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Jiri Georg Dokoupil, Still Untitled, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 146 x 114 cm.

Kenny Scharf

I love acting. As a kid I used to watch Michael Jackson, and get up in front of the TV and do his number. My brothers used to say I was going to be a rock'n'roll star. And I liked the idea.

A talk with **K e i t h H a r i n g**

Keith Haring: *Where did you grow up?*

Kenny Scharf: I grew up in Los Angeles, in the valley.

KH: *In the valley? It must have been strange.*

KS: After seeing other places, it's pretty strange. But growing up there you don't know it's strange. It's just normal. The car washes are the best buildings in L.A.

KH: *The car washes? You were thinking of painting one.*

KS: Yeah. They are really like space stations. Each one is different.

KH: *You were just in L.A. right? Didn't you just have a big show in Los Angeles?*

KS: Yeah, I had major show. I had paintings, customized appliances, and a customized 1961 Cadillac.

KH: *Yeah, I saw pictures by Kwong Chi of it, it was incredible. I mean, even things inside the trunk.*

KS: In the trunk was Nirvana.

KH: *And how did you show the car? It was supposed to be on a revolving platform.*

KS: It wasn't on a revolving platform. I just drove it in the gallery.

KH: *You drove it alone?*

KS: Ann Magnuson did a performance for the opening. And I drove the car and she layed down on the roof.

KH: *Weren't there plastic dinosaurs all over the roof?*

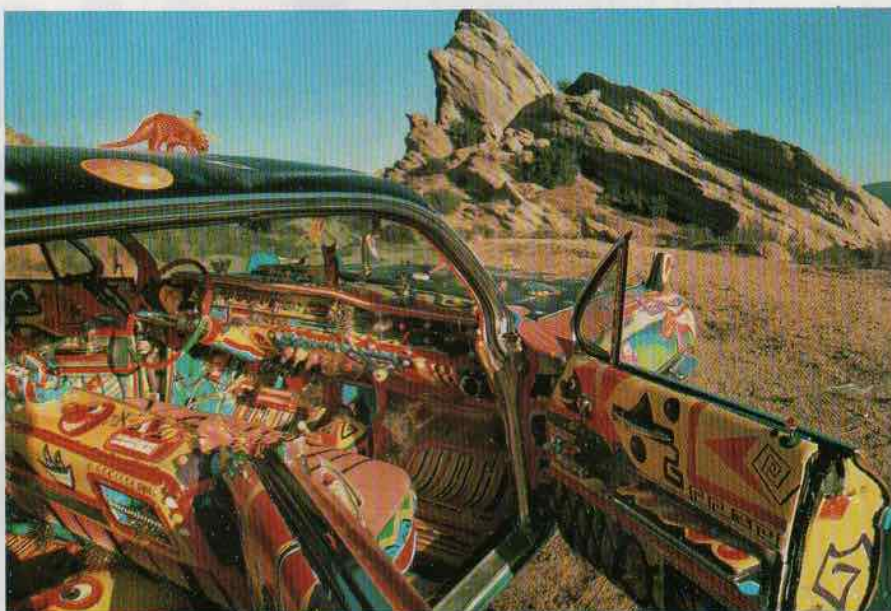
KS: Yes, a big gigantic pink one, and a few little ones, but there was still enough room to stand or sit.

KH: *You always loved Cadillacs.*

KS: '59 was my favorite. Those were the biggest ones ever made. But all the way from '57 to '62, it was really great. Everything from that time was so optimistic. Everything was like "the future is here. It's happening now, let's embrace it." It's total fantasy. Our technology and our lives were allowing for fantasy, which is what I like. It's how I like to lead my life.

KH: *Weren't you going to drive the car cross country?*

KS: What I would like to do is have a caravan. A few cars and maybe a van, a



Suprema Ultima Deluxa, 1984.

Acrylic and found objects on 1961 Cadillac. Photo Tseng Kwong Chi. Courtesy Tony Shafrazi Gallery, NYC.

camera crew, stopping in each town. Like the side shows a long time ago. I think art should be like that. If I just continue showing art in galleries and only being known by people who know about the art world, I think I would be a little unfulfilled. It's time that it's taken out of these limits. I think people are ready.

KH: *Right. I think if people make art that is in tune with popular culture and comes from popular culture, they should put it back into that culture.*

KS: I know, I want to be in the National Enquirer and things like that.

KH: *So, how did you get from Los Angeles to New York?*

KS: I remember learning about Andy Warhol and that whole scene. And I said, like, Wow! That guy is really great. That's something I'm really interested in. And I want to go there. And I knew that it wasn't like it used to be. But I thought maybe—I didn't know. That was one of

the reasons why I came to New York. Learning about pop art, Andy inspired me. And I knew that in Santa Barbara, California, there was nothing going on, so I went to New York to attend the School of Visual Arts.

KH: *Really? Did you like going to school there?*

KS: I liked it for the people I met. And I liked it for some things that I learned. I had one teacher, his name was Noel Mahaffey, a photorealist painter. He taught me some technique, how to use the same kind of brushes, blending.

KH: *A photorealist?*

KS: Yeah. But I never wanted to do photorealism. I thought, what a great idea to learn how to do photorealist technique, but make up your own reality. I never understood why they would do photorealist painting if they were just copying from photographs, why not just do the photograph? But if you could do a painting of something you could never

take a photograph of, that made more sense to me.

KH: *You have a different attitude toward paint.*

KS: I have an obsession about wasting paint when I'm doing a painting, and I just love color. So if I have a palette that I'm mixing my paint on, I love the way the paint looks on the palette. It's all these colors, and it's really pretty. So, instead of just throwing that palette away, I'll look at those forms, you know, just weird shapes, and they'll become monsters or faces. It's kind of like, I'm actually doing what I did when I was a little child. I remember walking around and looking at things. I would make

KS: Yeah.

KH: *You paint every place where you live?*

KS: Yes.

KH: *You told me even when you were in Los Angeles working on this show, the little apartment you rented for a while had things all over it.*

KS: Yeah. I can't stand regular, sterile environments. They make me feel so boring. So, as soon as we got there, I went to a party store and got strands of paper and balloons. And I decorated the beige, fake-natural, boring apartment. You see, I couldn't paint it because I was just renting it for a month, so I decorated it.

KH: *Customized it?*

KH: *Right.*

KS: I hate fake-natural . . . I mean if you're plastic, you might as well . . .

KH: *Go all the way.*

KS: . . . Go all the way and be pink. Like, for instance the Hippodrome Coffee Shop near Times Square. I walked past this coffee shop every day, this bright yellow coffee shop with fake plastic hanging plants. Now, if they had been real, I would never even have thought about it. But just the fact that they were plastic, and that they looked plastic, I saw how great the place would look, that yellow coffee shop, with blue and pink plants. It would just be so great.

KH: *How did you ever come about to do that?*

KS: I found out who the owner was, and to my surprise the guy said, "sure." I didn't know why he was so quick to say yes, but I found out later, it was because they were tearing the place down. I never even got a photograph of it. I went away for two weeks and when I came back, the place was gone. But for the time it was there, it looked really wonderful. It looked so great . . . I made everything surrealistic. Like just serving eggs in this coffee shop that had blue and pink plants. I changed everything.

KH: *What about your sense of color?*

KS: Well, again, I would take it back to being really young, when everything was new. I think it had a lot to do with watching TV an inch away from the TV set. Most mothers would have stopped their kids from sitting two inches away from the front of the TV set for hours, but my mother didn't seem to say anything. I remember the early TV sets had color dots with the black on it—I would get off on the intense color. I remember staring into it, and just watching the different, intense, brilliant colors change all the time.

KH: *Actually, speaking of your mother, tell us the marshmallow story. It's one of my favorite stories.*

KS: She used to give me miniature marshmallows in bed.

KH: *How little were you?*

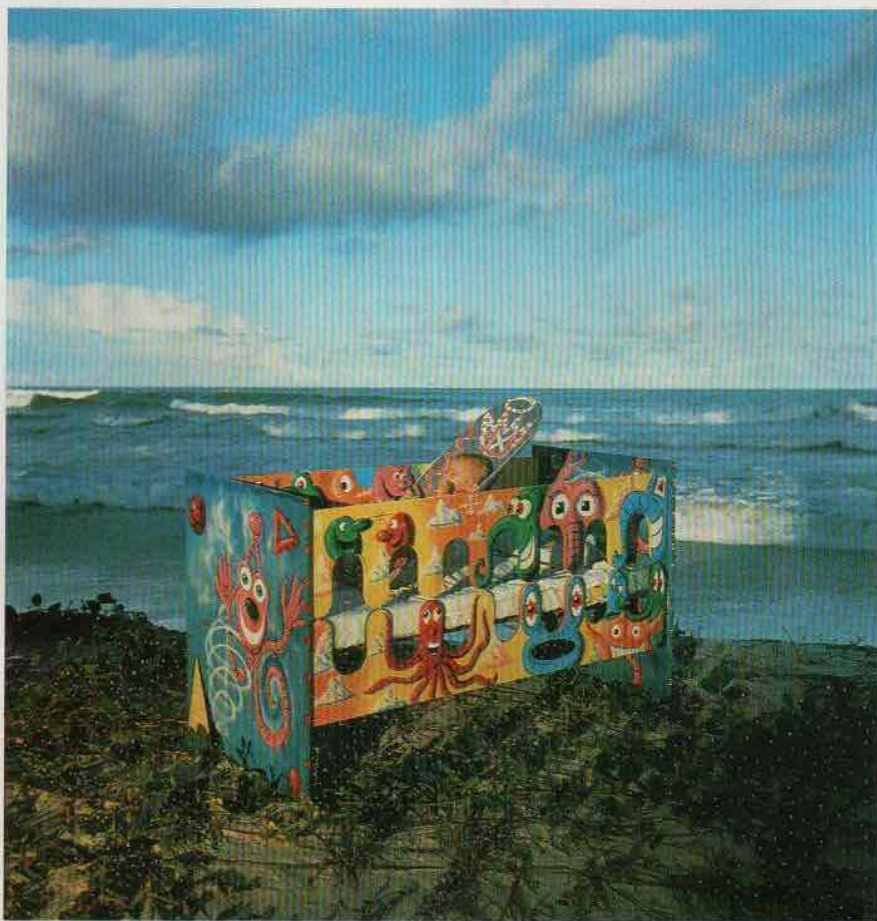
KS: Oh, I must have been three or four. She would give me a handful of marshmallows and turn the lights out, and I would eat miniature marshmallows in the dark.

KH: *A whole handful?*

KS: And by the time I was five years old, I had nineteen cavities at once.

KH: *Your baby is really cute. So, what's it like being a father?*

KS: It's pretty great. In the beginning it was really hard because it's so new and it changes your whole life, your sleeping habits, and everything. But now she's six months old and starting to really boom. She's a lot of fun.



Zena's Crib, 1984.

Acrylic on masonite, 4' x 2' x 3'6". Photo Tseng Kwong Chi.

everything into a face. Like car grills. They're all faces to me. A building with two windows and a door. I still see faces everywhere I go. So, I'm doing that.

KH: *That same obsession with paint is partly what's responsible for you painting everything around you, painting the walls of your house. Your house in Brazil is incredible, and it's really getting encrusted with paint. I can imagine it in about five years.*

KS: Then it's going to be incredible.

KH: *Now it's just normal.*

KS: Customizing is taking everyday objects, especially appliances—modern machines that we use every day that we really don't think about and transforming them. I started realizing how everyone has them, and everybody uses them, and you don't even think twice about it. And they are so boring looking. Like everyone settles for a beige phone, a muted grey TV set.

KH: *Olive green blender.*

KS: Or, like the worst to me is fake wood.



Felix on a Pedestal, 1982. Acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 96" x 104".
Photo Ivan Dalla Tana. Courtesy Ara Australian Collection, NYC.



Hypnozen, 1983. Oil and spray paint on canvas, 7' x 75". Photo Ivan Dalla Tana. Courtesy Smorgan Family Collection, Australia.

KH: Is it the favorite thing you ever made?

KS: Definitely. She's a fun girl. She has a customized life. She thinks it's normal . . . Customized crib, customized stroller, customized clothes.

KH: What is your relation to pop art?

KS: Pop art was making symbols and all those icons of pop as art. It was a distance away, like looking at it very cool and non . . .

KH: Nonobjectively.

KS: Nonobjectively. Not being really involved, just taking it out of wherever it is and putting it as art. And then what I think happened now, twenty years later, was this kind of pop resurgence, except that instead of being far away it's from the inside. We grew up with this and it's part of our inside or unconscious.

KH: Vocabulary.

KS: Right. So it's really not pop art. It's just regular . . . it's the way we are.

KH: Pop life.

KS: Pop life. So that's what I was talking about when I used to write and talk about pop surrealism. So I think what that means is that pop is part of the unconscious. All the symbols and TV overload, you know the Jetsons, the Flintstones, the Munsters, and all that stuff, is injected inside. So sometimes I'll dream at night with pop symbols, something from my past imbedded into my unconscious.

KH: So your dreams are in your paintings? Do you ever take things directly out of your dreams?

KS: I usually don't. I remember my dreams when I wake up, and I think about them. And then I usually forget them before the end of the day. But, I usually try to get myself into a dream-state when I'm doing images.

KH: I remember the dream you told me about when you were floating down a river on one of your paintings. Your painting was a raft?

KS: All my paintings.

KH: You were going down on all of them?

KS: Yeah.

KH: And who was on the rest of them? You were on all of them?

KS: I was lying down on all the paintings going down the river.

KH: Who is your favorite artist?

KS: Well, I really like Hieronymus Bosch. His paintings still stick in my head.

KH: The ones at the Prado?

KS: Yes. Incredible hallucinations. You can look at them and find things forever. Tiny little things, they're outrageous.

KH: He was a slightly obsessive painter (ha... ha).

KS: I mean, that was way before Freud and psychology and LSD.



Vivo la Vivo, 1984.
Acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 7' 1.5" x 10' 3.5".
Photo Ivan Dalla Tana. Courtesy Julian and Jacquelin Schnabel, NYC.



Tune in, Turn on, Flip out, 1984.
Oil on canvas, 6' x 4".
Photo-Ivan Dalla Tana. Courtesy Larry Gagosian Gallery.

KH: *And space travel.*

KS: They told us when we were growing up that by this time, in the '80s, we could get a ticket, get in line, and go to space. And it didn't happen.

KH: *What about space in your paintings? You paint space a lot.*

KS: Yes. I think it's the most beautiful thing. And it's the most unknown thing still. We go out in space, but compared to the realm of the whole universe, it's minute. Where we've gone, to the moon, I mean it's tiny. There's so much out there. I think about it a lot. When you see that our sun is one star. And we just happen to be by this one star on this little planet. Now, when you think about how many billions of stars are in the Milky Way Galaxy, let alone all the other galaxies, it's just impossible that we are the only ones.

KH: *A lot of times your paintings have a view to another world beyond the one that we're in. Like someone's mouth opens up and it's another space beyond that. Either expanding and going into space, or getting smaller and going into microspace. And some of these paintings look like what you would see in a micro-*

scope or . . .

KS: Well, I guess that has a lot to do with infinity. Going in outer space an infinite amount, as well as inner space where an infinite amount is also the same thing. You could keep going smaller and smaller, and I don't think it ever stops. And also when you think about it, an atom with the revolving protons and neutrons is just like the planets. It looks the same. They're spheres. Maybe we're just a little molecule in someone else's cellular structure.

KH: *Do you still do performances?*

KS: Yeah. I did one last week with Ann Magnuson. We did breaking and popping and scratching. (i.e., acne pimples). And I sang Neil Young. People were really freaked out. I feel so much better being in front of people at a stage performance than going to an opening and supposedly being myself, a painter. Anyone reading this story who wants to star me in a movie, go right ahead.

KH: *Why? Do you want to be in the movies?*

KS: Yeah.

KH: *I think you would be great in the movies.*

KS: I love acting. As a kid I used to watch Michael Jackson, and get up in front of the TV and do his number. My brothers used to say I was going to be a rock'n'roll star. And I liked the idea. I want to do a TV show. I want to have a variety show with Ann Magnuson, I want her to be on TV. I think we should go back into TV. That's our roots. We are really turning to television. We should go back to our roots and bring it out.

KH: *Back to two inches away.*

KS: From the air waves into the brain, back into the air waves.

KH: *What about the future?*

KS: I just want to get bigger and better and wilder.

KH: *Bigger, better, wilder?*

KS: More better. Funner . . . nower.

KH: *Nower?*

KS: Newer. Just keep going without really thinking. I mean, I've always just done it without really planning or thinking about what I'm doing. And that's always led me the right way. Following my instincts. Whatever I feel I do. So I'll just keep doing it.