
A close-up portrait of a man with a short beard and mustache, smiling broadly. He is wearing a red mesh tank top. The background is dark and out of focus, with some blue and purple shapes.

Ken
Schwarz
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beautiful little eden

by paul jacobson

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"You can't find this in South Beach," he says with a smile about his North Miami studio. Standing in the middle of his animated art-filled room, Kenny is tan. He looks like a sun-burned Malibu beach bum, with a red mesh shirt barely clinging to a physically fit physique, a pair of sandals clinging to his feet, and cut-off shorts dancing up and down as he speaks.



Some might consider his new space a room full of junk. A crowded room of clutter. Trash. But one man's trash is another man's art. Cliché's aside, Kenny is an artist. His art is a cool collage of comic book type cartoons. Kooky and crazy, it is filled with items that resemble a biology class project come to life. A spacey scientific experiment gone mad. Mischievous microorganisms meandering aimlessly, agitated amoebas mix and match with prancing protozoa-like globs. All intermingling and laughing.

Kenny has been sharing his wild eccentricities with the canvas since the early eighties — both with smiles and frowns. As a painter, a performer and now as a father he's evolved and remained at the forefront of the art world.



Alternating between a silver tin foil square bowl in one hand and a paintbrush in the other, he stands over the paint splotted cement floors and lets us watch him in the middle of one of his latest creations.

He talks about being a California boy. Raised in the San Fernando Valley and Beverly Hills he moved to Santa Barbara to attend college. Hippie chicks and central California left little to be desired. So, like any aspiring artist, he packed his things and went to New York.

Kenny arrived in Manhattan and became immersed in the lower east side, downtown community. He befriended pop artist, Keith Haring and together they ruled the art scene.

Only, Kenny lived to tell about it.

"We were very close," he said about Keith, who died in 1990. "We were roommates. We shared common philosophies. He was an inspiration as a friend and a artist."

It was the time of break dancing. Fluorescent filled femme fatales. Rap music and Studio 54. CBGB's was the place to play. The Ramones were the group to hear.

"I had great memories, are you kidding?" he says, referring to the years when he, Keith Haring, Andy Warhol and a slew of East Village personalities were the toast of the downtown scene in the early eighties.

"When I go out here, now, I immediately have to leave. I get bored. I have to say, I'm so jaded from the night life I used to live in that anything in comparison seems really dull to me."

After a decade of shows and exhibitions, Kenny came down to Miami Beach in '91, during what some might consider the formation years of South Beach. One could say Kenny arrived at the beginning — when South Beach too had a downtown, funky edge.

"I think it was a lot more fun — a lot less self conscious. Now, everybody's like worried about how they look. Then, it was more crazy — more

eccentric. That's what I liked about it."

As an artist, Kenny has experienced both the good and the bad.

A lot of his critics have not always made him the darling of the art world. "I've experienced numerous incarnations of ups and downs of public popularity. Sometimes I'm fashionable. Other times I'm not. Luckily, I'm fashionable right now," he says with a sigh of relief.

Kenny knows the evaluation process can be difficult. Critics love to criticize. But one thing is undeniable: Kenny is still around. Kenny is still creating art. Kenny has survived. "If somebody wants to deem you "in" or "out" there's nothing you can do about it. I've made some mistakes by not trusting my own judgment and worrying about other's judgment. As an artist you can't do that. You can't please people. You have to please yourself. You have to be true to yourself."

Like all artists, through the good and through the bad Kenny has continued. But he hasn't done it alone. Along with his wife, Teresa and his two young daughters, he's forged ahead. "One of the things that has kept me up has been my two little girls (Zena, 14 and Malia, 10). When your friends are dying, you can't go home and be depressed because you've got two little babies. You have to elevate them," he says while taking a momentary break from his concentration. "They really helped me through that hard time."

Kenny still considers himself a New Yorker. Most of his business is primarily executed there. "I'm a New Yorker who just lives here," he says. While he doesn't see a big art scene burgeoning anywhere in this region, he does credit Miami as getting more sophisticated.

"It's growing in art especially with the MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art]," he says, and adds that he has high hopes about the Bass Museum's renovations and expansion. "The kids on the beach don't go to Museums, maybe that will change once the Bass is finished."

When asked where he sees himself in 10 years, he stops painting again and thinks about it for a second. "Oh, no, I'll be 50," he says with a laugh.

Kenny moved to Miami Beach because he fell in love with it. But with all love, it doesn't come easy and it's not always consistent. Kenny loves the light down here. He loves the resort aspect of Miami and he likes the architecture — that's still there — and ads, "which gets onto the things that I don't like."

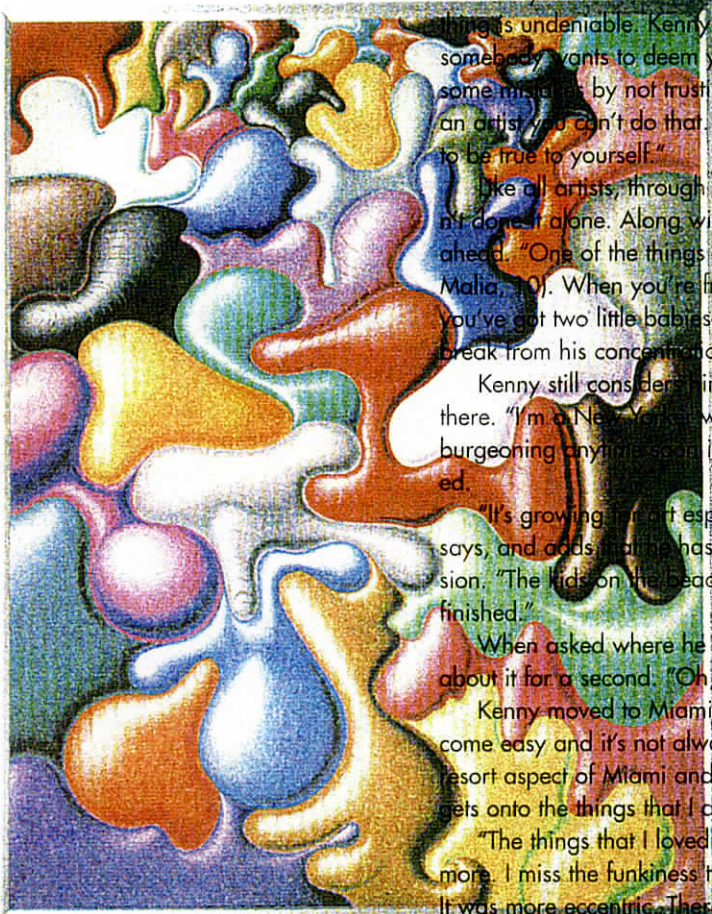
"The things that I loved about it and what brought me here are kind of not there anymore. I miss the funkiness that was here when I arrived. It reminded me of the East Village. It was more eccentric. There were a lot of freaks. Put some freaks back into it," he demands. "Put some funk back into it. Tear down those ugly sky scrapers."

If anyone can put the funk back into it, Kenny can.

Chaos, control. Confusion, clarity. Kenny's art is a constant collision, but the message is always clear: "It's emotional. It's about life. Color. Nature. Consumerism. The world we live in.

"They are the things I like to look at."

And those are the things of Miami Beach.



Globup 1989 oil on aluminum frame
collection Tony Shafrazi