

HOUSE & GARDEN

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The Rockefellers'
Japanese Country House

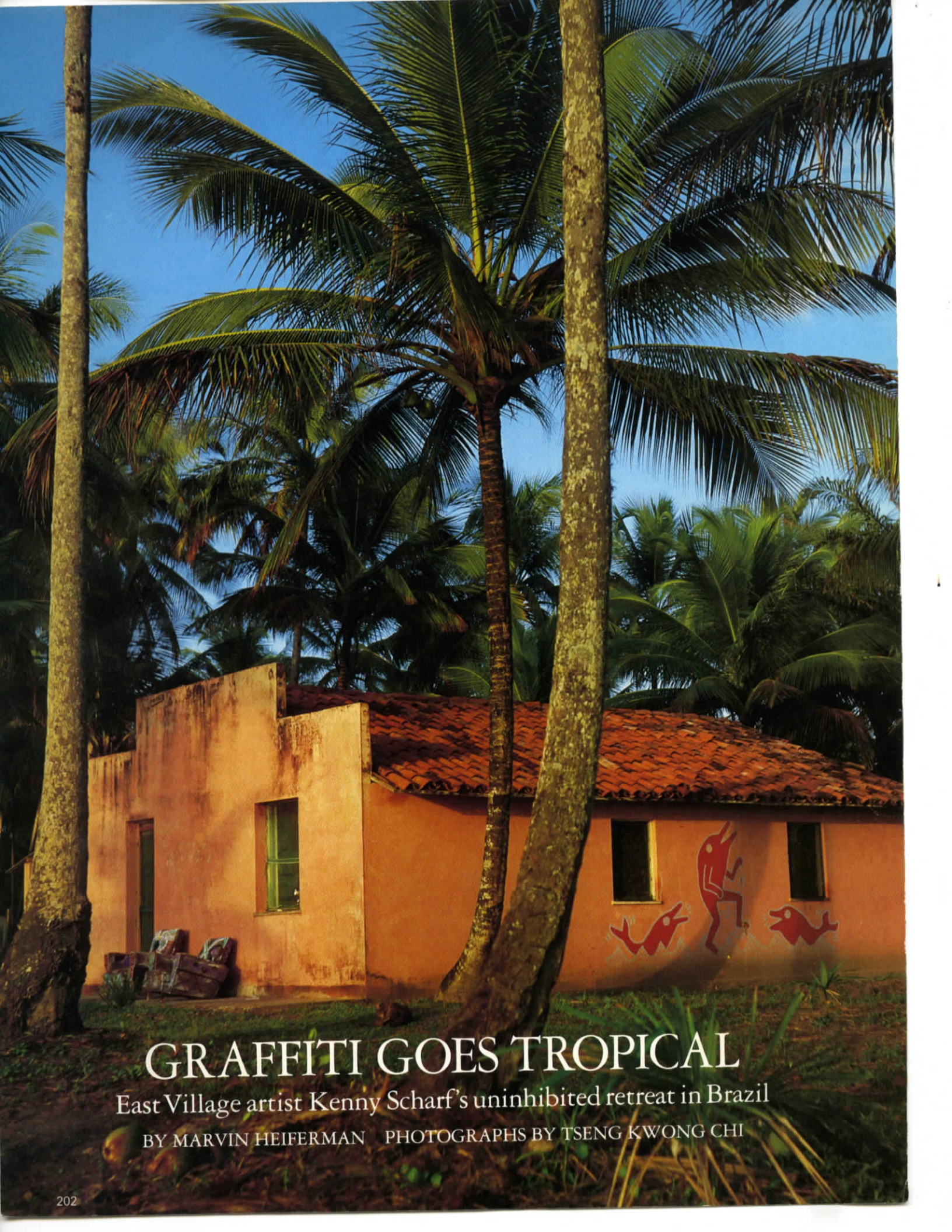


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GRAFFITI GOES TROPICAL

East Village artist Kenny Scharf's uninhibited retreat in Brazil

BY MARVIN HEIFERMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY TSENG KWONG CHI



Keith Haring mural, *opposite*, adorns the side of Kenny Scharf's pink stucco house. Chairs painted by Scharf face the ocean. *Above*: Some brushwork by Scharf and Haring in a corner of the wooden guesthouse.

The great escape from New York's art world for painter Kenny Scharf, his family, and friends is twelve hours of jet travel and a long drive over rutted, muddy roads to an isolated beach in Bahia on the coast of Brazil. Not far from that beach where a gentle surf rolls in and diffuses over perfectly white sand—where at the end of the day the equatorial light filters, like smoke, through the palm trees—lies the Scharf winter mini-compound: the pink stucco house, the thatched pavilion, and the wildly decorated wooden building. But this particular retreat evokes *Gilligan's Island* rather than Gauguin's Tahiti.

At 26, Kenny Scharf is one of a group of young painters who appeared on the art scene in the past five years, rewriting the customs and schedules of dues-paying and financial success as they went along. Born in 1958, shortly after Sputnik's launch, Scharf is a genuine product of the times. One of the happiest days of his life, he recalls, was announced by the arrival of a color television in his parents' house. "I must have been about six or seven, and I used to just sit right in front of it for hours. TV sets were colored dots on a black surface, so if you looked really close, it was like hallucinating."

TV clearly made its impression and became a major resource for Scharf's painted imagery. Cartoon characters, like the Flintstones and the Jetsons (the wacky, post-Apollo space-age family), would become central to his work.

When Scharf moved from Los Angeles to New York in the late seventies, he shared an apartment near Times Square with artist Keith Haring. He began making



Scharf, *below*, at work on a canvas. *Above and opposite:* Details of his work in the houses with segments by Keith Haring and other guests. Second row: Scharf has made a construction with a local religious statue and another with parts of plastic toys and, below, one with tin cans and soap containers. Scharf painted chair, lower right, one of two in front of house.

art from discarded machines, from trash, and later was in demand for house calls to customize working appliances; touch-tone phones, blenders, Trinitrons, answering machines, and ghetto blasters were festooned with plastic toys, rubber models, monster faces, fake gems, Mylar fringe, and bright bursts of acrylic paint. This was the complete "Van Chrome" experience, as Scharf dubbed it. The art scene, he felt, had almost nothing to do with real life. It was his self-appointed mission to bridge the gap, and his technical updates on the classic Greek amphora did just that.

In a remarkably brief time, he had attained notoriety. A solo premiere at Fiorucci in 1979 was followed by a string of performances and exhibitions at P.S. 1 in Long Island City, at the late Mudd

Club and Club 57 and the Fun Gallery, the night spot and gallery that were harbingers of New York's East Village renaissance. Scharf has since moved on to grander circuits: SoHo, 57th Street, European Kunsthallen, and a string of biennials (in São Paulo, in Venice, in New York at the Whitney Museum). Bigger paintings and commissions followed success, as have marriage, parenthood, and Brazilian real estate.

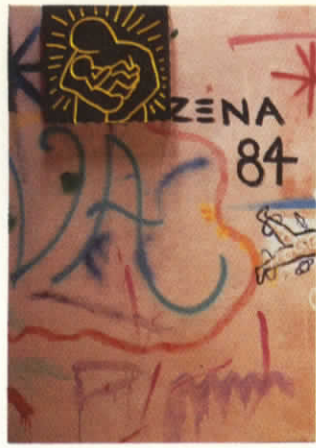
The love story, in keeping with the art, was purely jet-age modern. Scharf met his wife-to-be, Tereza, on a flight to Brazil, en route to Carnival. It was love at first sight. Scharf deplaned, lost her phone number, and proceeded to lament her loss, an Orpheus wailing for Eurydice. But, as Scharf's TV experience might have taught him, there would be a

happy ending. The couple were reunited, by chance, on a street corner shortly thereafter. They married and now spend most of their time, with their daughter, Zena, in Lower Manhattan.

Their South American houses, however, are on the outskirts of the small city of Ilhéus, cocoa-bean capital of the world. Commodity traders talk numbers in the corner cafés and school bands march in practice formation around the town square and through the narrow streets. The Brazilian writer Jorge Amado makes his home there, as do Scharf's in-laws.

On the beach, miles from town, life, for some, is stripped back to the basics. Houses along the shore range from mud shacks (whose residents arrive and depart on the local bus, a *(Text continued on page 264)*







View from the main room of the pink adobe house through to the kitchen, left, with its decorated icebox and, right, one of the bedrooms. In the living room a local chatchka sits on a Scharfized cabinet. *Opposite:* The crib in Scharf's daughter's room is decorated with his painted creatures.

