

Kenny Scharf

by

Keith Haring

A few years ago, when Kenny Scharf first showed his paintings at Club 57 and the Fun Gallery in New York's East Village, spray paint on canvas was a somewhat innovative craft gimmick. Graffiti in galleries rocked the house of fine art. Critics screamed, but the bright, gaudy Krylon colors drew the biggest, wildest opening-night crowds ever, and helped instill a little art appreciation in the souls of the most unlikely patrons. Five years later, many of the style's "masters" have returned to wherever they came from, and most openings are once again respectable and boring. Not so Kenny Scharf's. His paintings and openings have survived.

Scharf uses both spray paint and oils to make huge homages to a cartoon-inspired vision of Tomorrow. Goofy, androgynous blob-people meet hybrid Jetson/Flintstone offspring on the fields of a surreal landscape. They are frightening paintings, packed from edge to edge with the stuff nightmares are made of. His "sculptures," however, are a lot of fun. The telephones at Shafrazi Gallery, a Sony Trinitron and a '61 Cadillac have all been the victims of epoxy glue, plastic animals, radio tubes, sequins and his trademark cartoon images—contemporary kitsch at its best. When *Interview* photographed Kenny's '61 Cadillac in Victor Potamkin's East Side showroom, one salesman was overheard asking another, "What the hell is that?" "That," the other replied firmly, "is art." So be it.

Kenny's latest solo show at the Shafrazi Gallery was a sell-out, except for the Cadillac. The 26-year-old painter's work was shown in the "Times Square Show" and "New York, New Wave" in 1981 and has been in group shows at the Robert Miller Gallery, the Holly Solomon Gallery, the Robert Fraser Gallery in London, the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco and was a part of the 1984 Venice Biennale.

—Robert Becker

KEITH HARING: What made you leave Los Angeles for New York?

KENNY SCHARF: I was taking this art history course and we were talking about Pop and the whole scene in the '60s. I knew it didn't exist anymore, but I thought I'd better go to New York because Santa Barbara wasn't happening.

KH: When I met you at the School of Visual Arts in 1978, you were walking around the neighborhood, finding broken television sets, hauling them back to school, taking them apart, and gluing extra tubes onto the outside of them with a hot-glue gun. I thought, "Who is this nut? I have to know this person who is so obsessed."

ANDY WARHOL: Were you the only two interesting people at school?

KS: No, there was John Sex...and actually we met Jean Michel Basquiat there, too. He wasn't allowed in because he wasn't a student, but I wrote a note from a teacher and signed it, saying he was allowed to come in. Then he did and wrote all over the walls.

KH: When was your first show in New York?

KS: I did this show in '79 at Fiorucci. I had just come to New York. Klaus Nomi [*the late new wave performance artist*] performed at the opening. There was a series of paintings that was supposed to be a photo album of this lady named Estelle.

AW: Who was Estelle?

KS: Estelle was the jet-set woman of the future. I got John Sex to help me make this huge photo album with a coil in the middle, and I had paintings in it with captions. There was one painting of her at a television/pizza party where she holds up this pizza that has TV sets and martians coming out of the TV sets. The martians give her a one-way ticket to space. The next shot is her inside the plane, and she's looking out the window at the earth. There's a TV set with a nuclear bomb, and she's looking at the world exploding. She's the only survivor and she's really pleased.

KH: Weren't you a go-go boy?

KS: I was one of the dancers at Max's in Klaus Nomi's show.

KH: You used to do really great performances at Club 57 [an early East Village performance club]. We had a different theme every night, like the Debutante Ball, and TV-dinner parties and stuff.

AW: It sounds like you had a lot of fun.

KS: We used to idolize the '60s. That was our main thing.

KH: We had grown up watching that stuff on television, but we were never a part of it because we were always too little. By the time we were doing Club 57, it was all satire. It was like reliving it, but it was a satire.

KS: It was really fun, I loved it, but I'm so busy being a painter now, I don't have time to do that stuff. The worst part about being "successful" is that you don't have the time to do all that other stuff. I used to do videos all the time, I used to do performances and dancing. Now I just don't have time.

KH: You should still make videos, though. You made the best ones.

KS: I want to make videos. I was talking to a reporter from the Daily News today. He saw my tapes a long time ago.

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KS: We wrote to the National Enquirer and maybe they'll cover the show.

KH: You'd be great in the National Enquirer. These new paintings really have mass appeal. Everyone should have their appliances customized by you.

AW: What are customized appliances?

KS: Taking a basic, boring, everyday appliance and transforming it by painting on it and decorating it with jewels and things.

KH: What you do is something everyone can do for themselves. Everyone should paint their radio or their own car or TV.

KS: Why not? And if everyone did, it would just make life so much more interesting. People's regular lives are so boring. They get up every day and everything's the same, especially suburban people. If everyone had customized appliances, their lives would be a lot more fun, interesting, glamorous. If every time you used the phone you were touching jewels, or a little sparkle every time you put your blender on, it would help.

KH: When we lived together on Sixth Avenue, Kenny used to paint everything in sight. We used to find things on the street and take them home and turn them into art.

KS: New York has the best garbage.

KH: We had so much room in this loft we were subletting that Kenny had a whole room he didn't need. So he started filling it with different things we found on the street and painting them.

KS: Yeah, I put in black lights and kept

painting and adding things. It was like a little retreat where I could go and be quiet and alone.

KH: He painted everything. One morning I woke up—I was still half asleep—and Kenny said, "Can I paint your glasses?" so I said sure. Then I realized an hour later I had purple glasses. So I started letting him repaint them. Every week it was a new style—stripes, polka dots, etc. We finally had to stop because it got so thick it started cracking off.

AW: The car is really the best.

KH: The ultimate customization.

KS: Ultima Suprema Deluxa. I bought a 1961 Cadillac a couple of years ago. I've always loved the fins on cars, especially from the late '50s when cars looked like rocket ships. I bought it in New York and drove it cross country and painted it in Los Angeles for a show there last year.

AW: It was really great when we went for a drive in it last week.

KH: Sitting inside it is like being on the most intense acid trip you've ever been on in your life, without after effects.

KS: We took it in the Halloween parade in the Village. It was the best.

KH: Last week this guy got out of his cab and said, "Your are the happiest person I've ever seen in my whole life, and whatever you have, I want some of it. I am so happy now, you made my life." I felt so good.

KS: I would love to drive it across the country. But I want to have TV crews following behind me, because if I'm driving through Arkansas without a camera crew, people are going to wonder. But if they see cameras, they'll think, "Oh, they're doing a movie...that's okay."

KH: You should get PM Magazine in every city to cover you, since it's a local show. They'd take you from border to border.

KS: I would like to also have a customized trailer, with a black-light closet in it and performers like John Sex and Ann Magnuson, and in every town Keith can do a mural and the performers can do a show.

KH: Isn't that how Ringling Brothers started?

KS: We could have our own traveling

circus.

KH: Didn't you just sell a painting to the Whitney Museum?

*KS: I did the painting after I did my Cadillac. The idea was kind of to make a Cadillac of paintings. After the Cadillac, I thought, "What can I do to top this?" So I did this huge, 18-foot painting. I called it *When Worlds Collide*.*

KH: What does your 10-month-old daughter, Zena, think of your paintings?

KS: She screams. She's my biggest fan. She saw the new ones for the first time and just went wild—it was like this inhale of excitement. I'd take her to each one and she'd just scream. People like the paintings, but no one got off like she did.

KH: She's been sitting, watching you paint since the day she was born. Even in Brazil she was sitting beside you in a little stroller watching you paint. . . . You and I were both born in 1958. That makes us the first babies of the space age. We thought we were going to grow up in the Space Age.

KS: Especially growing up in Los Angeles, because everything was real Pop. The car washes looked like space stations, and the coffee shops did, too, and the cars looked like space ships. Everything was like the Jetsons in the early '60s in L.A. We all used to say, "By the '80s, we'll all be going to space, and there'll be seats for everyone—it'll be great." Then the '70s came around and everything got real boring, and I refused to believe it.

AW: But now there's the space shuttle.

KS: It's not the final frontier. It's the ultimate—

KH: Shopping mall. I like how they say they'll have space shuttle rides—maybe they'll build a shopping mall in space, because there's nothing else to do out there. Now, if you go, you just go there and come back. You could have T-shirts that say, "My mom and dad went to space and all I got was this lousy T-shirt." Or you could have ones that say "I ♥ Space," like "I ♥ New York." If they would send you to space, would you go?

AW: I'd turn it down.

KH: If they were sending anyone to space, they'd probably send LeRoy Nieman. □