WATCH: Keith Haring’s NSFW Celebration of Gay Male Sexuality

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One of my favoring things about Keith Haring is that the man wasn’t afraid of sex. He portrayed sex and homosexuality with all the joy and vibrancy that he put into his family-friendly Radiant Babies and DJ Dogs. And he did this at a time when AIDS was a death sentence and gay men were pariahs.

For me, Haring’s sexual politics and activist ethos are a big part of why he’s still relevant 25 years after his death on February 16, 1990. Prudery, homophobia and the culture wars have not gone the way of the cassette tape. Just this month, Facebook suspended POZ’s account because of

“questionable content.” The offending post? An item regarding the famous Annie Leibovitz portrait of a nude Keith Haring. You know the one (hint: It’s staring at you atop this blog entry). Hello, people. This ain’t porn, it’s art. Besides, his manhood is basically camouflaged in paint.

But that photo is like a Normal Rockwell painting compared to Haring’s “Once Upon a Time” mural, completed in 1989--about nine months before he died. The piece was done in what was the bathroom of the LGBT Center in Greenwich Village, as part of the Center’s legendary 1989 art show. Thankfully, the work has been preserved.

I got a fresh look at it during a recent peek at the Center’s renovations. Check it out for yourself in the video below. (My apologies for the vertical format and dizzying camerawork. I am no Stephen Spielberg or Kristen Bjorn.)

Narration in the video is from Glennda Testone, executive director of the Center, who was leading a tour. Here’s what she said:

This mural from Keith was part of the 1989 Center show, and it’s called “Once Upon a Time.” It was rare for him to title his pieces. This piece was really about his vision of a world before AIDS, a celebration of gay male sexuality at a time when this was at the height of the AIDS crisis and something that was literally terrifying to many people. And the Center was that safe space where he could do a piece like this, and we are proud and honored to be able to preserve it today.

I find inspiration in the fact that Haring incorporated an unapologetic eroticism in his body of work.

(For other reasons why he’s awesome and relevant, check out the blog post "Keith Haring Is Alive?! Why It’s No Surprise People Actually Believe This.")

At a time when gay lives have been desexualized to make way for marriage equality, and when HIV prevention efforts focus on testing and treatment and not intimate relationships--because it’s easier to talk about pills than penises--Keith Haring’s work is more relevant than ever.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/keith-haring-celebrates-gay-sex