

**PLUS C'EST LA MÊME CHOSE**

It was the weekend after Labor Day, and all over New York the art galleries were beginning the year with shows meant to prove that this city is still the world headquarters of art. A stretch limo pulled up outside Tony Shafrazi's Soho gallery and out jumped a rag-tag of young art groupies. After five minutes in the gallery where Shafrazi had hung new work by Kenny Scharf, the privileged youths emerged from the packed gallery, ran through the throng that had spilled onto the sidewalk, and drove off to applause and catcalls. The season had begun; it was time to get out the be-seen-in Soho clothes, to wander the streets from opening party to opening party, plastic glass in hand and art-anecdote on tongue.

Around the corner from Shafrazi's, on Greene Street, a crowd gathered for Castelli Gallery's twenty-fifth anniversary exhibition. The art establishment and the would-be-counter-culturettes united to toast the legendary Leo in his own champagne—unlike the art, non-vintage. Post-baby-boomers leaned against a table and chair made by Richard Artschwager; "You can't sit on that, it's art," hissed a gallery employee. Behind a pillar, dealer Mary Boone wooed critic René Ricard: "I'll give



*In Ecstasy by Kenny Scharf—recently acquired by a major collector of contemporary art from the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in Soho—is representative of the work of second-generation graffitiists on the road to social respectability.*

you an exclusive on my shoes, René," she said, removing and proffering her Susan Bennis/Warren Edwards artworks. All around hung classic works by Castelli's classic artists—great pieces from their great years—and all people could say was "what's new."

The art world, having easily digested the German neo-expressionists; the young

Italians, and the energetic new Americans who are already entering their classic phases (David Salle, Julian Schnabel, Jonathan Borofsky, Robert Longo), is hungry again. And this year it is being fed graffiti art in frames.

"Real" graffiti art—the spraypaint vandalism of disenfranchised youth—first attracted the attention of the culture

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vultures some ten years ago. With the air of Paris sophisticates of the thirties drinking early morning onion soup in Les Halles, the *éclat avant-garde* slumped in the subways; documentaries were filmed, magazine articles were written, genius ascribed. And like Ralph Lauren looking at Amish quilts, the dealers asked: "But what about us?"

At first, the answer was to lionize the graffitiists. It was Leonard Bernstein's party for the Black Panthers all over again, as discontent young men were invited above-ground to spray the walls of galleries and chic co-op apartments, to make ersatz aluminum sidings for sale at Sotheby's. And this time it was the "real" artists' time to ask: "But what about us?" With the way paved for them, middle-class youth was getting in on the act; some went into the subways, or onto the streets; others took spray paints straight to the galleries, where they melded graffiti, new image, and fifties cartoon sensibilities to produce a new art. The territory of the have-nots was invaded by the haves.

While Lee Quinones, one of the original graffitiists, shows at Barbara Gladstone's Fifty-seventh Street gallery and at Documenta, Kenny Scharf, Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and others are the mainstays of the new downtown galleries, spaces designed to appeal to the desperate breed who already find Soho dull and new wave passé. And in the unchanging way of the world, an art that began in protest was



made, like folk song, profitable.

At the FUN Gallery, between First Avenue and Avenue A—that's the Lower East Side—underground film actress (star of *Underground U.S.A.*) cum art dealer Patti Astor told me, as if I didn't already know it: "This is a business!" The FUN Gallery, too, was having a Kenny Scharf show. "Kenny's stuff is really expensive," Patti said, pointing out that a round painting about two feet in diameter was priced at \$800, and a larger roundel at \$1,200, while the biggest wall painting in the show was about \$4,000. Then she told me about how she was haggling with an uptown dealer over the price of a Keith Haring painting. Then she said, in the manner of Betty Furness selling refrigerators: "See my blender," pulling out a resplendent appliance decorated by Scharf in his "van-chrome" mode. "This is part of a three-piece set. My blender, my toaster, my kitchen clock. And it works. It's acrylic,



An ink drawing by the ubiquitous Keith Haring (top left), at Shafrazi's; The FUN Gallery is showing new work by Jean Michel Basquiat (above) this month.

and you can wipe it off. Kenny loves van chroming." Scharf used to go around in a truck to peoples' homes with his paints and doo-dads, decorating on site. Now he has dealers like Astor and Shafrazi to represent him.

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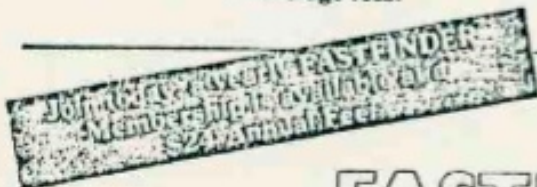
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developing and marketing of graffiti art, can keep a clear enough eye to see that some of it, at least, has real power, and merit. "There's definitely an energy about the work," says Patti Astor, selling me on it. "It's committed. And a lot of the best examples have a style and elegance that people can recognize. It has integrity."

"Besides all the so-called paintings and sculptures and drawings and other projects that Keith (Haring) does continuously, I'm committed to all the subways, which are public works to him," Shafrazi told me. "That, for me, is a resolution of the idea the conceptual artist was trying to get to. No one all those years was even aware of those blank advertisement spaces as a perfect place to work with. It was the most economical, the most plausible, the most effective place to present their ideas, next all the other advertisements." Shafrazi's semi-historical career gives the art he shows (in addition to Scharf and Haring, artists like Futura 2000 and Zephyr) a measure of validity it might not otherwise have. An Iranian, Shafrazi was a student at London Royal College of Art in the 1960s. Later, New York, Shafrazi got involved with the Art Workers' Coalition, and organized the "Art Strike" which upset museums for a while. Invited to help form a collection of contemporary art for the new National Museum in Tehran, Shafrazi then got a taste of what it feels like to be on the other side. When he returned to New York after the 1978 revolution, he needed to do something new. "I wanted to show what was different from what I had known. I had to look at things that were quite jarring and shocking, even to me." Thus, the graffitiist

"All of these works and the people really moved me," Shafrazi said. "The enthusiasm among the young artists is a sign I find of their ability to deal with ever situation that arises, quite freely and very happily, without any sense of guilt or restraint which I sense in the older generation a great deal. They're not intimidated by the older aesthetic." They also make good copy, the work is relatively cheap, and it sells.

At the Whitney Museum's opening of the Milton Avery retrospective, New York's art world turned out from top to bottom—*Fluxus Art meets Artnews* for the best two out of three—to honor an artist who had been pretty much ignored during his lifetime, and is now considered a major and original modern American master. Of those in attendance that night, many had had the opportunity to buy Averys cheaply 20 and 30 years ago, and didn't. Not wanting to make such a mistake again, this year they're buying the graffitiists. But 30 years from now—assuming they don't vaporize in a Haring-esque mushroom cloud—will these art-consumers stand surrounded by the work of someone ignored in the pattern-and-decoration/neo-expressionism/graffiti rush and wonder why they missed him? Plus ça change, and all that.

—S.G.