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## ROSEMARY GRILLO

t's 1991 and Kenny Scharf is one of the few survivors of the madcap '80s. Now thirty-something, he's at ease with his domestic life with a wife and two daughters, but this doesn't mean he's "settled."

The first time I saw Scharf was at his recent opening at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery, thronged with art notables and their younger counterparts. Scharf, wearing bell-bottoms, a spontaneous smile and an attentive look, was almost inconspicuous in the crowd. Missing, of course, were Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring (with whom Scharf was closest in the '80s) and Warhol.

At our second meeting, in his West Village home, Kenny Scharf confirmed that every part of this one-time space-age aficionado, pop-loving, L.A.-born East Village resident, SVA student, trend-seeker/maker and artist was alive, well and vibrant in his new work.

In his spacious kitchen, he peels an orange and apologizes—he's only slept three hours since his return from Normal, Illinois, where he lectured on Keith Haring's work.

Scharf says he's painted since he was a child, influenced by the Jetsons, *Time* and *Life* magazines and TV. He learned about Pop Art and Surrealism in high school, and by the time he entered college in 1976, his own esthetic was emerging.

### *What brought you to New York?*

I was in college at U.C. Santa Barbara, and took an art history class [with Eileen Guggenheim]. It was all interesting, but...then I heard about Andy Warhol, the old Factory, and it just electrified me—I thought, 'I have to get out of here.' It was just so amazing...Oh God, wow! That was 1977, I knew the Factory days were way over, but I still thought I could find something in New York. I only knew one person, but I knew I just had to be there.

### *You once referred to your work as Pop-Surrealism. Does this still apply today?*

It's Pop because it has the imagery of Pop. But the difference between what I'm doing and Pop from the '60s is that my form of Pop is coming from the unconscious and from insight. In the '60s it wasn't so ingrained in artists' unconscious; they didn't have that kind of early plugging in. So it wasn't like unconsciously they were saying, 'Oh, this is a can of soup and now it's art!' I still call my work Pop-Surrealism because even in the past when I was doing more

cartoon figure imagery, it was very surrealistic in the way that it has different kinds of atmospheres and metamorphic shapes. Now my imagery is more grown-up, adult-like. It's more Pop-Abstract-Surrealism.

### *What has changed in your life and work in the past ten years?*

It's changed many times. But I'd say that it's changed more dramatically in the last five years. Around 1983 when the first people started dying, AIDS was taking the whole scene and energy apart. Everyone just kind of freaked out. It was really scary. It took a few years to get back into things. I lost so many friends that were really close that I knew were going to die. I just had to sit and watch it. There are still people sick and dying, but my closest friends have died. So I feel personally I'm over the real hard part. I feel my outlook is changing for the better.

### *How has marriage and fatherhood affected your life and work?*

I would say that fatherhood is the real marriage. It changed me a lot. I had lived a kind of crazy life-style, without any responsibility. But now it's been seven years since the first girl and now I really like it. I think it affected my work. When my wife was first pregnant I painted a lot of fertility images. Having kids makes you more optimistic because if you're not, it's really depressing for the kids. They helped me a lot when my friends were dying of AIDS. They were always so up and energetic that you had to be more positive about the future.

### *You once said you were inspired by drugs, i.e., mushrooms. What inspires you now?*

When I said I was inspired by mushrooms I was talking about certain things you can learn from them. I've never advocated them. I'm concerned when I see people doing mushrooms, going to a club, smoking, etc. When I did mushrooms, I thought they were a very sacred thing, spiritual and mind-expanding. It was about going through an unconsciousness, all that mumbo jumbo I believed in, and stuff I wanted to learn. I just wanted to be in tune with those kinds of, like, gods and spirits. I think they're a magical thing. Yeah! It was very inspiring, like you were learning about a universal oneness. I did it. I don't do it now.

### *Is there a specific theme or series behind your new work?*

There is no series. I consider each piece to be a whole different theme by itself, even though they relate to each other. Each painting is like a changing of the channel. You know it's another

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station and another program. As far as an overall theme: Each one is about the present and how we are living in this civilization, where I think we're going.

***So where are we going?***

Well, it's a lot about our ongoing and blatant consumerism. And it all boils down to killing the earth environmentally by pollution. Just like this Gulf war—it's like we're fighting so we can kill ourselves. We're fighting to uphold this way

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of life, but because we all come from nature there's no way out, we're all victims.

***In your past work your images were almost child-like. Today, besides the '50s images of cars, the space age materials of the '60s and the echoes of Warhol's Jackie O's, there are also images of genitalia in your new work. Why the change?***

The images of the '50s and '60s basically reflect today and our everyday lives, things around us that we use—cars, telephones, shoes, television sets, etc. I like the style and the whole optimism of the time with the ideas of space travel possibilities. It's this past version of the future that I'm fascinated with. Now we were supposed to have been able to travel to the moon. Obviously that didn't happen. As far as the sexuality it's more adult-like imagery. Sex is part of our everyday lives. It's definitely an image that goes on in everyone's mind a lot.

***What are your plans for the future?***

I am taking a little break from painting. I've done a ride for the Luna Luna Amusement Park [a carousel; in the mid-'80s a number of artists did rides for this project, currently in storage in Austria—*Ed.*]. I like to do things that get out in the world. And if I do get more "commercial," I'm ready for the criticism. Duchamp, Warhol, Keith Haring's merger of commercial art and fine art is still not accepted. I won't do anything along those lines until the right thing comes along. I strongly believe that as long as you stand behind whatever you do, that's all that really matters. The only danger is when something gets out of your hands and you don't have that control anymore, then it's gone, it's not yours, and then it's never good. †