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SAINT KENNY AND THE CULTURE DRAGON

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Soothing yet terrifying, Kenny Scharf helps me to cope with the conflict between my need to be fully aware of the state of things in these turbulent times and my aching desire to have someone around that I can talk to about Sally Fields in "The Flying Nun."



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I tend to think of Kenny Scharf more as a guru than as an artist. By dangling his post-apocalyptic vision from an implausibly nostalgic rehash of Pop culture, Scharf has paved the way toward spiritually transcending the most guilt-ridden of all inheritances: a '60s childhood. For us, to whom the experience of Vietnam was as closely aligned with TV as John Glenn in space, the fanciful conceit of Revolution in our Time could only come as an offshoot of the Now Generation. I, for example, came to political consciousness at about the same time Patty Hearst did, an historical moment etched in many minds as the precise instant a cultural rebellion was transformed into a cartoon. Soothing yet terrifying, Kenny Scharf helps me to cope with the conflict between my need to be fully aware of the state of things in these turbulent times, and my aching desire to have someone around that I can talk to about Sally Fields in "The Flying Nun."

Kenny Scharf is also a guru in the Timothy Leary mold, for he uses a giddy spectacle of hysteric cosmology to impress upon the viewer a sense that something is very wrong in the state of America. The Jetsons, ideological message-bearers for the Great Society, helped to anaesthetize a generation of American after-schoolchildren. As Scharf himself has emphasized, the Jetsons were a child's myth of what the future would be like. Robots with a sense of humor, meals at the touch of a button, sky-cities connected by tubes: they all symbolize technological betrayal in the 1980s. Betrayal of a child is perhaps the cruelist form of faithlessness. But if the child is a slightly perverse TV brat from Southern California, there is always a danger that he will turn on his betrayers as the Stepford Wives did their oppressors, coolly brandishing the images of their deception with a wild look in their eyes. Scharf still asserts that the Jetsons as he has reconstructed them are primarily an optimistic device, and that, even today, he firmly believes in the utopian possibilities of that technology. Nevertheless, on a gut level comparable only to Ed Paschke, Scharf exorcises the sinking dread accompanying our growing conviction that all we can expect from the Technological Age is instant annihilation.

Scharf is, in short, quite the master of disguise: when you have finished categorizing his work as too much of one thing at the loss of something else, he has a tendency to shift meanings radically. Like Keith Haring, his emergence c. 1980 was immediately ubiquitous (if you happened to live in the East Village, at any rate), because he perfected—straight out of the Graffitiists' Handbook—the obligatory signature, a tag that no one else could copy. Never one for train-writing himself, Scharf learned to produce George Jetson or Leroy-Bug at will, instantly, any

time or place (his few street contributions remain relatively unmolested today, an unusual honor in the current cut-throat mini-bucks graffiti/rap/fashion scene). But his recent leapfrog into deadly earnest art-making, marking him as the only post-graffiti figure besides Jean-Michel Basquiat (MIA) who can *paint*, surprised everyone but Kenny Scharf.

Scharf turned 25 in 1983. He also bought a 1961 Cadillac and a home on the coast of Brazil, got married, and plans to live there most of the year. He has left the Jetsons and the Flintstones to art history, and is concentrating for the time being on the anthropomorphized cubes, sponges, sprongs, and amoebae that began to emerge in his paintings in late 1982 as post-mutation alter-egos to his comic book heroes. Almost certainly, he is moving to Brazil for health and attitude (and because they still publish Flintstones comics there in Portuguese), but he seems to be looking for a different *tabula rasa* to work off as well. Somewhere in the steamy Amazon jungles and coastal fishing towns, Scharf is now exercising his impossibly funky imagination on whatever scale and format he now finds appropriate. Is this somehow the death knell of the East Village's first wave, a signal that the Times Square Show, like Woodstock, is something you can never return to? Will Lady Pink be next for the cover of *Art News*?

In a clearcut way, Scharf's career has duplicated the institutionalization of the East Village. All those unpredictable nights of tramping around Manhattan's back streets, unknown artists and the reverie of overripe artistic fertility: how quaint they seem to us today. Kenny Scharf, Keith Haring, and Jean-Michel Basquiat—all are the stuff that legends are hung from, and all three have been catapulted far past the days of casual camaraderie and collaboration, days which they all thought would never end. The most perspicacious antennae in the East Village, which haven't stopped wildly registering data since the Talking Heads first played CBGB's in 1976, now point themselves in the direction of the limousines that pull up to Gracie Mansion and Civilian Warfare, just the way jet-setters used to score their drugs on Avenue B a few years ago.

Is Scharf's unexpectedly beautiful new work an indication of the innate lack of comparable quality to be found east of Second Avenue ("We've been had!"), or is his vision merely the least academic variation on a style that grows more contrived and imploded every time another gallery opens on Avenue B? The obligatory line in every East Village art story harps on how unheard of it used to be to achieve commercial success as a New York painter at age 25; what I find even more bizarre is the notion of being constantly confronted at 25 by the wan and pinched imitators of your own effusively personality-laden style. The title for one of the Manet lectures at the Met seems to underscore the neighborhood difficulties of forecasting a school of painting: "The Great Artist as a Problem in Art History." Not yet a Great Artist, Scharf is nevertheless learning quickly to transcend the East Village style-shuffle, but can he stay afloat once he finds himself pitted against true art history instead of ambitious colleagues?

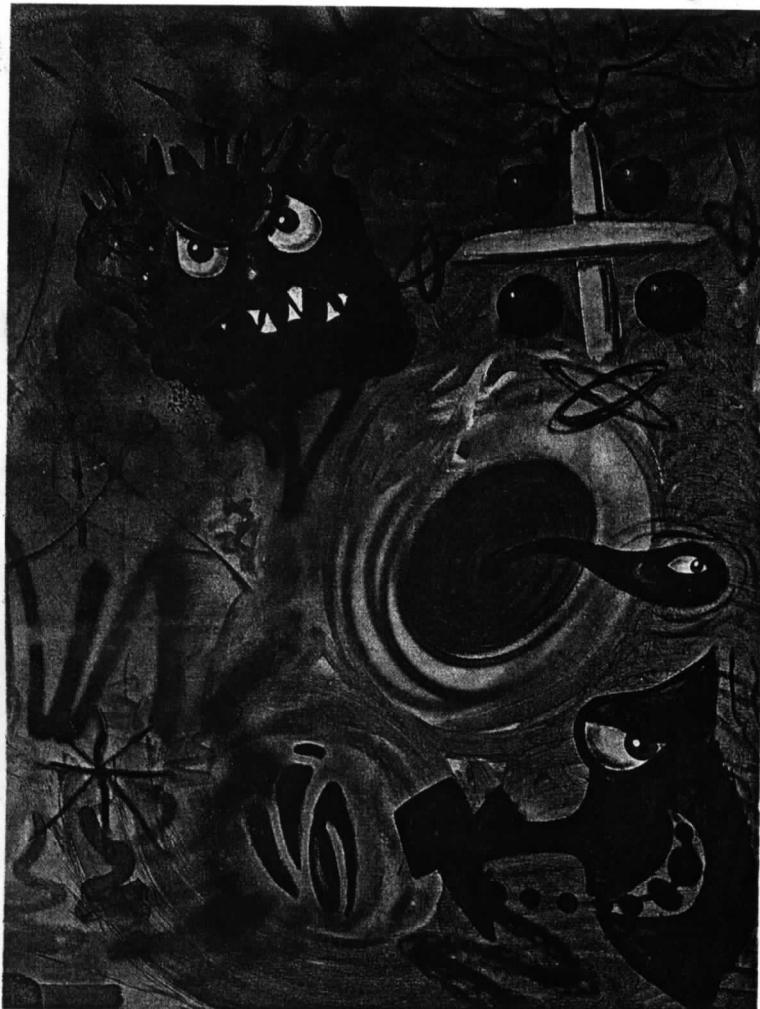
I tend to see Scharf's work even more broadly than this, since his rapid rise has been punctuated by a stunning flair for outstripping his commercial success. As befits the man who named the Fun Gallery, Scharf's early paintings were more goofy aesthetic events than art. They signaled the all-important rupture with the Soho way of doing things, but they could not transcend their basic status as fascinating anomalies until Scharf changed course and decided to do things exactly the way that Soho did them. His last exhibition here seemed, in fact, perfunctorily New York School: huge canvases, bulky frames, hefty price tags, and much more fun per square inch. That these paintings have been Scharf's calling card into The Big Time seems overshadowed by the simple knowledge that he could not have shown or sold them in the East Village, where his mini-revolution began. After examining the facts of the matter, the most frequently asked question about the East Village galleries—are they a bona-fide low-rent alternative to the established gallery system (as the 10th Street galleries were in the 1950s), or are they merely a grass-roots feeder system into West Broadway—rings all too rhetorically today. If you want to

eclipse Julian Schnabel on his own turf, you're not going to do it by scribbling on fenders or tacking works on paper, to broom closet doors. The Next Generation can look truly subversive to a New York audience in 1983 only when they've copped the same formats as the Quickly Fading Generation in order to herald the latter's retreat from the public eye.

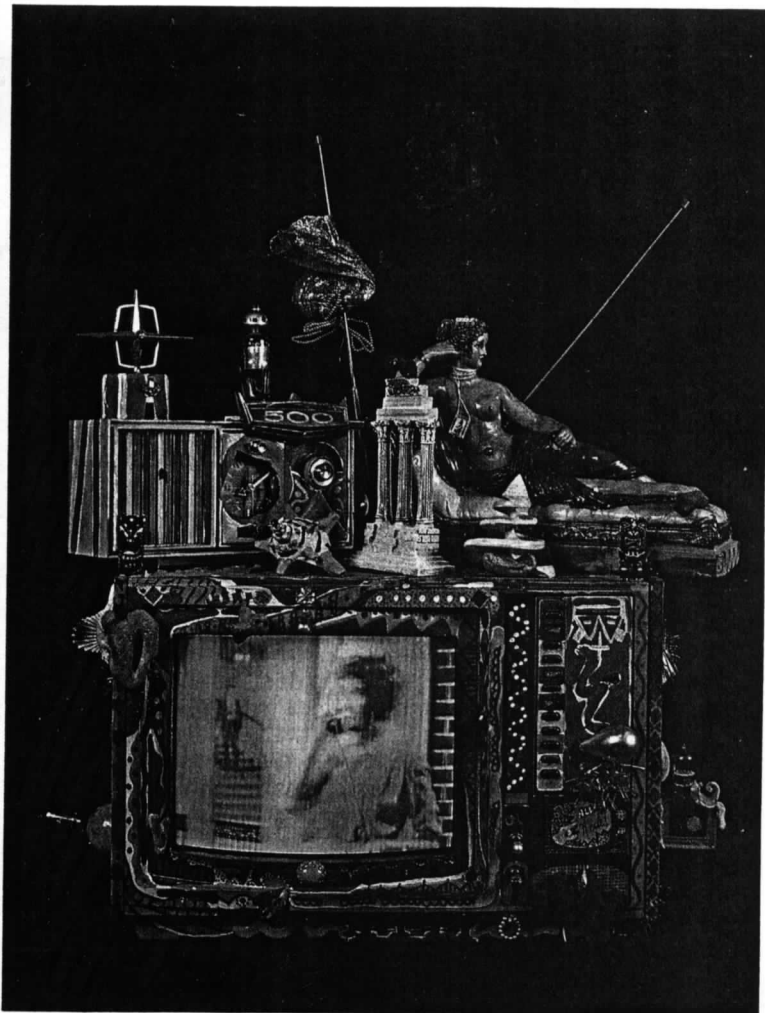
Perhaps writing this way will cause the reader to mistakenly conclude that Kenny Scharf is a shameless entrepreneur, which is far from this writer's viewpoint. By the same token, he wasn't exactly just discovered in the right place at the right time; if the post-graffiti had never happened, I suspect Scharf might still have attracted an audience faster than most of his colleagues. Nowadays, when echoing the success-at-25 gospel relative to the East Village, one usually finds the occasion for dragging out Peter Schjeldahl's now-portentous observation of three years ago, to the effect that there is no more vital arbiter of contemporary art opinion and taste than the dealer. This is not to say, however, that if Schjeldahl happened upon the Next Big Thing

critics want to get caught with their pants down, like heralding the New Abstraction scant moments before it flops over and becomes as embarrassing as Abstract Illusionism.

Still, the unquestioning acceptance of whatever the big dealers have coughed up, be it bad or good, as the Next Big Thing, smacks too easily of Clement Greenberg harrumphing that Dan Christensen has just picked up where Jules Olitski left off. A cute little story making the rounds lately has a pair of erstwhile collectors, trepidant in their ambitions, confiding that they already owned "one Boone and two Shafrazis" and now only needed "a nice big Metro" to round out their recent acquisitions. This innocent anecdote is unduly frightening, first because it is all too true, but also because it implies not just the existence but the tacit acceptance of a much wider and dangerous gap than was ever thought plausible between those who sell, promote, and acquire art and those who make, study, or think about art. The Bitter Factor that has been poisoning the morales of countless artists in recent seasons is experiencing,



Kenny Scharf, *Don't Scare Me*, 1983. Oil and spraypaint on canvas, 36 x 48". Private Collection, Chicago. Courtesy Tony Shafrazi Gallery.



Kenny Scharf, *Van Television*, 1981-83. Customized Sony Trinitron, acrylic, and found objects. Private Collection, California. Courtesy Tony Shafrazi Gallery.

working away in a lonely tenement in Astoria, he couldn't do a little something for him/her as a critic. Rather, since Schjeldahl (and, by implication, everyone else) is simply much less apt to be looking for the Next Big Thing in an out-of-the-way place than a critic ten years ago might have been, he experiences considerably less guilt in championing the already hyped. To a very real extent, this is as it should be: with hundreds of galleries in New York promoting thousands of artists, a working critic might feel like he's doing the obligatory studio visit in Astoria when he has merely popped into the Soho 20 Gallery. Also, these are painfully transitional times, during which no self-respecting

it seems, an even more virulent resurgence among critics, curators, administrators, philanthropists, teachers, and even—small surprise—some of the less successful dealers. Since no one seems to be able to (or desire to) see light at the end of this particular cultural/historical tunnel, many have chosen to merely turn about-face and confront the direction they have come from, sometimes with an alarming sense of reactionary zeal. Without going quite so far as to quote Freud, Roberta Smith did a splendid job in the *Village Voice* of rendering Diane Waldman's curatorial apoplexy at the Guggenheim this fall as a form of lock-jawed, repressed hysteria. By pretending November, 1983 does

not really exist, Waldman waved the wand of psychological transference and—voilà!—it's June, 1976 again.

Is it impractical or unsound to develop these journalistic musings into the intermission of a critique on Kenny Scharf? I am interested in Scharf because I think he is a fine painter and eminently capable of turning into an important one; but I am *fascinated* with Scharf because of the extraordinary clarity with which his art happens to illuminate this particular moment in the tumult of contemporary culture. He is, I have come to believe, the perfect artist for our time, part of the reason for this appropriateness being the guileless ease with which his art lends itself to exploitation. He subverts the thorny issue of culture-for-dollars with as much ease as early Warhol, but his art is entirely lacking in the mute existentialism that Warhol tamed for the purpose of turning Marilyn into an icon. Scharf's imagery and technique address proliferation with a vengeance; whether it is linked to the issue of post-nuclear mutation or not, his figurative mode screams out accusations (*affirmations?*) of corrupt ennuï, mental claustrophobia, and aesthetic gluttony. We, his audience, come to feel decadent and immature in the harsh light of his phosphorescent color, grotesquely fertile shapes, and shiny-smooth airbrushed surfaces. Unlike the urban guerilla strategy of Haring, Scharf the mad scientist has run amok in his laboratory and jammed the pleasure controls into overdrive. Even Julian Schnabel manipulates the indecipherability of abstraction as a basic principle, historically eschewing the sort of paintings which can be absorbed too quickly by the non-elite. But Scharf contrasts this with a fervent populism that seems to know no bounds: he is utterly comprehensible and utterly relentless at the same time. Without resorting to encyclopedic or all-over imagery, Scharf's spectacle makes the viewer blink or avert the eyes on first encounter; they are simply too harsh, too glaring to take in all at once.

Perhaps his gregarious brand of anti-elitism is going to be Scharf's strongest play for the aestheticians. Like it or not, his work has the most universal appeal potential of any artist since Andrew Wyeth, and I say this with a sharp memory of how the civilized world was besieged last winter with Keith Haring buttons and coloring books. Scharf's universalism is unique in part because it is so whimsical, but also because it is so identifiable to the world at large. In another historical context, he might be coming up with comic book characters to promote breakfast cereals, but in this age of doubt he asserts that that which can only be possessed by the ruling classes need not go unappreciated by the great unwashed. Ask any five-year-old what heaven is like, and invariably you'll discover that Mr. T and Wonder Woman have celestial thrones side by side; Scharf the anti-elitist asserts through his universal appeal that those who appreciate and understand High Art really have nothing that the rest of the world doesn't have, except perhaps for snob appeal, trust funds, and a mythological panoply of heroes that would intimidate the Justice League of America.

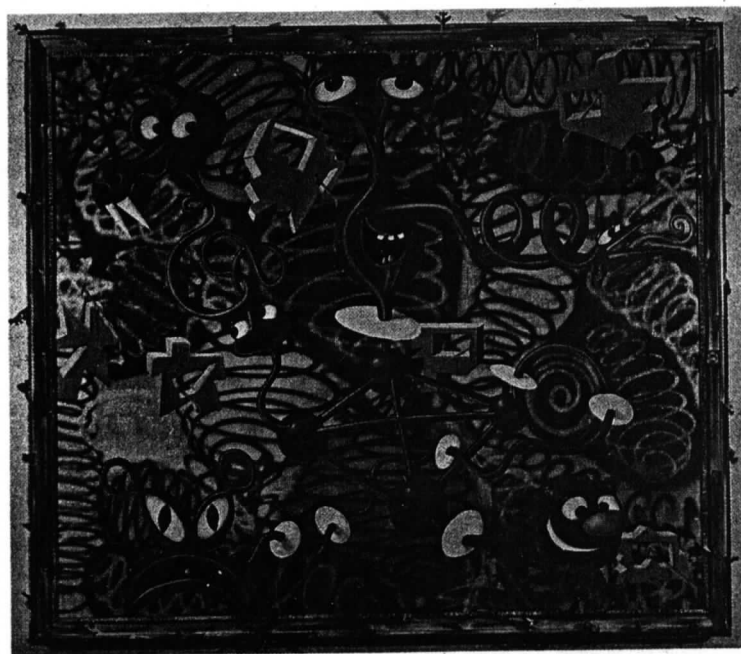
Content? Well, your guess is really as good as mine. Obviously, there's a "The Day After" aspect to the work that Scharf is quite serious about, but that's a touch too topical even for non-agitprop purposes, since all of Scharf's denizens seem to *like* it out there in deep post-Holocaust space. Frankly, he is starting to seem more and more like a site-specific artist, despite his purely sensual approach to painting. He is an incredibly rapid worker, and has an unslackable thirst and stamina for painting. His two-room installation in Madrid—the show-stopper of last summer's Arte Contemporaneo fest—was executed in two days. He speaks of covering the walls of the fishermen's homes in his Brazilian village, and in the next breath conjures up an anonymous city of bleak skyscrapers with monochrome surfaces—except one, which is covered from top to bottom with a Kenny Scharf mural. He has revved-up 1960s West Coast funk through his customizations of phones, TVs, cassette decks—and even his 1961 Caddy, which will go on display in the Larry Gagosian Gallery for his exhibition there.

Perhaps "content" is rather an inappropriate word for Scharf's vision; "world view" fits his style a bit better. He breaks his activity down into three discrete parts: paintings on canvas, room installations, and customized objects; between the three of them one can envision a world gradually gone Scharf. His populism combined with his environmental megalom-

ania may eventually result in a wasteland of buffoonery and overkill; the Arts and Crafts Movement cross-bred with The Green Slime. In fact, since the Jetsons are no longer quite the forbidden pleasure they were two years ago, Scharf could not have picked a more opportune time to be rid of them in favor of animistic rococo. But I think he has proven by now that he can transcend his own career strategies, and once the big corporate commissions start rolling in, public taste and elite taste might not seem quite as far apart as they do at the present moment. Still, Scharf's greatest obstacle remains his acceptance by fellow-artists, for if the well of \$500-a-throw "investment" into the East Village scene ever dries up, disappointed would-be Young Turks—who are never as populist as they seem—might be gunning for him as vociferously as the hard-edge painters from Kansas seem to (from their academic berths, that is).

Clearly, that is the culminating aesthetic slap in the face that Scharf incorporates into his work: he makes it all look too easy. Sure, there may be a bit of Kenny Scharf in all of us, but the original is making a very concerted lunge for the crown as of his last exhibition, and yet he still doesn't look as if he's worked up a sweat. But then again, swim through the taffy-colored cacophony in a typical recent Scharf and check out the wildly vacant look in his creatures' eyes. These are cartoons of cartoons, thus

Kenny Scharf, *Pipe Dream*, 1983. Oil and spraypaint on canvas, 7 x 8'. Private Collection, New York. Courtesy, Tony Shafrazi Gallery.



hopelessly cut off from their roots in human figuration; and yet they are us. I shudder deeply at the prospect of seeing one of them hanging next to a Picasso some day, for the harshness of their statement might then come through all too clearly.

With his sardonic characterization of the human race as cudly mutants beatifically lining up for a mug shot, Scharf has stumbled upon the ultimate inversion of the cool rationalism that still dominates post-conceptual art. In fact, his work may even be the penultimate signal that the pendulum has started to swing back in that direction. For the time being, Kenny Scharf is the ultimate aesthetic nightmare for those who have come to take themselves a mite too seriously, but that does not discount his scathingly un-ironic fatalism. It is as if, via mock-surrealism, Scharf has opened up a second layer behind the unconscious mind, and discovered that underneath our frustrated impulses and miscellaneous fears lies a land where our neuroses take the form of disturbed junk culture flotsam with human features. They are hated aberrations, our helplessly deformed alter-egos, but all they want to do is play.