago. In Melbourne's harsh climate, it will be pretty much destroyed within another two years.

Haring died of Aids in 1990, aged just 31. In his short life he had risen from being a guerrilla graffiti artist, chalking his iconic designs on the walls of New York subways, to a figure of international stature, feted at biennales and hung in major galleries throughout the world. In his trademark use of street-level images he was, in a sense, the inheritor of the pop-culture-as-

fine-art mantle worn previously by Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein - both artists with whom he worked.

In the manner of Australian painters such as Ken Done and Sally Morgan, although on a much larger scale, he constantly crossed the border between art and merchandising, putting his work on everything from canvas to table mats. He counted among his friends the likes of William Burroughs, Timothy Leary, Madonna and Princess Caroline of Monaco.

The Collingwood mural, together with a smaller piece on the wall of a South Yarra kindergarten, are the only surviving works from a short and highly controversial visit made by Haring to Melbourne and Sydney in 1984.

*If the Haring were indoors as a mural this issue wouldn't have arisen. They would have preserved it. It's because it's on the street.*

Given the enormous international reputation of the artist, it would be understandable if the mural was regarded as a very significant part of Australia's cultural collection. He is, after all, regarded as just as important as Jackson Pollock. It is not, however, and the art world is oddly divided as to whether it should be restored or simply left to flake away in the wind, rain and sun.

Haring was brought to Australia by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, the director of which at the time was John Buckley. Mr Buckley is now a private art consultant.

"It's a tricky question," he said. "Keith would say don't let the drawing get in the way of kids getting an education, but while it's not in the way of anything we should by all means preserve it."

Chris McAuliffe, on the other hand, a lecturer in contemporary art at Melbourne University, holds

an opposite view. "I argue that as graffiti it should be left to fade," he said. "If you subject it to conservation procedures, then you transpose graffiti into a realm that it was opposed to. You make it art."

The arguments for and against the restoration of the work stem in part from assumptions that have to be made about the intentions of the artist when the piece was done - specifically, whether it was intended as a permanent or temporary creation. Throughout his life, Haring did both, awkwardly balancing the essentially ephemeral nature of graffiti and the permanent basis of fine art.

Haring himself is vague about the intention behind the Collingwood piece. In his authorised biography, written by John Gruen, he mentions being asked to do a mural on the wall. Gruen quotes him: "I went to look at it, and agreed to do it - and it's become a permanent site!"

His principal commission during his Melbourne visit was to paint the window at the front of the National Gallery of Victoria. It was intended as a temporary work, but ended up being much more temporary than anyone had imagined. The piece provoked controversy in the media at the time, with many people claiming that Haring's style was a rip-off of Aboriginal art.

The accusation was plainly absurd, since Haring had never seen Aboriginal art, and the similarities between the two forms were ridiculously superficial. But this, however, did not deter one anonymous art lover who, two months after the piece was finished, blasted away its central panel with a shotgun.

During the course of his visit, Haring did several other pieces, some commissioned, some not. He painted a mural, for instance, at a venue called the Hardware Club. It was later painted over and replaced with a work by Juan Davila. Other pieces were done on walls near the Richmond railway station, and these were quickly painted over.

The Collingwood piece was done for no charge as a community project - students at the technical school (as it then was) help





Top, far left: Keith Haring has his first brush with Collingwood.

(Photograph by Mike Martin)

Left: John Buckley, art consultant with Haring's guardian angel.

Bottom: Haring and hench-artists at work on the wall of Northern Metropolitan College of Tafe.

(Mike Martin)



ed with the actual painting.

A final piece - a black and white guardian angel figure - was done on the wall of the kindergarten at Glamorgan School in South Yarra, a prep school for Geelong Grammar. This piece is still intact, more, it seems, due to good luck than good intentions.

John Buckley remembered Haring doing the painting. But the school principal, Ms Philippa Beeson, had no idea of its provenance until informed by *The Age*. She was, however, delighted to discover that the pre-schoolers were being educated in the shadow of a work by a very famous artist.

"I think it's important," she said. "I didn't know who this fellow was. People wouldn't like to lose it. I didn't realise he was so big. I don't know what will happen in the future, because we do need to put another room on that building, but if it's important we'd do what we could to preserve it."

Whether the same admirable attitude resides within the walls of the Northern Metropolitan College of Tafe is unknown. Responsibility for the work falls under the umbrella of the Tafe's corporate services department. Telephone calls placed to the department over a three week period were never returned.

James Mollison, the director of the NGV, refused to comment. Bernice Murphy, chief curator of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, which has a Haring painting in its permanent collection, said the question of restoration was extremely problematic.

"If a work is done externally then it's exposed to the weather and the community," she said. "I don't dodge the question, but the responsibility for it lies firmly with the community. If he did it outside then he would have known that it was exposed to many more factors than a piece done for a museum. He would have been aware of the risks of doing so."

She added that it seemed probable the piece was intended to be temporary, on the grounds that there was no indication Haring had talked about possible restoration while he was actually doing the painting.

"I'd be rather on the side of those people who care for the

work but wouldn't want restored," she said.

Chris McAuliffe places himself firmly in the same camp. He is in favor of producing a CD-ROM to contain photographic images of the mural and oral historical accounts of its creation. He admits, however, that such an approach is highly problematic.

"I think it would be a perfect thing to do a CD-ROM on, but then you'd need \$3000 worth of hardware to see it instead of just a tram ticket," he said.

"If the Haring were indoors a mural this issue wouldn't have arisen. They would have preserved it. It's because it's on the street. Implicitly, heritage and conservation is about the legitimacy of culture. Graffiti hovers on the margins."

John Buckley, in contrast, supports the restoration of the mural, both desirable and simple - if only somebody would do it.

"I can't see any reason why it shouldn't be preserved," he said. "I know the debate is whether it should be preserved or allowed to disappear with the ravages of time. The trouble is, no one knows what Keith would think."

"It would be quite a simple matter to preserve it: you just have to go over the lines. Don't forget, it was done with the help of the kids in the first place."

Whatever the complexities of the debate, one thing is certain. The Collingwood mural is a unique and irreplaceable piece of public art. If it is to be allowed to fade - as expert consensus suggests the artist, were he still alive, would wish it to do - then he would be disappointed.

If, however, it fades simply because the conundrum it throws up renders it a candidate for a too-hard basket, its demise would be a tragedy, perhaps even an act of vandalism.

The final words, fittingly, should go to Keith Haring himself, quoted in a book of portraits taken by the American photographer - and another artist who found controversy in Australia - Robert Mapplethorpe.

"When the act of creation is really successful, the 'thing' creates itself," he said. "The artist is only a vehicle, a tool. Once created, the 'thing' has a life of its own. I want to live and make things live."