

# Kenny Scharf looks sharp at MCA

By CAROL EBERT SCHULTZ  
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On a brilliant August day, internationally-known graffiti artist Kenny Scharf of New York, Florida and Brazil set his paints next to a blank wall in the Axline Court at the Museum of Contemporary Art and began work on the 12-by-24-foot mural that will dominate the scene for the next year.

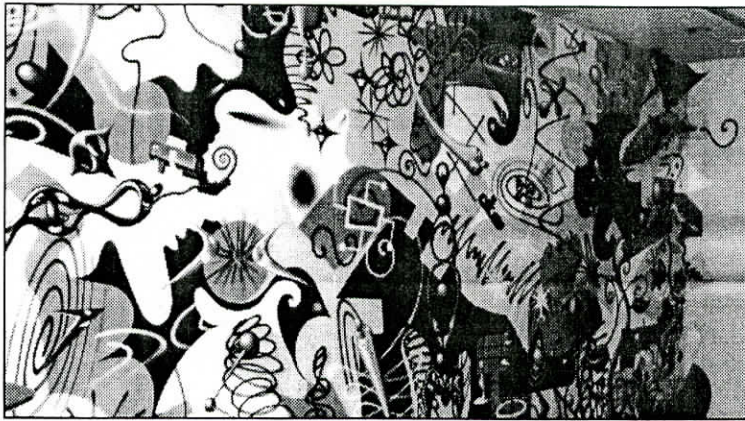
More than a week later, light blue, yellow, pink, white and black free-form figures had been painted in acrylic on the triptych canvases. Sprayed swirls added happy gestures. (Scharf has learned how to handle a spray can.)

"This painting has many steps," he said. "Because of the process, everything is spontaneous. Part of the fun is that there is no plan. All I think about is style." At the moment, the artist was using gesso to paint white shapes, which would later receive a final coat of oils.

Several spectators intruded on the explanation, one insisting she liked the painting and Scharf should stop. The artist took it all in good humor, but by the next interview, he was surrounded by loud, alternative progressive rock music, which made him less accessible to casual conversation.

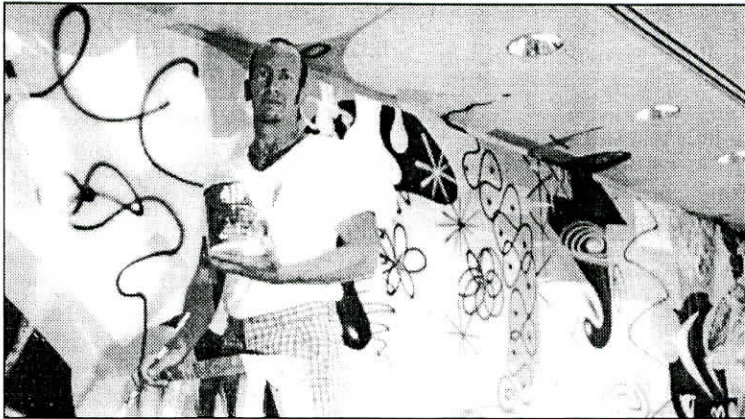
In the final stage, Scharf was using oils to shade in his trademark cartoon character shapes — viridian green balls with determined faces fly across the extragalactic landscape amid stars and planets, while crowds of smiling crimson crescents skim merrily along through twining purple vines. Dominating the center, a bright red monster grimaces with rows of very sharp teeth "to scare away evil," according to the muralist.

Armed with brushes and a ladder, Kenny Scharf has scaled the heights of the contemporary art scene and reached a pinnacle. "This may be the best thing I have ever done," he confided. (The mural was almost completed.)



photos by Paul Hansen/Conor O'Healy

Hollywood-born graffiti artist Kenny Scharf (below) pauses during the creation of his 12-by-24-foot mural in the Axline Court at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 700 Prospect St. Scharf's completed work (above) will be on display through summer 1999.



What is the name of this phantasmagoric mixture of imaginary creatures? Scharf doesn't name his work until it is done. "Tell the people to come and find out for themselves," he said.

Born in 1958 in Hollywood, Kenny Scharf began making art at an early age. He always knew art was what he wanted to do. He was greatly influenced by television — cartoon characters such as the Jetsons and Flintstones — as well as Jackson Pollack and Rene Magritte.

Scharf attended UC Santa Barbara, where he studied art history, printmaking, and painting. But he left for the School of Visual Arts in New York, where he joined forces with Keith Haring (who later became his roommate), and Jean-Michael Basquiat as graffiti artists.

Scharf wanted to meet Andy

Warhol. "I worked in the silk (screen) shop for one day and decided I wouldn't meet him this way," he said. "But Keith had met him so we all went to lunch."

"Lots of people found the scene exciting. Andy was the one and only — the Father of Pop. Being around him was an honor, just talking with him. Andy freed up art — what art is and the role an artist can play in the world."

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He made it more fun."

From the Factory, Scharf moved into the cultural mayhem of the East Village's Club 57, a breeding ground of experimentation. "We were spoofing TV culture and tradition with happenings — fantasizing, making entertainment, singing and dancing. We put on a show," he said. "But we weren't calling it 'Art.'"

During this time, Scharf customized appliances under the name "Van Chrome," painting phones, cars and blenders in wild designs and attaching fake jewels, toys and plastic figurines. In this vein he decorated a bor-

ing TV set, giving new meaning to 'What's on TV?'

Although he has lived in Miami since 1992, Scharf owns a house in Brazil; his wife is Brazilian, and they have two girls, 14 and 10. He is committed to environmental issues, ecology and AIDS.

In 1995, Kenny opened the Scharf Schop, Miami Beach (now defunct) and Scharf Schak, New York. These boutiques sold Scharf designed clothing and accessories, and are an extension of Scharf's philosophy to share art with the public through affordable T-shirts, caps and ties.

The mural will be at MCA, 700 Prospect St., for at least a year; call 454-3541.