

# DRAWING

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## Drawing Now in New York City: The New, Pictorial Image of the Eighties



Keith Haring, NYC Subway System Drawing, 1982, chalk. Courtesy Tony Shafrazi Gallery.

Ronny H. Cohen

Though only in its third season, the 1980s

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New York art scene is already dominated by the act and fact of drawing. Drawing has become not only something indispensable, even natural to do but something that is relaxing and fun, according to a consensus of

many of New York's leading emergent and young, established artists. Fueled by the upward reevaluation of the medium by the minimalists in the sixties and the conceptualists in the seventies, and fired by the current fascination with painting and the clear-cut preference for artworks of a decidedly visual persuasion, much recent drawing around New York has an exciting pictorial character.

These pictorial drawings are evident in successfully individuated expression in which the "image" is emphatically at issue, serving as the key element to understanding the artist's special interests in the drawing medium. As New York City creations through and through, these drawings also share the push-to-the-limits ambitiousness, along with the intelligent articulation traditionally characteristic of the best trend-setting products of this culture capital. What is immediately striking about today's pictorial drawings made in New York City is their direct and persuasive appeal. While remaining, in essence, true to the distinctive aspects of the drawing medium, they manage to matter in emotive and perceptual ways once thought reserved to the major media of painting and sculpture.

Their bold impact is probably best captured in the presently popular phenomenon of graffiti art. A familiar decoration on the streets and subways of New York, graffiti is an exaggerated form of drawing, involving the marking up of a surface not originally intended to display art. Graffiti, in fact, has been deemed as an antisocial act by the New York City government, but the threat of legal penalties has hardly dampened the graphic enthusiasm of the legions of artists eager to express themselves in this instantaneous, direct, and aggressive fashion.

Taking the work of Keith Haring, the

heavily publicized drawer, as representative, one finds that graffiti emphasizes the quickness and minimal preparation time associated with the process of drawing; the flair so important to a personal style of drawing; and the easily identifiable and repeatable subjects confounded with popular notions about the proper imagery of drawing. The inventiveness of such images as the barking dog and crawling baby, repeated in rhythmical compositions in white chalk on the hard, black, unused advertising spaces on the subway, and in magic marker on the sides of subway stairs, established his reputation. The importance of the pictorial dimension accounts for the strong impression made by Haring's recent works on paper, which use sumi ink and brush technique in some examples and marker ink in others, aiming towards sophisticated calligraphic ends. And it also influences the viewer's perception of the "paintings" or works involving the application of color on canvaslike surfaces, such as vinyl tarpaulin. They are still seen as drawings.

Kenny Scharf, another graffiti artist, also calls attention to the relationship of drawing and painting. His vivid pictorial appropriations of such popular cartoon imagery as the Flintstones, his trademark, are applied in a strong and expansive graphic style on the wall, as in the room he executed for a show at P.S. 1 in the Spring of 1982.

Of course, the graffiti gang are not the only ones concerned with this issue. Other artists among the emerging group have resolved it by making painting more like drawing and at the same time making drawing behave pictorially more like painting. Mark Tansey's provocative efforts in this particular arena rate closer inspection. His acute handling of the visual politics of nostalgia-loaded

and culturally encoded imagery, culled from popular media and art sources, turns his large, handsome, monochromatic oil paintings into dynamic illustrations of ideas and sentiments. In *Chess Game* (1982) the viewer is invited to recognize the figures of Marcel Duchamp and Alfred Jarry, think about the thematic importance of chess to Duchamp and twentieth-century art history, and speculate about the significance of all this within the context of World War I, suggested by the militaristic signs strewn about the landscape background. His work is executed in a controlled and specific mode of rendering, stressing value contrasts that recall illustrations. Tansey's process starts and ends with drawing; the artist himself has likened his paintings to "big drawings." His visualization of the ideas, which inevitably involve ironic displacements and juxtapositions of fact and fiction in synthetic but convincing scenes, based on both found and imagined sources, begins with thumbnail ball-point sketches. A small format drawing is then executed in lead pencil but left unfinished. Tansey next makes a small oil study and big painting, after which, he usually goes back and finishes the drawing. Though scale is the obvious main difference between them, the drawing and painting are amazingly alike, having been informed by each other.

Robert Kitchen investigates the cultural and conceptual implications in turn-of-the-century illustrations from children's stories. Starting with the small, often black-and-white, but sometimes colored sources, he preserves the heroic-cum-classical realist style of drawing, distinctive of the period, while altering the scale and surface to suit the pictorial needs of his own drawings. Executed on large Arches sheets, which measure forty

Kenny Scharf, *Space Invaders*, 1982, installation at P. S. 1. Courtesy P. S. 1, Institute for Art and Urban Resources.



Mark Tansey, *Chess Game*, pencil on paper, (9 x 11½ in.). Courtesy Grace Borgenicht Gallery, Inc.

