

Pop power

Kenny Scharf brings his pop art fantasies to town

By Cathy Byrd

How do you approach a contemporary legend? Easy it's not. Especially considering the amount that's already been written about pop surrealist Kenny Scharf, whose exhibition at McIntosh Gallery opens Sept. 11. He's even been interviewed by actor Dennis Hopper, an avid collector of his work, and by his former roommate, the late Keith Haring of "Radiant Baby" fame.

All the same, when he spoke to me from his studio in Miami, I



"Lokglob" by Kenny Scharf

managed to get some of the skinny. I can tell you he was born in 1958, raised on television, pop culture and the media in Beverly Hills. I can also explain his penchant for wild colors and cartoons: As a child, he spent eight hours a day one inch from a television set where he totally zoned into the dot matrix that created the on-screen colors of those characters.



When he grew up, Scharf hung out with actors James Dean and Natalie Wood and later with the King of Pop himself, Andy Warhol. That white-haired ghost floats through some of Scharf's never-ending cosmic paintings where soap and cereal boxes spin around media text and cartoony space creatures.

The artist started making his mark in New York in the '80s, beginning with graffiti, which he considered less about signatures and more about art

fantasy. For a while, his mutant cartoon characters peopled public walls around Manhattan. He developed a passion for creating art cars, too. His favorite vehicular subject is the Cadillac: "Love the fins!" he explains. In one performance with his artist friends, Scharf drove his customized '61 Cadillac, its trunk filled with a miniature space city, right into a gallery. Scharf used to customize everything in his life, from air-conditioners to televisions, even his infant's crib, with paint and pop. Now represented by the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in New York and featured in big-time solo exhibits everywhere, he confines the delightful chaos of Scharf art to his studio a few miles from home. "It's pretty wacky here," he says.

This surrealist's culture may be pop, but his nature is the Brazilian rain forest. He began traveling to Brazil in the '80s, and the country's endangered environment became one of his *causes celebres*. In paintings like "Junglerama" and "Jungle Times" he twined vinelike organisms around found imagery and text, creating a 3-D vortex in which the viewer gets lost. Many of his paintings hold a futuristic environment inhabited by goofy, primeval creatures or play with stylized globs of paint — what he calls "glob obs." The appeal of his work is ageless; Scharf's special brand of pop spirituality is irresistible.

Asked about his inimitable, indefatigable style, he says, "My style has stayed the same because it's mine. I can't be compelled to be anything but myself. I've covered a lot of territory. I have the freedom and the choice of going back and exploring an area where I've been before. I've realized that I can keep going and growing within the same style. I would never want any boundaries for myself."

The man-with-no-limits can't be stopped. He's recently created a series of man-nequins for Pucci

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"Molecuwet" by Kenny Scharf

Courtesy Kenny Scharf

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