

CONTEMPORARY CURRENTS

Kenny Scharf

Closet No. 9

The Queens
Museum of Art
Queens NY

22 October-
22 December 1991



Kenny Scharf

Kenny Scharf's art emerged with memorable flamboyance into the art world, causing excitement and controversy. Scharf—like his good friend and artistic compatriot Keith Haring—was a leading participant in the exuberant East Village art scene of the early 1980s. Only 20 years old when he made his art debut, much of his early work was created for exhibitions and performances in nightclubs. To many art world observers, Scharf seemed more interested in having fun than producing serious art. Yet his fast, visually loud, upbeat paintings were clearly original and had a contagious appeal. Kenny Scharf became an art star as his work was embraced first by his East Village peer group, then the fashion world, the popular media, and finally—over the angry objections of conservative art critics—it entered museums and other fine arts venues.

Scharf is a quintessential product of affluent, postwar America. Born in 1958 in Hollywood, California, he is part of the "television generation," latter day baby boomers who were the first to grow up with a steady diet of TV viewing. If Pop Art had not already existed, Scharf and his generation certainly would have invented it. Even as a young child he made paintings inspired by television. Scharf's mature work continues to reflect this seminal influence. He uses the bright fluorescent colors of television and often incorporates TV-derived images from animated children's cartoons such as "The Jetsons" and "Felix the Cat." Schooled on television, Scharf seeks to create an art that is quick, entertaining and has broad popular appeal.

In the 1960s, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and other Pop artists incorporated popular imagery and commercial techniques into their art, effectively challenging the barriers traditionally separating high and low art. Pop Art initiated a dialogue between art and life that was rich in possibilities for Scharf and other young artists of the 1980s.

Scharf's unique blend of art and life can be seen in the display of "customized" household appliances at the Queens Museum of Art. Scharf has attached objects onto functioning electrical appliances and painted on them, creating a hybrid: useable art. "I think it makes life better if you're using art every day, like talking on a customized phone," says Scharf. According to art critic Gerald Marzorati, a distinct evolution has taken place from the Pop Art of the 1960s to Scharf's brand of 1980s "Post-Pop." "He brings painting to objects like Robert Rauschenberg brought objects to painting. It's still Rauschenberg's line between art and life; Scharf is just working the other side of it."

Scharf's all-encompassing ambition to fuse the real world with the world of art can be seen in the "Closet" installation he has constructed for the Queens Museum of Art. This day-glo, sci-fi, blacklight environment is the ninth in a continuing series of closets that began with the closet Scharf created for the midtown loft he shared with Keith Haring in 1980. It is the first closet that Scharf has made in almost six years. Each new closet incorporates objects Scharf has saved from earlier closets that have been dismantled. Like all of Scharf's creations, the closets are created spontaneously with no working plan.

Inspired by the psychedelic environments of the 1960s, Scharf's closets are retreats for silent meditation and dreaming. Upon entering, the viewer is surrounded with a mix of images and visual sensations drawn from the collective subconscious of the postwar generation. Scharf has coined the phrase "Pop Surrealism" to describe his hallucinogenic dreamscape vision. It is a zany, carnival world of bright colors, mutated media images, ancient archetypes, children's toys, broken appliances, plastic, rubber, biomorphic shapes, graffiti and expressive abstract painting.

A key element in Scharf's fantasy world is a 1960s science fiction vision of space age life. "A month before I was born the first satellite went up," Scharf explains. "Every one was telling us that we would be able to go to space and I believed it. They weren't only telling us, but literally putting it into our everyday lives, with space age designs in our cars, household products, architecture, everything. Then when the Vietnam War came and the boredom of the 70s set in, people stopped trying to sell that dream. I didn't want to stop so I continued it!"

Scharf's upbeat Post-Pop art accorded well with the affluent, consumer oriented 1980s. The 1990s have started on a more sober note—a fact that Scharf knows all too well as he has lost many friends to the ravages of AIDS. The changing times have subtly altered our reading of Scharf's art. The cartoon characters in Scharf's paintings have always reflected adult passions. The giddy hilarity has always had a manic edge. Beyond the fun and nostalgia, a poignant darkness has always existed. Now it has begun to emerge.

Marc H. Miller
Guest Essayist

Louis Grachos
Project Director/
Director of Exhibitions

cover:
Closet No. 8
1985
Sogetsu Museum,
Tokyo, Japan
[Installation:
October]

top left:
Comunicado
Ultimida
1986

Acrylic, jewels, and
plastic toys on stan-
dard push button
desk model tele-
phone. 11" x 13" x 9"

top right:
Cheekee
1981

Acrylic and glass
Television tubes on
vacuum Cleaner
16" x 22" x 7"
Collection of
the artist

bottom:
Closet No. 7
Biennial 1985
[Installation:
13 March-9 June]
Whitney Museum
of American Art,
New York



Kenny Scharf

BORN 1958, Los Angeles, California

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1991

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York
Studio Trisorio, Naples
AC & T Corporation, Tokyo

1990

Galerie Beaubourg, Paris
Hans Mayer Gallery, Dusseldorf
Akira Ikeda Gallery, Tokyo

1989

Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles

1988

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York
Akira Ikeda Gallery, Tokyo

1987

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York

1986

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York
Akira Ikeda Gallery, Tokyo

1985

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York
Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich

1984

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York
Larry Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles

1983

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York
American Graffiti Gallery, Amsterdam

1982

Fun Gallery, New York

1981

National Studio Artists, P.S. 1,
Long Island City
Customized Appliances, Club 57,
New York
The Jetsons, Fun Gallery, New York

1979

Celebration of the Space Age, Club 57,
New York

CLOSET INSTALLATIONS

1991 *Closet No. 9*

The Queens Museum of Art, Queens, NY

1985 *Closet No. 8*

Sogetsu Museum, Tokyo, Japan

1985 *Closet No. 7*

Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC

1984 *Closet No. 6*

Palais De Luxembourg, Paris, France

1983 *Closet No. 5*

Palacio De Chrystal, Madrid, Spain

1983 *Closet No. 4*

Tony Shafrazi Gallery, NYC

1982 *Closet No. 3*

Fun Gallery, NYC

1981 *Closet No. 2*

P.S. 1, Long Island City, NY

1980 *Closet No. 1*

Scharf/Haring Loft, NYC

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1991

The 1980s, A Selected View From the Permanent Collection, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Metropolitan Home Showcase 2, New York

1989

Don't Bungle the Jungle, Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York

1988

The Frederick D. Weisman Collection, California State University at Fullerton (traveling show)

1987

Comic Iconoclasm, Institute of Contemporary Art, London

1986

Picture From the Inner Mind, The Palladium, New York

Television's Impact on Contemporary Art, Queens Museum, New York

1985

Biennial 1985, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

East Village Artists, Holly Solomon Gallery, New York

Investigations, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

1984

New Hand Painted Dreams: Contemporary Surrealism, Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

The Human Condition, Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco

1983

Surrealist Show, Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Bienalle de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil

1981

The Times Square Show, Times Square, New York

New York, New Wave, P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York

Beyond Words, Mudd Club, New York

EXHIBITION CATALOGUES

1990

Kenny Scharf, Galerie Beaubourg, Paris

1989

Kenny Scharf: Jungle Book, Art Random, Kyoto Shoin International Co., Inc., Kyoto

1986

Television's Impact On Contemporary Art, The Queens Museum, New York

1983

Kenny Scharf, Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

1988

Roberta Smith, "Kenny Scharf Grows Up," *The New York Times*, September 23.

1985

"A Talk with Keith Haring," Kenny Scharf, *Flash Art*, January.

"Kenny Scharf's Fun House Big Bang," Gerald Marzorati, *Art News*, September.

1984

Dan Cameron, "Saint Kenny and the Culture Dragon," *Arts Magazine*, January.

CONTEMPORARY CURRENTS

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**Queens
Museum
of Art**