

Best Revenge

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By Roberta Smith

Of all the young artists madly mining the veins of graffiti, Surrealism, and cartoon imagery, Kenny Scharf is among the most sophisticated and complex, partly because he makes equal use of all three degraded sources, pulverizing them into a sleek, only superficially disjunctive hybrid. Like some of his contemporaries—Robert Longo and Roberto Juarez for example—Scharf sums up so many aspects of this particular moment in art, that if he didn't exist he would have had to be invented (a position which also holds the potential for instant invisibility). Scharf's hybrid is actually a new take on an old formula—a mix of high with low Surrealism not unlike Philip Guston's double-pronged debt to de Chirico and the Katzenjammer Kids. In Scharf's case, it's Tanguy meets the Flintstones or their Space Age successors, the Jetsons: all those simple ameboid Tanguy shapes floating in deep intergalactic space finally have faces and they're often Fred's or Wilma's "Jetsoned" with little antennaed hats.

Scharf's work is rife with illusionist tricks and sleights-of-hand. One of the things he does is best is open up a black ground with an infinity of stars, constellations, and brushy Milky Waylets. Another favored background is New Wave fuzzy spray-painted spirals in somber tones of black, brown, and silver. Either backdrop can be overlaid with a pair or a herd of loony, leering, snakebodied cartoon creatures whose Juju Fruit colors and pop-out dimensionality make me think that even Abstract Illusionism, an art movement which started out degraded, may have its day. In sum, not one square, or more accurately, one cubic inch is left inactivated, or inarticulated and the results have the manic ingenious energy which is more and more the norm.

Scharf mixes his sharp-fuzzy recipe in different ratios here, and the diversity suggests that he is developing very quickly. There are a couple of big paintings of jammed-together Flintstone/Jetson quasi-patterns, which seem earlier, where everything is slightly soft; others, such as *Message from the Molecular Messiah*, are too completely hard and fastidiously rendered. Scharf is at his best when he works the extremes against each other and this happens with particular friction in a series of smaller paintings done on boards and pieces of found wood where the looseness, rather than being sprayed, results from a lot of small-brushed handwork, uncharacteristically thick and painterly. Examining these smaller works, the larger ones soon wear a bit thin, looking like exhibition pieces that display more skill than anything else. What is most striking about them is the

weightlessness Scharf gives their big size and Baroque complexity—a contrast to much Neo-Expressionism which seems rather deliberate.

Like Jean Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, Scharf, who is 25, has a precocious command of medium and message and he works with the same kind of grimly optimistic, peculiarly impersonal energy. His art is eerily complete, old, but not necessarily wise beyond its years; too often its finish seems already locked-in. It is hard to imagine this stylistic mix without the liberating examples of Sigmar Polke and Jon Borofsky and yet, object for object, Scharf is clearly much more deliberately style-conscious and conservative. His work reminds me that Sur-

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Fred-O-Puss Realizes by Scharf: a precocious, eerily impersonal energy

realism, especially the academic illusionist sort, is every high school student's favorite modern art movement. At this point, Scharf pursues his hybrid with the intense, narrow focus of the prodigy. Fortunately that hybrid actually incorporates many ways of painting, some better than others, and it will be interesting to see which ones win out. (Tony Shafrazi, 163 Mercer Street, 925-8732, through June 11)