

MUTANTS FROM OUTER SPACE

Kenny Scharf's New Psychedelia

by Steven Hager

Remember how much fun art was in the '60s? There was more freedom, more humor and more drug-crazed energy in the art world during that decade than in any other recent time. That is, until a group of renegade art students in New York began reliving the era by dropping acid, go-go dancing and holding impromptu "happenings" at a Polish social club in the East Village.

The revival, which started in 1979, was led by a 21-year-old painter named Kenny Scharf, who was later known for spray-painting Hanna-Barbera-inspired cartoons (The Flintstones, the Jetsons) on the tenement walls of New York City's Lower East Side. At night, Scharf would return to his slum apartment and work on his private day-glo environment—where he occasionally consumed magic mushrooms while listening to Jimi Hendrix records. Scharf was born ten years too late to fully experience the '60s, but he was determined not to miss out on them altogether.

In the beginning, public reaction to Scharf's art work was mostly negative. He was accused of ripping off Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera. He was dismissed as a revivalist. He was ignored while several of his art student pals from the School of Visual Arts (SVA) became international art celebrities. Recently, however, it has become clear Scharf's influence on the current generation of painters has been enormous. He has an impressive list of collectors waiting to buy his work (which has soared in price in the last two years), prestigious museums are negotiating to buy his paintings, and critics like Kay Larson (*New York* magazine) are suddenly calling him "the best painter in the urban-punk wing of the new American Surrealism."

"It has changed the way other people look at me, but it hasn't changed the way I look at myself," says Scharf, a handsome, engaging presence

with close-cropped hair, blue eyes, a chipped front tooth, and a pair of jaunty, three-inch sideburns. He is dressed in jeans and a self-decorated T-shirt. "Success is a responsibility," he says reflectively. "The good part is it allows my work to get bigger. Instead of customizing broken machines from the street, now I can customize Cadillacs."

There's a certain poetic justice in Kenny Scharf being born in Hollywood, California. He was raised, however, in the somewhat less glamorous San Fernando Valley—home of the Valley girls. His father is a successful businessman from New York who ran his own knitwear business before retiring to independent projects. "Kenny had a traditional Jewish upbringing," says his father, Roy. "He was into drawing and art since he could hold a pencil." "He had an imagination that wouldn't quit," adds Rose, his mother. "He was a lot of fun as a child. He never shut his mouth and he always had something going on. He got good marks except once when he was in the third grade and his art teacher gave him an 'F.' The teacher wanted him to draw a house the way she wanted and Kenny refused. He was livid. Kenny would only draw his own way."

Kenny had two older brothers who were closer in age, so much of the time he was left to himself. "I had two personalities," he says. "At school the whole social thing was being good at sports. I was a chubby preteen so I always got picked last. Every summer I went to camp, where everyone loved me. I lost weight. I was the best at sports. Then I'd come back to school and nothing would have changed. Once you get pegged, you can't get over it."

● *Black Light Installation by Kenny Scharf at Fun Gallery, 1982 (Wendy Wild body-painted by Bruno Schmidt and Adolfo Sanchez).*

Photo by Tseng Kwong Chi





"When I was 15, my parents moved to Beverly Hills. They wanted me to go to the local high school, which is the richest school in California. The school has its own oil well, TV station and observatory. I hated it. It was full of the worst brats. I grew up in the Valley, so I wasn't one of them. When I was 16 I got into the groovy cocaine and quaalude set. It was fun, but I always felt I was playing with it, almost using them. They were all spoiled. They'd smash up their Porsche and daddy would buy them a new Ferrari."

Scharf spent most of his time painting and his early work included several Rousseau-style jungle scenes. René Magritte, the Belgian surrealist (whose work has appeared on such album covers as Jeff Beck's *Beckola* and Jackson Brown's *Late For the Sky*), was also an early influence. At the time, Scharf had a reputation as a party boy, and his house on Camden Drive was the location of several wild bashes while his parents were conveniently out-of-town.

After graduation Scharf entered the University of California at Santa Barbara, where he took an art history class with Eileen Guggenheim. "She told me about the Soho art scene and that kind of made me decide to move to New York. I knew Santa Barbara wasn't happening." In 1978, after two years at Santa Barbara, he came to New York and moved into an apartment on 55th Street and 7th Avenue. Although he applied to several art schools, he was accepted only at SVA, which at the time had a reputation for taking just about anyone.

"I was doing mostly paintings of outer space," says Scharf.

"I'd also pick up broken appliances and machines in the street, glue them together and paint them." Scharf applied to the illustration department and it wasn't long before he had an exhibit at Fiorucci's, a fashionable new wave clothing boutique. "Then I decided to leave illustration and go into fine art," he says. "My teachers told me I was crazy. 'You're a star in illustration,' they said 'and they'll hate you in fine art.'" The prediction proved true. Scharf was never able to convince the fine art department he was a serious student. He built a miniature space city out of found objects and used it as a set for a video project. "You're not doing art," they told him. "You're just playing." At the time, a new art scene was developing in



Soho, and many young painters were scrambling to occupy positions in hot new galleries like Mary Boone's. Many of these painters had backgrounds in conceptual art and were fairly solemn and serious about their work. Needless to say, Scharf's work was anathema to many of them.

In 1979, the church fathers of one Holy Cross Polish National Church decided to turn their basement into a community center for local youth. When former theater student Ann Magnuson took over the job of running the center in May, it was dubbed "Club 57" (after the address at 57 St. Marks Place in New York's East Village) and immediately turned into a cross between a '30s Berlin cabaret and a '60s sock hop. "I first met Kenny at his Fiorucci show," says Magnuson. "He was just the sort of person we were interested in having at Club 57. He was energetic, imaginative and could dance a mean Watusi." Scharf was invited to exhibit at Club 57 and soon began spending most of his spare time hanging out at the club with fellow SVA student Keith Haring. "We were really outrageous at the time," says Scharf. "We'd wear funny clothes and were groupies for the B-52's [who had just arrived from Athens, Georgia with an independent cult single called "Rock Lobster"]. We went to all their shows and gave the band presents. Keith gave them plastic fruit once and they loved it."

In 1980, after graduating from SVA, Scharf went into a deep depres-

sion. "On most days I didn't get out of bed until 3 o'clock," he says. "I thought about leaving New York." It was during this period he began work on his first "closet," a blacklight environment that was to profoundly affect the direction of his paintings. "Every day I'd collect junk in the street, paint it fluorescent and put it in the closet," he says. "I never painted on mushrooms and I don't do them anymore, but I really got a lot of inspiration from them. On the ceiling I painted a fluorescent blue and orange spiral. I used to take mushrooms, lie on my back and stare at the spiral until it slowly dropped from the ceiling. I'd leave my body, go inside the spiral and float around in endless space. After that, I always stared at the spiral when I took mushrooms."

"The best thing about Kenny, he's always had the ability of taking his life to the limit without censoring or editing it," says Stefan Haves, his oldest and closest friend. "It's the same way with his art."

In June 1980, the Club 57 artists were invited to exhibit at the Times Square Show, which was being organized in an abandoned massage parlor near 42nd Street. The result was a chaotic mixture of erotica, graffiti, punk art and political manifestos. A number of black and Hispanic graffiti writers, who were illegally spray-painting murals on the sides of subway cars, were also in attendance. Scharf and Haring became friends with the graffiti writers and were soon influenced by their work. On blank subway ads, Haring began drawing simple, primitive sketches dominated by faceless human forms. The chalk drawings also included crawling babies, barking dogs, space ships, telephones, TV sets and atomic explosions. Almost overnight, Haring became famous.

"Keith and I were living in a loft together," says Scharf, "and all these collectors were coming by to look at his work. My paintings were up but it was like a blank wall to them. I was nonexistent. It was kinda hard on me." In an aggressive attempt to establish his career, Scharf wrote an article for the *Soho Weekly News*, offering to customize home appliances in his distinctive psychedelic style. "I thought it would be the answer to boring useless art," he says. "Here was art that was fun, improved your life and was in constant use. I thought it would be a real big business—that everyone

would have to have one. Most people took the article as a joke, but I was really serious. I included my phone number, but I only got one call and nothing came of it."

It was around this time that a friend visited Scharf with a Jetson coloring book. "At school I'd made videotapes using the Jetsons," says Scharf. "I was really into their style. I flipped through the book and said, wait a minute . . . I'll just copy this . . ."

Scharf's first Jetson-influenced show was held at a pioneering gallery which had just opened in the East Village. Run by Bill Stelling and underground film star Patti Astor, the gallery had had one previous show and did not yet have a name. Scharf suggested they call it the "Fun Gallery." Although the name stuck, Scharf's paintings were not very popular, except with his friends. "People asked me why I copied Hanna-Barbera," says Scharf. "But I never just copied them—I always changed the characters around and put them in my own situations. And anyway, I thought that question had already been answered 20 years ago with Pop art."

Later that year, Scharf was given a temporary studio at P.S. 1, a former school in Long Island City that had become an important center for experimental art. By this time, he was incorporating the Flintstones into his paintings and was spray-painting the Hanna-Barbera figures on buildings in the Lower East Side. He converted his studio into an enormous blacklight version of his closet. Although the studio was a success, Scharf's paintings still failed to attract the interest of any collectors.

However, when Scharf had his next show at the Fun Gallery in 1982, it was apparent his work had matured considerably. The paintings were bigger, bolder and more confident. Included in the show was a remarkable 5' x 6' painting titled "Whoa Nelly," which had the familiar cartoon figures, but also contained some new characters from Scharf's imagination. A swirling mass of color dominated the painting, which somehow conveyed the wild emotional intensity of a trip on mushrooms. Tony Shafrazi, an art dealer who was representing Haring, brought a collector to Scharf's apartment who immediately offered \$800 for a painting.

In the following two years, Scharf's paintings grew increasingly complex and his fondness for contrasting op-



• Left, TV set, 1984. Above, *Red Jello Fellow*, 1982. Next page, *When Worlds Collide*, 10'2" x 17'5". Collection: Whitney Museum of American Art. Photo by Ivan Dalla Tana.

posites became more noticeable. He often crammed canvasses with as many conflicting elements as possible. Last year, Scharf dropped the Jetsons and Flintstones entirely and began painting characters that employed elements of both cartoon strips, adding references to Felix the Cat. He called it his "El Fredix" phase. He also painted allusions to classical art and began adding three-dimensional effects in the form of hollow cubes, balls and bulbous, cartoony noses. "I like to mix it all together," he says. "European sources and the mass media. I feel the world is like that—a complete mixture of everything. If my figures didn't have eyeballs and mouths, they'd be abstract paintings. I guess I'm doing abstract paintings and making them a little less abstract by putting faces on them."

Scharf took a vacation in Brazil in 1983 and when he returned he had married a Brazilian woman and bought a house on the Atlantic Ocean. "It's just like Kenny to do that," says Min Thometz, a frequent dance partner of Scharf's during the Club 57 days. "He's a carefree person who always has his own world around him. You especially feel it now when you visit him in Brazil. When you get close, you leave the real world and enter Kenny's world, where he'll just grab you and say, 'Let's dance.' It's great until you realize

you have to eventually go back to the real world." Thometz was recently hired as Scharf's assistant, with the unenviable task of putting the artist's business life in order. "Kenny can get pretty messy and disorganized," she says. "You're just as likely to find his passport in the cornflakes box as anywhere else."

Last year, Scharf's wife Tereza gave birth to a baby girl, Zena, and subtle references to pregnancy and Scharf's feelings about fertility now appear in the artist's work. His life is more stable now. There are fewer parties and more business appointments. Scharf is also somewhat dismayed over the current state of affairs in the East Village, where he seems to have spawned several imitators.

"Like everyone else, I'm waiting to see what will happen next," he says, "but I'm not sure it will come out of the East Village. I think our scene peaked in 1980. I had a New Year's Eve party that year and I remember everyone was sprawled out in a pile in one corner. We were all drunk on champagne. At the time, everybody was dating everybody else, regardless of sex, color or whatever. It was one big communal family. Today the East Village has really changed. It seems most of the artists just want to get into galleries. That's just the sort of attitude we were rebelling against."