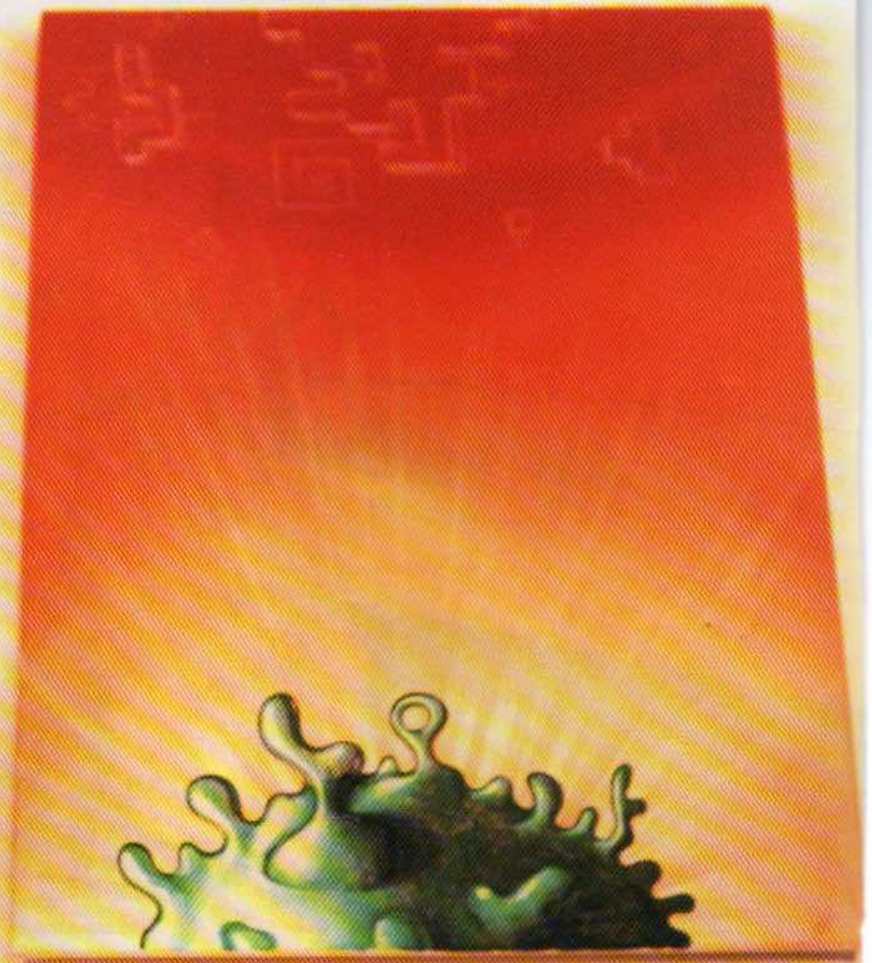
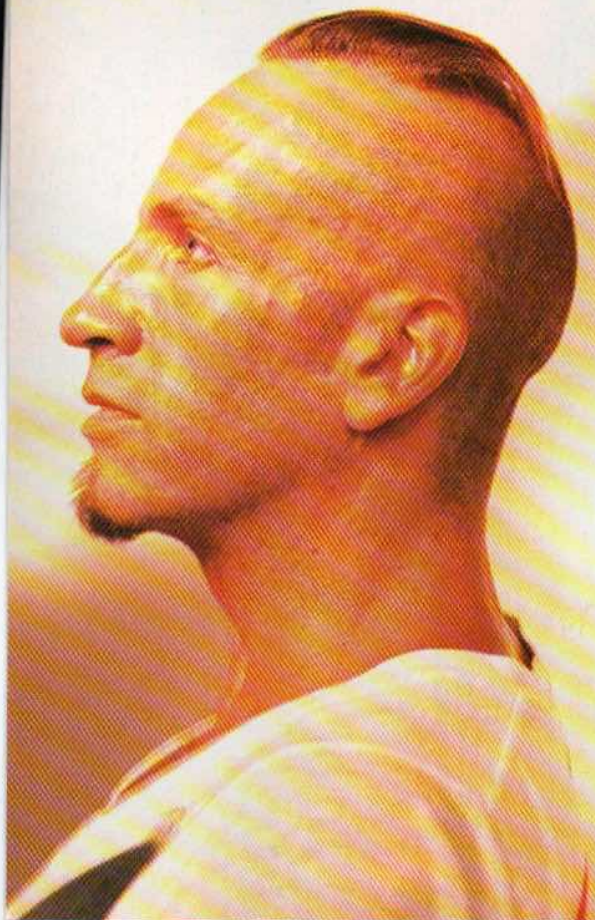


Lost in space



Full Circle Kenny Scharf with one of his recent works, *Green Planet*, at Tony Shafrazi Gallery.

From the subways to the jungles, through graffiti and eco-pop, **Kenny Scharf** has been there, done that. Now his friends are gone and the '80s have ended. So where does he go from here? Walter Robinson explores the final frontiers of an artist in suspended animation.

photograph by Joseph Pluchino

"I've been up and down the roller coaster three or four times the last decade," says Kenny Scharf, the graffiti artist, pop surrealist, and '80s survivor. Along with Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and Robert Longo, Scharf, who is now 36, had risen to fame during that decade's art boom. Today, alongside those same colleagues, he is struggling to reinvent himself for the '90s. "They tear you apart if you turn your back for one second," he says. "You have to keep on fighting."

Scharf has a huge warehouse studio in Miami, a beautiful home, a wife and two kids. His major paintings routinely sell for more than \$50,000. His first retrospective, *The Scharf-o-Rama Vision: Paintings by Kenny Scharf, 1978-1995*, closed this spring after traversing the globe and most major cities. He has new projects galore, including exhibitions, yet another retrospective, his own movie plans, shops selling his trademark knickknacks in two major cities, and a signature room he is designing for a popular New York nightclub.

Yet Kenny Scharf is haunted by ghosts. The East Village art scene he helped launch is gone and all but forgotten. His Don't Bungle the Jungle environmental benefits in 1989 and 1990, which raised more than \$1 million and garnered worldwide press attention to the issue of rain forest preservation, have had, by his own admission, little effect on the crisis. And perhaps most importantly for Scharf the artist, the spectres still linger of his deceased compatriots in the graffiti art wars: Keith Haring, who died of AIDS in 1990, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, who died of a heroin overdose in 1988.

Scharf's critics have not all been unkind, though the gossips have been wicked. Compared to Haring and Basquiat, whose achievements were idealized after their early deaths, his recent work has been less well received. His series of colorful paintings from around 1990, which layered screen-printed images of commodities and commercial advertisements, were thought derivative of earlier works by Rosenquist and Salle.

His more recent series of naturalistic paintings of jungle scenes, which could well have been favorably termed Scharf's neo-classical phase, inspired by his environmental concerns, were instead compared to the creepier diorama views of the younger artist Alexis Rockman.

And, as if to signal a retreat from these, however brave, experiments, Scharf's most recent show at Shafrazi Gallery this spring was titled *Full Circle: New Paintings*, indicating a return to the pop surrealist cartoons that made his reputation over a decade ago.

Much has been packed into the relatively brief career of Kenny Scharf. Born in 1958 in

Southern California, he traces his earliest artistic influences to television—coverage of early Apollo missions, nature documentaries (particularly ones on insects), and, of course, cartoons, notably the Hanna-Barbera characters, the Flintstones and the Jetsons, whose presence is so strongly felt in his paintings. His trademark style, in fact, he calls "Jetsonism," an amalgamation of Eroy Jetson, Fred Flintstone, and Felix the Cat through a "super-time-splat" into Elfredix, the star of Scharf's cartoon world that brought him success in the downtown New York art world of the 1980s.

In 1978, he came to New York to attend the School of Visual Arts. Before long, he was in the midst of the now-legendary new wave music scene. Joey Arias, the drag queen avatar who gave Scharf his first New York show at Fiorucci's department store in 1979, says, "When you see him paint, it's like a song." Arias remembers Scharf's performances with new-wave diva Klaus Nomi at Max's Kansas City and the Monster Movie Club at Club 57 on St. Mark's Place, where a group of free-loving, drug-friendly, young bohemians would rent and screen, in the pre-video days, 16-millimeter prints of old movies. It was a fun time, until the AIDS plague broke. It's a stroke of luck that Scharf, who had more than his share of fun, was one of the survivors.

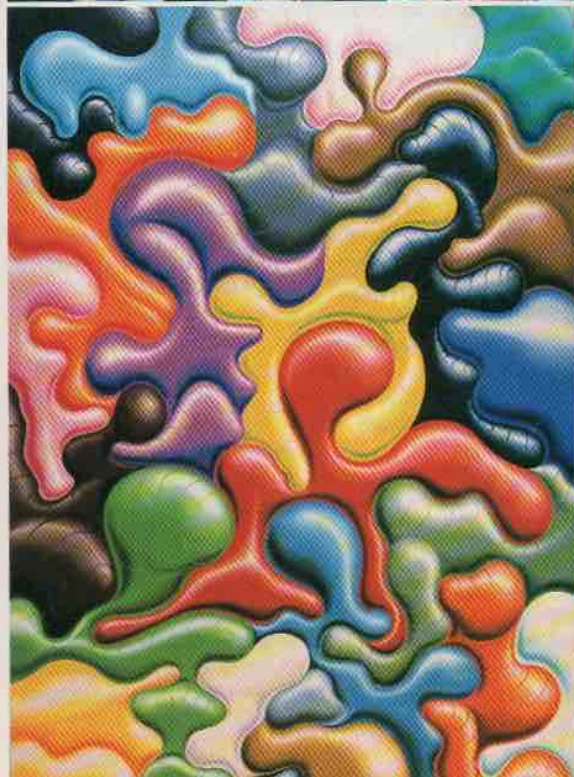
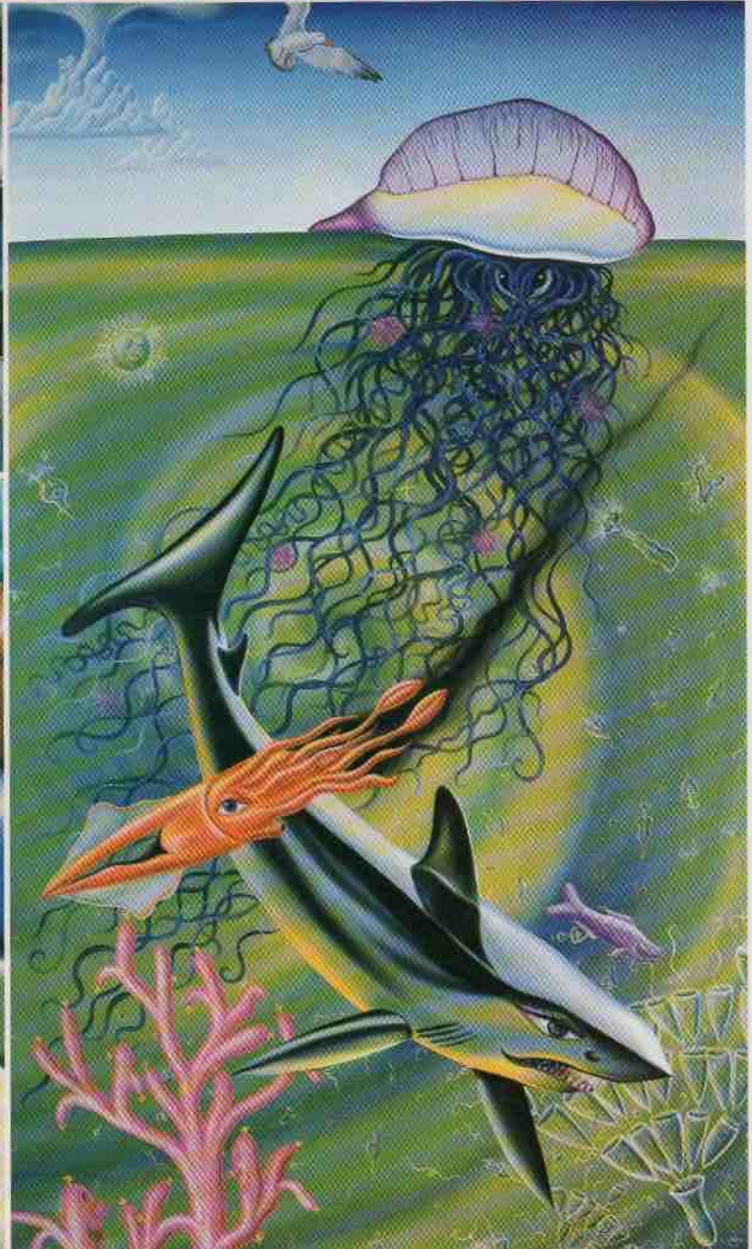
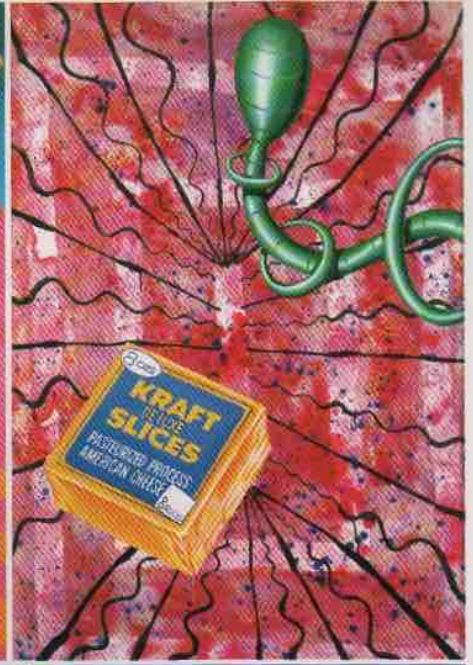
"He's one of the funnest guys around," says art dealer Tony Shafrazi, who's represented Scharf since the beginning. "He's very inspiring in many ways—alert, hip, everyone is drawn to him, everyone loves him. Kenny's always been ahead of his time. Kenny was MTV before MTV was invented."

He and Keith Haring shared a studio and discovered the graffiti styles together, Haring beginning with winged penises and overtly gay themes and Scharf decorating appliances and other found odds and ends with astounding accumulations of color and bric-a-brac.

When underground film actress Patti Astor opened the first East Village art gallery on East 10th Street in the fall of 1981, on the rubble of the punk rock scene, it was Scharf who named it the Fun Gallery.

In the late '80s, a time when the New York art market boiled over in a frenzy of hype and greed, Scharf entered a period of self-imposed exile and retreated to Brazil, where he painted on the beach under the coconut palms. He emerged from his South American sojourn with a deep respect for the environment, sponsoring the 1988 Don't Bungle the Jungle benefit, which resulted in worldwide attention to the crisis of the Amazon rain forest.

In 1992, he settled in Miami, where he now lives with his Brazilian wife of twelve years, Tereza, and their two daughters, Zena, 12, and Malia, 8.





The art critic Brooks Adams, who dubbed Scharf's environmentally conscious paintings "eco-pop," has compared him to Jacques-Louis David, the 18th-century French neoclassical painter, as well as to Andy Warhol.

Personally, I like to think of him as a kind of Picasso of the cartoon world, possessed by a hunger for imagery and an irrepressible desire to draw.

A blue Judy Jetson, for instance, flees a pink nuclear cloud in Scharf's version of Picasso's apocalyptic *Guernica*. He even surpassed Picasso in making pure abstractions of biomorphic candy-colored shapes called "globby forms."

Scharf's current projects include a Lava Lounge at the downtown nightclub the Tun-

Scharf Attack Clockwise from top left, opposite page: *Saint Elroy Slaying the Dragon*, 1982; *American Cheese*, 1989; *Diatagua*, 1994; *Obglob*, 1988; *Dimensions*, 1990-91. This page: Kenny Scharf with friend at Palladium, 1988; the Scharf Schak on Prince Street in SoHo; *Fabuvalla*, 1995. Bottom right: *Scharf Talk*, 1995.

1970s-style, Morris Lapidus-designed building that's getting a new forty-story tower.

Scharf will create abstract squiggles and patterns in red, yellow, and blue for the pool and the 60,000-square-foot backyard, including tilework, landscaping, walkways, planters, a fountain, the kid's pool, even the chaise lounges. "I'm just beginning to design things like that, because there's only so much you can do yourself," he says. "It's

Greenwich Village's Halloween parade.

Today Scharf spends most of his time in Miami Beach in a three-bedroom space he calls "the jungle house." In an upper-class neighborhood behind a huge hedge is not a manicured lawn but an eccentric garden. He swims in the ocean every day. His studio is a 5,000-square-foot warehouse in a north Miami suburb. There, he is sometimes assisted by Oliver Sanchez and his wife, Mimi, and other people customizing clothes for the Scharf Schak; but the activity ebbs and flows. "Sometimes it's just me," he says.

The Scharf Schak, already criticized for being a clone of Keith Haring's bauble-dispensing Pop Shop on nearby Lafayette Street, "has been kind of running on its own," he admits. "I need to find the time to infuse some more energy into it." The former newsstand-cum-speakeasy lookout on the Prince Street side of the Guggenheim SoHo building was converted into a curio haven this spring when Peter Brant, the polo-playing Scharf patron who is married to model Stephanie Seymour, turned the space over to the artist.

And he's making a movie. It's based on an idea from his youth involving an impending nuclear apocalypse and widespread decadence on Earth. A handful of citizens see flight to

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nel, featuring a gigantic lamp in the middle of the room, custom-made by a set company, plus other columns of lamps from off the shelf. On the ceiling will be a mural of figures. Nothing goes on the wall. "I learned my lesson from the Palladium," he says. "Anything within reach is destroyed." He's begun working with commercial designers. Presently, he is making sunglasses for Christian Roth, fabrics for Nicole Miller, and jewelry for Todd Oldham.

In Miami, he's working on a renovation of the Seacoast Towers condo and hotel, a

great to have technicians to do all these things for you."

"Kenny should work for *Playboy*," said Yasmin Ramirez, the young Puerto Rican art critic who was one of the early chroniclers of his career. And so he will. In the spring, Scharf undertakes a project for Hugh Hefner's magazine doing body-painting on some of the featured models. "You tell them to take their clothes off," he said, "and then you paint them." Body-painting has been a Halloween ritual, he points out, in connection with



scharf

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outer space as the only viable alternative. In retrospect, he says, "I look back at the time when everyone thought we were about to die in a nuclear war, and faced it by throwing a big party of sex and drugs. But it wasn't the bomb that came: it was AIDS that ended that brief hedonistic era, which was a source of a lot of creativity, too.

"Artists don't have to be limited to one thing," he says, while emphasizing that he is a painter first. He was a video major at SVA, where he made elaborate projects, many featuring performances by Club 57 alumni like John Sex and Ann Magnuson. Scharf shot these on three-quarter-inch-tape and is only now having them transferred to VHS so they can be viewed. "It wasn't the right time then," he says, "but there's a lot of interest now." That period, he says, of the late '70s and early '80s, was "the last time that people were doing things as part of a truly underground scene, without the media being right on top of it. Now everything that is new and interesting immediately goes on MTV."

So if he's already been ahead of his time, how will Scharf keep it going into the 21st century? "He's the only survivor of his generation," says one observer. "That's hardly nothing." But, according to both friends and detractors, he has to be careful to keep the quality up, and perhaps the quantity down. At worst, his work is excessive, and, well, downright tacky.

These days, celebrity artists play the globe with shows in New York, London, Germany, and South America. Scharf's best bet for a new shot at success in the second half of the '90s may have to do with his intimate association with the southern hemisphere: his homebase in Miami, his ties to Brazil, his upcoming retrospective at MARCO in Mexico.

"It's very brilliant of him to go southern access," says Brooks Adams. The current issue of British *Elle Decor* features a spread on his Miami house, and it looks fabulous—hot colors, tropical plastic furniture, all very crazy, Latin, and fun. It's very much an MTV thing, and it's also seasonal—every winter you need a shot of the equatorial vibe.

In retrospect, Scharf himself feels as if he's suddenly come out of hibernation, and is beginning to see a new dawn. "It's really crazy right now," he says. "It's like I've had a five-year resting period. Now I'm riding the wave." □