



photo by: JIM McHUGH

Art

KENNY SCHARF: ON MAN ON NATURE

Back in his hometown, the artist continues to blend life forms and brilliant color with an array of images from pop culture.

text by

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*Kenny Scharf (above) mines the world for unsuspecting cultural images. He infused *Jungle Jism*, 1982, (right) with animistic vitality, and enhanced a tail-fin Cadillac (inset) to make it *Ultima Suprema Deluxa*.*

“It’s true, when someone sees a painting of mine with a cartoon face, they may say, ‘Oh, it’s fun. Let’s get it for the kids’ room.’ And all these years, I’ve wanted to say, ‘Wait a second. There’s a lot more to it than that,’” says artist Kenny Scharf, who has recently moved back to the L.A. area after a 21-year hiatus.

While Scharf’s art reflects the vocabulary of cartoon characters of his youth, he has deeper concerns: “For me, the environment is the number-one issue and all other issues stem from it.” Scharf has had firsthand experience with the loss of the rainforest and of close friends dying from AIDS, so these two major issues affect him deeply.

“Even if you’re talking about AIDS, you can relate that back to what we’re doing to our world. Overpopulation, poverty, it all affects the environment,” he adds. “So the greatest issue in my art is man and nature. It is still for me what I think about most of the time.”

Born in Los Angeles in 1958, at a hospital next door to a pop building resembling a stack of records, Scharf grew up in the San Fernando Valley and still speaks with traces of Valley intonations. Having two much-older brothers, he often was left to entertain himself, watching TV for hours. Pop culture and California’s hyper-West ways became his reality.

When Scharf’s family moved to Beverly Hills, he attended the local high school, followed by college in idyllic Santa Barbara, where he became interested in art and was exposed to pop art. This was during the 1970s, and although pop art was the substance of mainstream modern art of the ‘60s, Andy Warhol’s influence was still strong and inspired Scharf. He moved to Manhattan in 1978 to finish his studies at the School of Visual Arts.

Scharf met Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, sharing a loft with Haring from 1981 to 1982. Life and art



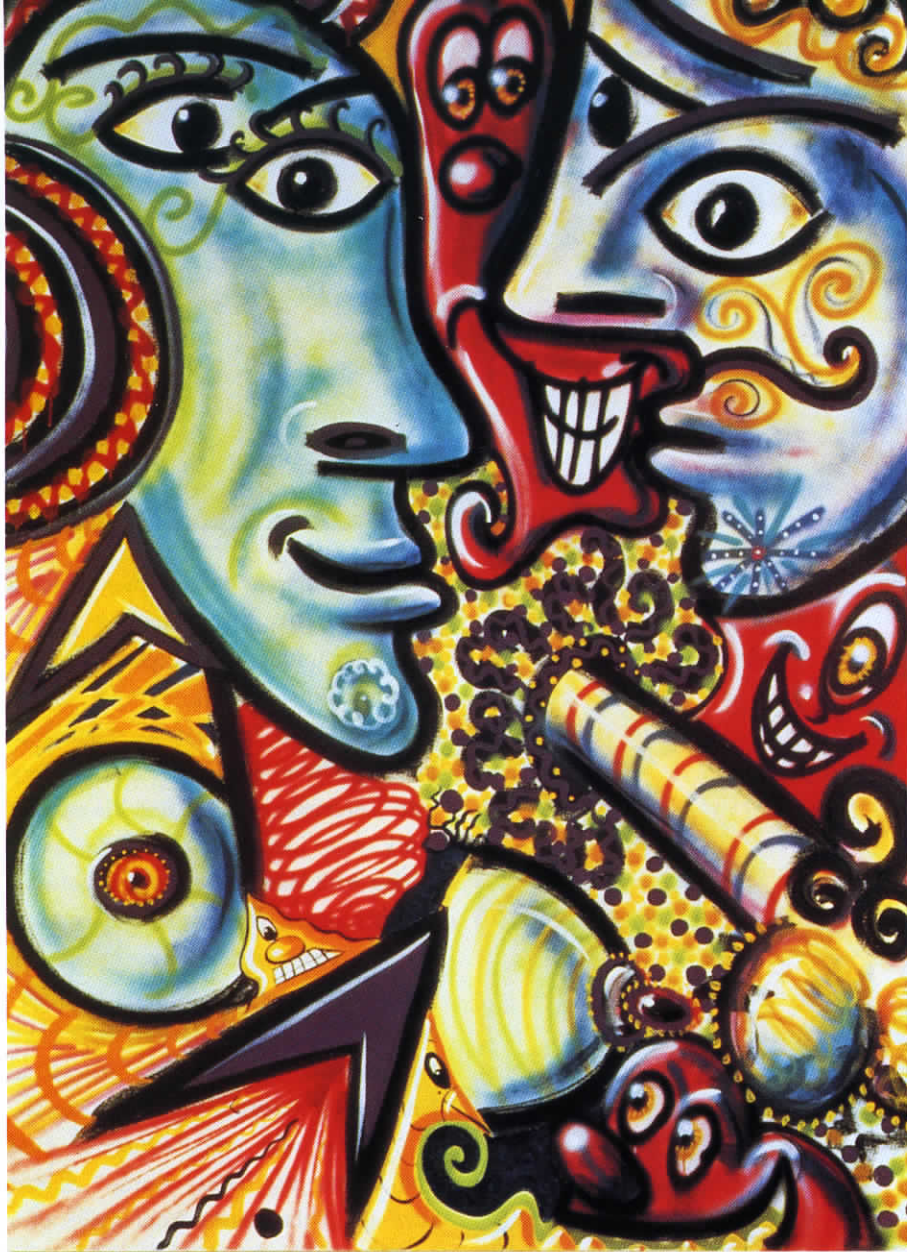


came together as Scharf met creative people he liked and learned photo-realist techniques that helped make real his unreal inspirations.

Scharf and his friends wanted to bring the street experience and imagery into a museum context, and his earliest work was ideographic and fantastic. Along with Haring, Scharf was called a “graffiti artist,” but his own tag varied in style each time, and eventually he preferred to be called a “pop surrealist” because his cultural images were from the unconscious. Scharf’s generation had already absorbed pop images as art.

“It was odd when everyone died and I was just barely thirty,” Scharf says about the deaths from AIDS of a number of his close friends. “I had an acting-out childhood in New York that was cut short. All of a sudden, I had to grow up fast and experience things that most people don’t until they’re old. As time unfolds, they’ve all been gone a while and I’m still here. It makes me feel proud that I was there with these people who have become legends.”

Scharf recognizes a profound change in society that parallels his own experience: “The year I was born, 1958, was at the beginning of the space age. But then in the late ‘60s and ‘70s, everything was sadder after the Kennedy assassination and as we realized we really weren’t going to outer space in the way we fantasized.” Scharf pauses. “It wasn’t so optimistic



Left: Scharf's *Picasso, 1984*, shows how all of art history is conceived as content for his art. Below left: *Dawn in Paradise, 1985*, is an idyllic image that seems to capture the harmony of his family life at the time while living on the beaches of Bahia, Brazil.

any more—but I loved that early optimism,” the artist adds.

From 1983 to 1987, Scharf married and lived in Brazil, the native country of his wife, Teresa. While settled into the coastal area of Bahia, his interest in the paradise beach, the jungle and the rainforest deepened. His rainforest images have been thematic to his work, even as he moved to upstate New York, Manhattan and Miami, where he created his own private jungle on a small island within the city.

Scharf believes that there is no place more alive than the rainforest and that it guards our environmental future. His jungle paintings exude organic growth, often wild and excited, with tendrils, berries and leaves. Sometimes the plants are given cartoon-character faces with loopy wide eyes and Gumby bodies, twisted and morphed into geometric or biomorphic shapes.

As a child, Scharf made faces in paint and put smiles on car grills: “They’re all faces to me. I still see faces everywhere I go,” he says. The anthropomorphic character of each object, figure, background and foreground stroke of paint is clear in his work. Like a child who animates the sun and each flower—or every house with two window-eyes and a single door-mouth—the face is always recognizable, even when the organic curve is substituted with sharp geometric forms.

Scharf’s painting world is teeming with images and he gives them cosmic connections. A work like *Cosmiganic, 1996*, depicts our galaxy with the fluidity of water and the organic growth of forests. A three-dimensional sculpture, its curves and circles merge plant and



planet. Organic swirls are undifferentiated from axial orbits.

"I think cosmic space is the most beautiful thing and it's the most unknown," Scharf says. "There's so much unknown out there. I get a lot of inspiration about that never-ending space, and I look at the world very much like a microcosm or a macrocosm. Everything is the same and you can go into outer space with its planets and orbits, and then you can go to inner space with its atoms and protons. Infinity and an infinite amount of space is all the same thing."

Scharf seems caught up with life as pulsing energy—sometimes controlled, complex and organized, and at other times chaotic, random and running off at the edges. His compositions balance the all-over field of abstractions or graffiti-like ideograms, with more traditional, formal placements, organizing shapes to play off one another to create visual harmony.

The all-over abstract quality of his work has been compared to that of the American Abstract Artists of the 1930s and the dynamic canvases of the 1950s Abstract Expressionists, like Jackson



The microcosm and macrocosm of reality is one of Scharf's recurring themes. In Scaramush, 1997, (above) he investigates cartoon-like images in a mysterious infinity and Cosmiganic, 1996, (below) combines cosmic planets with tendrils and a toadstool.

Pollock. "My paintings are very much seen in relation to Pollock, who people don't normally associate with me," Scharf adds.

Form is inseparable from motion and the serious character of his work lies in the tricky balance between pairs of opposites: form and content, real and unreal, the disposable and the treasured, the cartoon and the ideal.

"What I love about growing up in the early '60s in Los Angeles," Scharf

continues, "is the whole imagery of that era filled with fantasy and this sense of 'Yeah, we're going to outer space.' Since I didn't like that we had to give that idea up, I continued that momentum, and my sense of style—as opposed to content—is really set in that time of architecture, design, everything."

Recognizably a child of the TV generation and of the 1960s, Scharf has likened his interest in common vernacular to "pop spirituality." "We're stuck with all these images, and all this media," he explains. "Everybody's so wrapped up in it, but we know what's really important in our own life and our world is completely different. So the highest priority is not the pop imagery, it's really something beyond the cosmic inspiration."

Scharf's sense of style is obviously and consciously cartoonish with the television as part of the contemporary landscape. He consciously uses images found in television along with those from art history, melding the Jetsons and the Flintstones with the likes of Pollack, Pablo Picasso and Yves Tanguy, as well as with other clichés from landscape painting.

Anachronistically, Scharf mixes styles and epochs and, in this way, he "customizes" the history of art, presenting surrealistic images in the hyper-realistic dream forms of Salvador Dali and the biomorphic shapes of Tanguy. He presents these lively images with bold primary and Day-Glo colors and emphatic forms. Occasionally called the "artist of overload," Scharf manages this dense effect without overcrowding the composition.

THE CUSTOMIZED OBJECT

While sharing a New York loft with Haring, Scharf began to collect discarded objects and paint them Day-Glo colors. He transformed city grime and created artificial collectibles from society's castoffs.





Assuming the identity of “Van Chrome,” Scharf metamorphosizes and customizes everyday objects—the ordinary electrified tools and chrome extensions of ourselves, such as toasters and televisions. The banal chrome, black and neutral gray, olive green and mustard, and pretentious faux bois are transformed into colorful objects, exuding glued-on baubles, dinosaurs and other toys.

“Why can’t plastic simply be plastic, and why not go all the way and color them pink?” asks Scharf. In Manhattan, he had the brief opportunity to turn his corner coffee shop into a riot of color, serving blue and pink eggs.



Top, left and right: Closet #16, 1997, shows the patterns and bold beauty Scharf created from consumer castoffs. Above: “Brown-scape (1999) is one of my recent works with more somber colors and imagery,” he says.

For a recent exhibition of Van Chrome’s “functional home improvement,” Scharf wrote: “Best of all, when your electrical energy runs out, you don’t have to throw your appliances away, they become art objects reminiscent of the prosperous electrical age we’ve come to know and love.” Spanning two decades, Scharf’s productions of “Closets” filled with these customized objects reveal our very real cultural mementos and show our fluctuations in consumerist taste.

“I’ve always felt that as far as appliances go—and I consider cars to be appliances in a way—the ultimate American car would be a Cadillac, especially from the era when I grew up. The tail-fin Cadillac is just about as high up as you can go in the style of American culture,” Scharf says. “Usually my customization has to do with taking something banal and boring and turning it into something fantastical, but in this case it’s taking something already fantastical and going further with it.”

Scharf always loved Cadillacs, and the 1959-1962 models are his favorites because they were the largest. He identifies the car with Los Angeles, and for an exhibition there in 1984 at the Gagosian Gallery, he recognized his California roots, showing a customized 1961 tail-fin Cadillac inside the gallery.

“Last year in Miami, I thought ‘maybe I should just come back to L.A. Here, I can still make my garden. I can grow things, I can go to the ocean, the mountains and the desert.’ All of that is very attractive to me.” For Scharf, Los Angeles offered the stuff of both worlds—cars and consumerism as well as plentiful nature and good weather.

“I carry so much of the aesthetic of my homeland and my hometown L.A. with me no matter where I go or what I do, I can’t escape it,” he says.

Whether in Brazil, Manhattan, Miami, or back on his home turf in L.A., Scharf carries the exuberance of life in a technological information age. This is how Scharf likes to live life, embracing technology and fantastic possibilities for the future.

“I look at everything—all of art history and of nature—and put it into my own package,” says Scharf in terms that sound not like he’s customizing appliances, but the entirety of his existence. “Maybe it’s the end of the millennium zeitgeist, but it’s how I’ve always approached making art, using everything that is inside me and everything around me that I love and care about—and the popular image is part of that. Especially those childhood images that impact us very much. It’s something that we all share and it’s part of our nature as people.” ♦