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the scharfer image

By Susan Ainsworth

This month, artist Kenny Scharf would like to transform your life. The Scharf Shop, opening on Miami Beach's Española Way, is filled with merchandise—including furniture, lighters, calendars, T-shirts, bags, postcards, ties and watches—which bears the artist's distinctive images, making Scharf's work affordable for everyone. An integral part of the 1980s movement that changed the definition of American art, Scharf, along with Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, melded the influences of urban streets, suburban backyards, sci-fi landscapes and cartoon icons with the discipline of painting. Their groundbreaking work reminded art audiences that pop culture can possess a beauty and depth that transcend irony. Two years ago, Scharf, his wife, Tereza, and two children left a life in Manhattan that most people—seeing it through the filter of glossy magazines—would have envied to the point of distraction. Their move to Miami Beach raised a number of questions about the artist's next step. We queried Scharf about his expectations as he embarks on this new course.

SUSAN AINSWORTH: *Are you ultimately glad about moving to South Florida? Has it changed your life in the way you expected?*

KENNY SCHARF: Yes, I'm very pleased. I moved here for the beauty and the ocean, and that will always be here. I loved the New York club scene in the '70s and '80s, but when it turned into the frou-frou dinner party thing, I found it really boring.

SA: *Did the idea for the store have anything to do with the requests you've always gotten from friends to 'customize' their possessions? I remember the year Vogue editor Elizabeth Saltzman received a Kenny Scharf-designed motorcycle for her birthday from Ian Schrager...*

KS: There are two different ways of looking at it. Customizing is taking products that are already made and altering them to create a new experience or a new way of looking at things. And I did do that for my friends, but I can't do that for everyone. Manufacturing these items is about bringing that experience to a wider audience and changing someone's everyday life. If you're dialing a beige phone every day, that's one thing. But



RON SAMUEL



by changing this beige phone, by realizing your phone doesn't have to be this boring object, every time you dial it your life is enhanced by art. It's kind of like the Greeks and Romans, who had the objects they used in their daily life decorated, bringing life and art together. You don't have to go all the way to a museum to look at art—it's in your kitchen or bathroom.

SA: *What kind of environment are you trying to create in the store?*

KS: A lifestyle store, with a juice and coffee bar. I'm even going to have a black light closet. So you can go to the store, buy great affordable stuff, look at the furniture, go upstairs and look at the art, and hang out in the black light room to get a whole new perspective—the world of Scharf!

SA: *How did you develop your merchandise?*

Art attack: Painter Kenny Scharf introduces a new line of merchandise, including notebooks and lighters.

KS: I started by licensing to companies that were interested in

my art—quality manufacturers like Zippo and Swatch. What I'd ultimately like to do is manufacture it myself—more like the line of bags I'm doing with Glenn Miller.

SA: *Who is your customer, as they say in retail?*

KS: Anyone who wants something out of the ordinary. The range of customers is wide, but anyone hip. From T-shirts for \$20 that appeal to young people who want something fun to wear, to furniture, which is more serious, to art, which is much more of a commitment, there's something for everyone.

SA: *Most people became aware of your art in the 1980s, when your work, along with that of Haring and Basquiat, really challenged the notion of American art. Does the inspiration for this new work come from a different place?*

KS: It comes from the same place. It's just about reaching a different audience, being more accessible and going back to where it came from—taking stuff from pop and putting it back into pop. Recycling.

SA: *You'll still do your art, won't you?*

KS: Of course. There's always a place for major paintings, a need for that and a love of that. But not everybody can have one.

SA: *Do you think the store will change the way people perceive you?*

KS: Probably. I'll get a lot of flack from certain people—that disdain for commercialism—but I'm embracing it. Anybody who sells art is commercial, no matter what. ♦