

A Nuclear Rapture: The Apocalyptic Art of Kenny Scharf

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Abstract

The art of Kenny Scharf is paradoxical in nature. He combines carefree cartoon worlds with distinctly religious apocalyptic images of terrifying nuclear holocaust. The odd juxtapositions Scharf creates between the horrific and the benign are the artist's means of coping with his own apocalyptic anxiety, as well as a critique of the self-destructive behavior of American society in the 1980s. At the time, Ronald Reagan's strong doomsday rhetoric and his emphasis on the Arms Race collided with the AIDS Crisis, creating a specific 1980s brand of the apocalyptic. Scharf responds to this widespread, heightened anxiety by using the cartoon (and a cartoon-based religion of his own invention) as a purposefully ludicrous anesthetic to numb his apocalyptic fears.

Keywords

Kenny Scharf, contemporary religion, apocalypse, apocalyptic, New York, television, 1980s

KENNY Scharf's painting *Judy on the Beach* (fig. 1) depicts a bizarre seascape with purple waves, orange, blue, and green skies, and orange sand. Judy Jetson—from the popular cartoon *The Jetsons*—runs along the beach, clad in a bikini and with a beaming smile on her face. Lying on a towel, a couple relaxes under an umbrella and stares into a television. The characters appear blissfully unaware of a large, pink mushroom cloud that looms in the background.¹ The painting includes strange symbols in two corners of the composition, a lexicon of Scharf's own making that mimics cartoon speech-bubbles and yet is not written in any comprehensible language. A painting such as this is characteristic of much of Scharf's oeuvre. On the surface, the bright colors, recognizable character, and smiling faces

¹ Scharf was well aware of works by other Pop artists and may be referencing Lichtenstein's *Atomic Burst*, 1966, in this image. Both works of art show a cartoon atomic explosion and both are devoid of the typical horror associated with such imagery.



Figure 1. Kenny Scharf. *Judy on the Beach*, 1981. Acrylic on canvas, 50.8 × 76.2 cm. Private collection. © 2012 Kenny Scharf / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 2. Kenny Scharf. *P.S.1 Installation: Heaven and Hell*, 1982. Installation in the Project Room, PS1, Long Island City NY. Private collection. © 2012 Kenny Scharf / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

in the painting locate the scene in the carefree realm of the cartoon. However, by putting these same innocent characters in grave danger, he purposefully undermines the safety of their animated world.

The contradictory aspects of Scharf's art represent a displacement of the apocalyptic anxiety the artist felt throughout the 1980s into a fantasy world.² His work vacillates between opposites (good vs. bad, heaven vs. hell, parody vs. sincerity), refusing to occupy a fixed position. His negotiation of these liminal spaces operates as both an analysis of contemporary religion and a wry defense mechanism.

In an installation at PS1 in the early 1980s, Scharf transforms his metaphoric shifting between opposites into a tangible reality (fig. 2). He hung a swing from the ceiling of the gallery and painted scenes of heaven and hell on opposing walls. During the exhibition, Scharf physically swung back and forth in the gallery, wavering between eternal salvation and eternal damnation. He describes the scene as follows:

It was a huge room with a swing in the middle. One side was heaven with Fred and Wilma [Flintstone] in a Jetson's car with clouds. On the other wall was hell with monsters with fangs and stuff. Then the swing could swing across from heaven to hell. On the other two sides was a huge nuclear bomb with people flying out of it—people raising their arms up to fly through the bomb, women with baby carriages flying out of the bomb. There was also a big spiral on the floor and an even bigger spiral up above. This represents moving into different worlds. (*Kenny Scharf* [New York 1998] 7)

² Trying to make historical trends fit neatly into decades is a futile task. Creating arbitrary historical markers condenses complex chronological developments into simplistic categories, which suggest that history can change overnight. The "decade" of the 1980s is not defined in this article as 1980–89; whenever the "1980s" is mentioned, I am referring to the period of 1979–91 in which a unique set of historical circumstances worked to heighten apocalyptic anxiety. In 1979, the nuclear power plant at Three Mile Island had a near meltdown, causing widespread anxiety about nuclear power and sparked the first national Anti-Nuclear Rally, which was held in Washington D.C. the same year. I bookend the date of the Three Mile Island disaster with the first performance of Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* in 1991 because it reflects back upon the previous twelve years by gathering together many of the strands of apocalyptic thinking in the 1980s into one elaborate story. Kushner's play marked the end of the "1980s" and the beginning of a distinctly different historical moment.

The PSI installation can be read as a metaphor for Scharf's views towards religion and the apocalyptic. He moves seamlessly from heaven to hell and back again, his work lacking clear distinctions between the two. Scharf's treatment of religion follows this fluctuating model: he is constantly negotiating between a parody of religion and sincere devotion. While many scholars and critics have been dismissive of Scharf's work and see it simply as light-hearted cartooning, it is important to note that the complex interaction of religious tropes is an integral part of his work and he uses religion as a tool for dealing with apocalyptic anxiety in the 1980s.³ This article will explore two key themes in Scharf's art, which together reveal his apocalyptic anxieties and his attempts to allay these fears: a religion of Scharf's own making called "Jetsonism" and the theme of escapism which pervades a large percentage of his work.

Apocalyptic writing and rhetoric, in its traditional form, is designed to relieve anxiety during periods of great distress and has been used in both art and literature to address anxiety about the end of the world. The comforting function of the apocalyptic is what led Barry Brummett, author of *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric*, to assign it the apt title "equipment for living" (43). He believes that the primary importance of the apocalyptic lies in its function as a system of order. Brummett, referring to the traditional definition of the apocalyptic, goes on to explain that "to an audience that thought that it was adrift amid chaos, apocalyptic reveals a grand plan underlying all of history, a plan that was in place all along" (30). This rhetoric "appeals to an audience that is suffering from loss of a sense of order in life; to counter that loss, apocalyptic depicts history as *hyper-ordered*" (37). Thus for many Christians, the world may be coming to an end, but if they

³ An excellent article on the tendency to dismiss religion as a serious topic in contemporary art is Sally Promey's "The 'Return' of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art." She describes a recent resurgence in scholarship on art and religion in America and claims that it has become a "hot topic" according to scholars like Wanda Corn (581). Promey does not believe religion ever disappeared from American art, but rather, that it disappeared from the *scholarship* of American art. Promey notes that for many years, academics have been suspicious of religion and have ignored the religious threads that are an integral part of a lot of American art. Until recently, religion was seen as taboo and not an appropriate topic for the enlightened scholar. It seems, however, that the avoidance of religion as a serious scholarly topic is slowly being corrected. Promey writes that this is due in large part to the emergence of postmodernism, which is calling into question Enlightenment thought and secularization, and allowing historians to once again take religion seriously (593).

are virtuous, they will be whisked away to heaven and saved from the destruction of Armageddon in a moment known as the Rapture.

Apocalyptic anxiety is present in nearly every historical period. Yet this dialogue intensifies at times, becomes more prevalent, and transforms into a historically distinct form. During the 1980s, a number of unique social, political, and religious factors converged, giving rise to an apocalyptic rhetoric specific to the decade. Ronald Reagan's presidential strategy vilified the Soviet Union, pitting the United States against this "Evil Empire."⁴ His black-and-white attitude further cultivated the characterization of the Cold War as an epic battle between good and evil, leading to the intensification of aggression and nuclear tension with the USSR. Reagan's strong apocalyptic rhetoric collided with the AIDS Crisis (which was viewed by many Fundamentalist groups as God's punishment for homosexuality),⁵ and created a specific 1980s brand of the apocalyptic. Scharf responded to this apocalyptic moment by painting horrifying post-apocalyptic worlds in which the fun and entertainment of the cartoon turns lurid and frightening. The multiple valences of Scharf's work allow his paintings to function in a liminal space, offering reassurance and danger at the same time.

Scharf's religious background is diverse, and provides an interesting glimpse into how his religious and apocalyptic themes would develop over time. Subscribing to widely varied belief systems is termed "religiosity" by Charles Lippy, author of *Being Religious American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States*. Lippy believes that religiosity is "more open ended. It takes in beliefs and practices associated with official religion, as well as those that come from other sources. It appreciates individual blends of belief and practice without claiming that any one mix is normative" (9). This more personalized belief, for Lippy, is like "shopping for God in a divine supermarket, for it involves individuals looking to many sources, picking and choosing beliefs and practices that make sense to them, and ultimately constructing a worldview that enables them to make sense out of their own experience, even if that worldview lacks conceptual coherence" (233). While religiosity is sometimes defined as an ostentatious and insincere religious display, Lippy characterizes it as a legitimate but

⁴ Reagan labeled the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire" in a speech he delivered in Orlando, Florida to the National Association of Evangelicals on 8 March 1983.

⁵ Patrick Buchanan, director of White House communications in the Reagan Administration from 1985–87, commented on one occasion that AIDS was "nature's revenge on homosexual men." See John Griggs, *AIDS: Public Policy Dimensions* (79).

diverse religious position. Scharf exemplifies Lippy's type of religiosity in his eclectic references to a wide range of world religions. For example, a number of his works include references to Hinduism mixed with popular culture, such as *Tantric Judy*, 1982, which merges the form of Judy Jetson with that of a multi-limbed Hindu goddess.⁶

Scharf, however, was raised Jewish and attended Hebrew School as a child (Scharf, personal interview). References to his religious background occasionally appear in his art in the form of a Star of David,⁷ but these types of allusions are rare. Despite his Jewish upbringing, Scharf exhibits a strong tendency to focus upon Christian themes in his work. He explains: "I'm Jewish. My family is Jewish. I went to Hebrew school as a child and I really hated it. I was really interested in religion but had a disdain for organized religions. They tell you what is and what to do—it's too dogmatic. I'm fascinated by religion. I believe in bits of all religions, not ONE single religion" (Scharf, personal interview).

While it is clear that Scharf's beliefs embody Lippy's definition of religiosity, it nevertheless seems strange that Scharf would use predominately Christian motifs in his art given his Hebrew education. When asked specifically about these allusions to Christianity, he responds: "[i]n regards to the Christian references—I am influenced by American culture. America is certainly not a Jewish country, but a Christian one. I was always fascinated by Christians and Christmas in particular. It was something I didn't get to participate in as a Jew. I love the showbiz aspect of religion. I like the rituals and icons too" (Scharf, personal interview). This statement indicates that Scharf's Christian interests were heavily influenced by American popular culture and that he was particularly drawn to the commercialization and spectacle of religion. As a non-practicing Jew who believes in the validity of all of the world's religions, Scharf is clearly not part of the traditional group of "saved" Christians. He occupies an ambivalent position within the Christian universe by picking and choosing religious symbols to address private and societal anxieties.

Nevertheless, he was particularly drawn to Christian apocalyptic motifs and often focuses on nuclear holocaust as the catalyst for Armageddon. He notes that "the demise of the planet . . . is a very strong undercurrent in

⁶ An image of *Tantric Judy* can be found on Kenny Scharf's website (kennyscharf.com).

⁷ The *Jetsonism Manifesto* (1981) published in the exhibition catalog, *Kenny Scharf* (New York: Tony Shafrazi Gallery, 1987), includes a picture of a Star of David as well as *Tantric Judy*.

almost all the work I do" (*Kenny Scharf* [New York 1998] 7) and that "the importance of religion in art stems from the increasingly threatening situation of nuclear catastrophe" (Scharf, "Jetsonism Manifesto"). Scharf even stated in an interview that the reason for the decadent party attitude of the 1980s was the feeling of certainty that "the Bomb" was going to drop at any moment. They wanted to live every moment to its fullest and "party harder than anyone had ever partied" while they still had time (Scharf, personal interview). This type of apocalyptic anxiety was prevalent throughout 1980s pop culture. Movies such as *The Seventh Sign*, 1988, *Threads*, 1984, and *The Day After*, 1983, whose tagline was "Apocalypse . . . The End of the Familiar . . . The Beginning of the End," became very popular ("The Day After"). Madonna even quoted from Revelation in a concert dedicated to the fight against AIDS (Dellamora 8).

Out of Scharf's interest in eclectic religious traditions grew his own all-inclusive religion called Jetsonism, which was coupled with an apocalyptic manifesto (fig. 3). This proclamation—written in 1981, but published in an exhibition catalog by Tony Shafrazi in 1983—solidified Scharf's earlier nebulous beliefs about nuclear catastrophe and religion, and influenced nearly all of the art he produced throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s. It therefore became the crux of his philosophical and artistic ideas, and it is difficult to understand his art outside the context of the manifesto.

Jetsonism closely parallels Christianity, but also references other belief systems. Scharf's "Jetsonism Manifesto" begins with an analysis of the mandala and its ability to bring the religious devotee into a transcendent state. He describes how there are remnants of the mandala form in virtually every religion, a universalist viewpoint which further highlights Scharf's emphasis on religiosity. He then proceeds to make references to the end of the world, which, according to Scharf, is caused by "nuclear catastrophe." He writes that hydrogen atoms are God because "they are the only thing created from nothing." When mankind usurps God's power and plays with atoms (as in the creation of the atomic bomb), he "destroys himself in the process." Scharf ends simply with the words "Jetsonism is Nirvana." The illustrations accompanying the manifesto create a visual parallel between Jetsonism and Christianity. By comparing an image of Christ with Rosie the Robot (the Jetsons' maid), Scharf establishes the Jetsons as a Holy (Nuclear) Family of the Atomic Age.

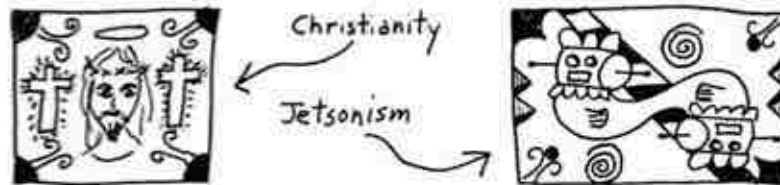
The first season of *The Jetsons* was originally broadcast in 1962, but the second season was produced much later in 1985. Scharf grew up watching

Mushrooms + television childhood = Pop Surrealism.

Religion is strong. Mandalas are used in all religions. they all have a center. They can hypnotically bring you to a higher level. Early Mandalas were simple. Simple symbolic shapes.



The spiral is easily understood as a means to other levels (worlds). For example: the tornado, the bathtub drain spiral where entering can take place (air through water). Galaxies are spirals. Suction-black holes? Spirals are universal in space, in nature and in culture. Second degree religions include Mandalas with icons.



The importance of religion in art stems from the increasingly threatening situation of nuclear catastrophe. Will I be all right when I'm dead? Well, hopefully. If you believe in being good you will lift your arms up the mushroom cloud, through a spiral to "heaven".



Heaven being the universal oneness with time equals nature equals god. God equals hydrogen atoms because they are the only things created from nothing. Hydrogen God is the creator: sun, planets, earth, man. The sun being hydrogen, fusing to helium as an after product. Man plays God by using atoms, destroying himself in the process-nuclear catastrophe.

Jetsonism is Nirvana.

Kenny Scharf
1981

Figure 3. Kenny Scharf. *The Jetsonism Manifesto*, 1981. Collection of Kenny Scharf. © 2012 Kenny Scharf / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

the show in the 1960s, and its re-emergence in the 1980s brought back nostalgic childhood memories. The Jetsons were a family living in a twenty-first-century space age. Their futuristic home was high in the sky of Orbit City, where they drove flying cars, had a robot maid and where everything was available to them at the touch of a button. The head of the family was George Jetson, who had a beautiful wife named Jane, a teenage daughter named Judy, and a young son named Elroy. The show followed their everyday lives, exploring the problems and mishaps of this futuristic family. While the Jetsons appeared to have every technology at their disposal, they were nonetheless confronted with the same kind of difficulties faced by real-world families of the mid-to-late twentieth century. Mishaps caused by the malfunctioning of the utopian technology featured in the show were used as common plotlines and exposed the seemingly idealized world of the Jetsons as being far from perfect.

Scharf's mythology enlists the youngest Jetson child, Elroy, as an important analogy to the Christ child. In *Madonna e Bambino* (fig. 4) Scharf creates a nativity scene with the Virgin Mary and Elroy Jetson riding on the back of a donkey, in imitation of the events surrounding Christ's birth. Both figures are pictured with light emanating from their heads, which is a popular convention in religious art for denoting holiness.

Elroy's father, George Jetson, is even pictured as God the Father in several of Scharf's imaginary worlds. In *Ecstasy* (fig. 5) features George Jetson with angel-wings, outlined in wispy white lines and flying high in the sky above the rest of the scene in the upper center of the painting. He is flanked by two winged "angels" in the form of Pebbles and Bam-Bam from *The Flintstones*. Christ, pictured just left of center and whose pose is borrowed from the Renaissance artist Giovanni Bellini's *Agony in the Garden*,⁸ prays to George Jetson in a primordial landscape just above the decapitated head of John the Baptist and an underwater sea serpent grinning maniacally.⁹ There is an element of danger in this holy scene in the form of an exploding volcano located on the right of the composition. Scharf notes that in his symbolic system, images of volcanoes are often used as prehistoric versions of an atomic bomb.¹⁰ With this in mind, the apocalyptic overtones of

⁸ For a reproduction of the Bellini painting, see The National Gallery www.nationalgallery.org.uk (accessed 24 Oct. 2012).

⁹ Scharf indicates that the decapitated head pictured in the painting *In Ecstasy* is John the Baptist's. *Kenny Scharf* (Normal IL: Illinois State University, 1998), 10.

¹⁰ Rene Ricard makes note of Scharf's parallel between volcanoes and atomic bombs in "Pledge of Allegiance."



Figure 4. Kenny Scharf. *Madonna e Bambino*, 1981. Acrylic on canvas, 30.48 × 35.56 cm. Private collection.
© 2012 Kenny Scharf / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 5. Kenny Scharf. *In Ecstasy*, 1982. Acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 227.3 × 273.1 cm. The Dannheiser Foundation. © 2012 Kenny Scharf / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

In Ecstasy become clear and the painting, though combining 1960s television characters and an ancient landscape, locates Scharf's apocalyptic anxiety in the present.

The parallel between a cartoon family and the Holy Family is intentionally ludicrous (and some might argue offensive). Scharf grapples with spirituality and its redemptive qualities and suggests that they are not always effective. He communicates with his audience by representing two simultaneous and contradictory layers of meaning that both soothe and terrify at the same time. The utopian fantasy of *The Jetsons* is meant to relieve apocalyptic anxiety, yet the terrifying references that haunt the images break down the very reassurance that the images are meant to provide. Through his art, Scharf produces bizarre alternative worlds that lack the appropriate emotional impact of real-life situations, and the psychic angst that *should* accompany his scenes is presented in a hyperbolic, humorous form. This opposition helps to reveal the precarious nature of Scharf's images (as well as the source material from which they were derived), and undermines their ability to alleviate anxiety.

Scharf was not the only artist at the time utilizing religious parody. Jean-Michel Basquiat and Al Diaz created "SAMO" as an alternative religion, Keith Haring made many references to the Jesus Movement that both celebrated their ideas and undermined them simultaneously, and even Andy Warhol produced ambiguous works featuring imagery of crosses and Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. Scharf's strategy of parodying religion seemed to tap into a growing interest in contemporary religious ideas that looked to new, less traditional ways of expressing religious faith that often included a critique of those very systems of belief.¹¹

The contradiction inherent in Scharf's work is further developed through an emphasis on escapism, a motif that is prominently featured in Jetsonism. In both his life and art, Scharf embraces a purposely naïve escapism. When art dealer Patti Astor opened her new gallery in the 1980s, she allowed Scharf to give it an appropriate name. He chose to call it the Fun Gallery as a result of his almost obsessive fascination with fun. Commenting on this aspect of his life, Scharf declares: "The whole thing about fun—I like to

¹¹ SAMO was a graffiti tag created by Jean-Michel Basquiat and Al Diaz. Together they would spray paint cryptic religious messages such as "SAMO as an alternative to God" on various buildings throughout New York City. An analysis of the Jesus Movement's influence on Keith Haring's work can be found in Natalie Phillips, "The Radiant (Christ) Child: Keith Haring and the Jesus Movement." An excellent discussion of Andy Warhol's religious influences can be found in Jane Daggett Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol*.

have fun. I think everyone wants to have fun. I think that having fun is being happy. I know it's not all fun, but maybe fun helps with the bad. I mean, you definitely can't have too much fun" (Marzorati 77).

For Scharf, fun is used as a means to escape the doldrums of everyday life, but in many of his works, escapism becomes linked to apocalyptic nuclear disaster. The cartoon imagery that he employs throughout his work marks a return to a child-like innocence separate from the everyday anxieties of this world, but the "fun" of his cartoon world simultaneously exposes anxiety and refuses to function solely as an entertaining distraction.

Scharf's escapism at times took the form of an indulgence in various visual experiments, which became the impetus for some of his later artistic production. He would often creep up close to his television to make the images on screen dissolve into nothing but abstract, colored dots. In *Judy on the Beach* (fig. 1), this influence from his early childhood is referenced by the couple who stare hypnotically at the television, undisturbed by the exploding atomic bomb in the background.

This activity later led to experimentation with hallucinogenic drugs and a further intentional immersion into the realm of fantasy (Marzorati 81). Scharf often included drug-related themes in his paintings, such as the marijuana reference in the title of the work *The Big Bong Theory*, 1987.¹² Mushrooms are mentioned in the "Jetsonism Manifesto," which opens with the line "Mushrooms + television childhood = Pop Surrealism." Scharf's frequent use of the mushroom can be read as both a reference to drugs and an allusion to the nuclear mushroom cloud.¹³

In an effort to magnify his psychedelic experiences, Scharf built fantastic environments in his apartment called Closets into which he would escape at the end of the day and occasionally use as a retreat for his drug experimentations. In a statement made in *ARTNews* about his first Closet, Scharf states: "I made it as a place to go and trip . . . There were a couple of months there when I was really into mushrooms—doing them maybe once a week . . . The first Closet was like making a safe place, solitude. I remember that I had this spiral on the ceiling and would just lie there and stare at it for

¹² A reproduction of *The Big Bong Theory* can be found on Kenny Scharf's website, kenny-scharf.com (accessed 24 Oct. 2012).

¹³ The iconic image of the mushroom would later be used in Japan throughout the 1990s when Tokyo Pop artists such as Takashi Murakami would create psychedelic mushrooms that were also meant to be read as references to Hiroshima.

hours. It was like I would leave my body and float up to the spiral" (*Kenny Scharf* [New York 1998] 81).

The Closets are fantastic, otherworldly constructions filled with garish day-glo colors and found objects from the street.¹⁴ Scharf creates a rather intense environment into which one can escape into an entirely alien world distinct from reality. Normal objects transform into fluorescent, radiating robots, the effect of which is dizzying. Cartoons of the Jetsons are often present as well, calling to mind Scharf's futuristic ideal represented by this television show. While they were certainly fun places for him and his friends to trip, the overly elaborate, womb-like structure of his Closets alludes to Scharf's desire to dissociate himself from the anxieties of this earth.

Scharf's Closets did not just represent escapism in the face of apocalyptic anxiety, but also the growing concerns of the AIDS Crisis. Many of Scharf's close friends, such as Keith Haring, died of the disease and thus he became acutely aware of the epidemic's devastating effects. Scharf created paintings showing AIDS imagined as an ominous black sperm (such as *Zoa* from 1988), and several paintings that were superimposed over newspaper headlines touting the apocalyptic doom of the AIDS Crisis. Because AIDS spread rapidly throughout the gay male population of New York in the 1980s, it further stigmatized the idea of being "out-of-the-closet." While Scharf was straight, the reference to the closet was certainly not lost on him.¹⁵ When Scharf and his friends were physically "in-the-closet" they were able, temporarily, to shut out the real world and escape into an idealized realm untouched by disease.

Scharf's use of the mandala, which figures prominently in Jetsonism, further exposes his interest in escapism. A mandala is an image used for meditative purposes in religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as Christianity to an extent. These meditative diagrams, which represent a microcosm of the universe and are said to aid in the passage to other worlds, typically have a strong central focal point with compositional elements radiating outward from the center. There are various kinds of mandalas, and many have strict representational rules and compositions that artists

¹⁴ Photographs of Scharf's Closets can be found at kennyscharf.com (accessed 24 Oct. 2012).

¹⁵ Gruen, personal interview. Scharf felt as though he was "safer" from AIDS than his friends (such as Keith Haring) because he was straight.

must follow. Scharf, however, adapts the idea of the mandala to his personal belief systems, and their form is often atypical when compared to more traditional mandalas.

Scharf explains that his interest in mandalas derived from his reading of Carl Jung, who often had his patients draw their own mandalas as part of their therapy. Scharf explains: "I was really influenced by Jung's *Man and His Symbols*—so there are a lot of icons and symbols in my work" (Scharf, personal interview). Scharf's mandalas are designed to allow access to higher realms; more specifically, they are the gateway to Scharf's version of heaven. This is in keeping with Jung's definition of the mandala, in which he states that "they express the idea of a safe refuge, or inner reconciliation and wholeness" (Jung 384). The mandala was a particularly important symbol for Timothy Leary, one of the leaders of the psychedelic movement in the 1960s and a friend of Scharf. Leary believed that through drug use and psychedelia "[w]e learned to move through the mandala to Nirvana, the state of absolute bliss" (Iles 70–71). His conception of the mandala's function closely parallels Scharf's own belief that mandalas allow one to move through worlds. Mandalas appear throughout Scharf's art in a variety of forms, such as atomic symbols and the Star of David, but most notably in the shape of a spiral, which, like many traditional mandalas, radiates outward from a central point. Two spirals dominate the floor and ceiling of Scharf's installation at PS1 (fig. 2), signaling his metaphoric swinging between realms.

The "Jetsonism Manifesto," as reproduced above, includes directions for surviving a nuclear attack by leaving the planet itself, an idea that relates back to Scharf's escapism. The manifesto claims that if you believe in being a good person, all that is required of you when the bomb hits is to raise your arms in the air and ride the mushroom cloud through a spiral to arrive in a utopian afterlife that Scharf termed "heaven" (a word Scharf himself puts in quotation marks). According to the manifesto, heaven is the "universal oneness with time equals nature equals god" (Scharf, "Jetsonism Manifesto"). The bad people, on the contrary, will either be condemned to death or, in some of Scharf's other paintings, sent to a sphere that closely parallels the Christian version of hell. Scharf confirms this description when he explains: "I had this theory that when the bomb comes, bad people would blow up and die, but good people would stand with their arms up over their head and fly through the bomb and all go to a fun place. Not to worry. It is a Nirvana . . . a Jetsons utopia" (Scharf, personal interview).

Scharf's plans for surviving a nuclear attack can be read as a kind of Nuclear Rapture, or escape plan for the atomic age. It takes the fundamentalist idea of the Christian Rapture, but updates it and applies it to the atomic age. Scharf transforms this Christian idea, however, into a more democratic Rapture that is open to all. Instead of having to abide by specific Christian rules, merely requires you to "believe in being good" (Scharf, "Jetsonism Manifesto"). He does not, however, define further what *believing* in being good means and so he allows for more personalized views on morality. Scharf's only other requirement for surviving a nuclear holocaust is to know the proper procedure for survival. He opens up salvation to all good people, not just Christians, and so heaven becomes considerably less exclusive.

Yet at the same time, Scharf's escape plan is purposefully ridiculous and naïve, much like his parallels between the Jetsons and the Holy Family. In a 1980s interview with a cable television channel in New York, Scharf demonstrated his process for surviving nuclear holocaust with mock sincerity by dramatically raising his arms up, pretending to fly up into an imagined mushroom cloud for the interviewer (Scharf, interview with Kestutis Nakas). While creating a utopian vision of a non-elitist heaven, he simultaneously imbues this idea with a ludicrous naïveté. The point here is not to make fun of religion, but rather, to revel in his imaginary worlds while also critiquing the Reaganist politics of the Arms Race that Scharf saw as threatening to destroy the world.

Many of Scharf's paintings are representations of the "space and life after the nuclear bomb—the Nirvana heaven where 'only the good people get to see'" (Ahearn et al. 58). Heaven is imagined as a utopian *Jetsons*-style landscape, entered through a spiral. *Elroy Mandala II* (fig. 6) illustrates this process of getting to heaven. As Scharf describes this painting: "Elroy was in the middle surrounded by symbols of people flying out of the bomb. Elroy is like the young boy, a Christ figure, surrounded by Wilma who has a snake's body. This represents time. Snakes often represent time throughout different cultures like Egypt" (Scharf, personal interview).

The incorporation of snakes in *Elroy Mandala II* and other works such as *Tantric Judy or Barbaradise*, 1981, may further reveal Scharf's interest in manipulating traditional religious imagery and combining references to multiple religions in one image.¹⁶ In Christianity, snakes are a symbol of

¹⁶ An image of Scharf's *Barbaradise* can be found at kennyscharf.com (accessed 24 Oct. 2012).



Figure 6. Kenny Scharf. *Elroy Mandala II*, 1982. Acrylic on canvas, 152.4 × 152.4 cm. Private collection. © 2012 Kenny Scharf / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

evil typically associated with the story of Adam and Eve. Yet in other religions, such as the ancient Egyptian belief system and Hinduism (which often uses images of the cobra protecting the god Vishnu), the snake does not always carry these negative connotations. Despite the intended parallels between the Jetson Family and Christianity, Scharf characteristically meshes traditional Christian symbols in his painting with a hodgepodge of imagery from other world religions.

Elroy's parents, George and Judy, are also present in *Elroy Mandala II* and encircle their child while flying around in spaceships. Nuclear holocaust is suggested both by the domineering mushroom cloud in the center, and what Scharf termed a Timesplat. He describes the process of a Timesplat by saying that "if the Jetsons were the future and the Flintstones the past, I melded them together in a nuclear holocaust" (Milani). He claims that the Timesplat is caused by some "catastrophic superpower happening" like "nuclear catastrophe" (Scharf, personal interview). The collapsing of temporal dimensions has apocalyptic overtones and at once suggests the splitting of the atom and the wrenching of the fabric of time. The figures that surround the mushroom cloud are lifting their arms into the air, practicing Scharf's proposed means of averting nuclear disaster.

Hell also figures in Scharf's repertoire and is linked to the Jetsons in revealing ways. Inspired by his first trip to Europe where he viewed many Medieval and Renaissance representations of hell, Scharf recalls: "I was particularly interested in the depictions of hell. These were the most fascinating. The images of saints and heaven were a little boring—not as imaginative. It was with the hell scenes that the artist could really use his imagination to the fullest" (Scharf, personal interview).

Scharf takes his interest in the imaginative, grotesque quality of these hell scenes and represents them in his own work. *Heaven and Hell I*, 1981, consists of blackened ruins (fig. 7). Figures with their arms raised above their heads make their way out of hell and through the spiral that separates it from heaven, which is populated most noticeably by the Jetson family. Scharf's work mediates between the stark contrast of the fiery realm of hell and the pastel-colored, gleaming world of cartoon heaven. Interestingly, the souls in hell do not appear to be condemned there for eternity, but rather, Scharf offers them a chance at redemption if only they follow the proper procedure outlined in his manifesto. Indeed, several figures are pictured at the cusp of the spiral, on the verge of escaping their fiery torment and joining the Jetsons in heaven. Just as Scharf swung between heaven and hell in his PS1 installation, the figures in this painting enjoy the same



Figure 7. Kenny Scharf. *Heaven and Hell I*, 1981. Acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 71.1 × 55.9 cm. Private collection. © 2012 Kenny Scharf / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

fluid movement between realms, contrary to more traditional Christian interpretations of the afterlife where souls are assigned to heaven or hell on a permanent basis.

Scharf's desire to leave behind life on Earth leads to even more overt representations of outer space and space travel. In a description of a 1980s performance, one reviewer reports that "Scharf, facing the camera dead on in a scene preceding the space launch, laments 'we want to go to space because it's . . . it's not good here anymore'" (*Kenny Scharf* [Illinois, 1998] 10). His anxieties about nuclear war and the destruction of the environment lead to references to UFOs and other forms of alien life. Spencer R. Weart, author of *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images*, discusses how UFO mythology "originated in close connection with nuclear fear" (40). The symbol of the UFO has been a potent one for decades of both xenophobic fears and a hope for a new future. For Scharf, UFOs represent a benevolent presence, such as in the 1987 painting *History of the World* in which Scharf depicts aliens helping to populate the planet and bringing culture and technology to Earth.¹⁷

A number of Scharf's works are set on strange, foreign planets. *Judy on the Beach* (fig. 1), *Horizoni*, 1985, and *Self Portrait with Cadillac*, 1979, are a few examples that depict colorful, yet largely barren landscapes.¹⁸ These other-worldly scenes demonstrate Scharf's desire for escape, and likely also make reference to Scharf's own religious experience. In 1971, Scharf made a trip to Israel after his Bar Mitzvah and was inspired by the Red Sea and the desert ("Kenny Scharf: Chronology"). His outer space landscapes may be inspired by the holy landscape of Israel, which helps to underscore the religious underpinnings of his escapist attitudes.

In 1979, Scharf invented a character named Estelle, whom he describes as a "jet-set woman of the future" (Haring 70) and who appeared in a series of his paintings that are set in outer space (fig. 8). Scharf describes how "[t]here was one painting of her at a television/pizza party where she holds up this pizza that has TV sets and Martians coming out of the TV sets. The Martians give her a one-way ticket to space. The next shot is her inside the plane, and she's looking out the window at earth. There's a TV set with a nuclear bomb and she's looking at the world exploding. She's the only

¹⁷ An image of Kenny Scharf's *History of the World*, 1987, can be found at kennyscharf.com (accessed 24 Oct. 2012).

¹⁸ Images of Scharf's *Horizoni* and *Self-Portrait with Cadillac* can be found at kennyscharf.com (accessed 24 Oct. 2012).



Figure 8. Kenny Scharf. *Estelle 2: "Escape in Time,"* 1979. Acrylic on canvas, 45.7 × 55.9 cm. Private collection. © 2012 Kenny Scharf / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

survivor and she's really pleased."¹⁹ Estelle manages to escape Scharf's nuclear holocaust and continue her fabulous life in the realm of outer space. The horror of the mushroom cloud she views from space is mollified by Estelle's cheery smile and the mediation of the explosion through the television screen. Like Scharf himself, Estelle is the ultimate escapist. The Estelle paintings help allay anxiety by trivializing nuclear holocaust, transforming it into a gleeful, nihilistic celebration. Estelle's fashionable, non-stop interplanetary party is seductive. Yet the obvious absurdity of her nonchalant response to the demise of the planet simultaneously underscores Scharf's intentionally ridiculous, escapist desire to dodge Earth's problems by simply moving to outer space.

Jetsonism's role as a self-created mythological system is a defining force in Scharf's art. While not widely read by collectors and fans of his work, this manifesto espouses his core beliefs, but at the same time, is a parody of religion and its ability to provide reassurance in difficult times. It becomes a key to understanding Scharf's work, and it still influences his artistic production in the present day.

Scharf created Jetsonism in a specific historical period in which a convergence of events created a moment rife with apocalyptic anxiety. Reagan's policies on nuclear weapons, the Arms Race, tensions with Russia, and the AIDS Crisis all contributed to this unique apocalyptic moment and gave birth to Scharf's paradoxical art, which combines the horrific with the idyllic. While religion plays an important and redemptive role in the world he creates, there is nevertheless a darker side of his work that reveals the underlying anxieties he felt about life in the 1980s and religion's power to ease these anxieties. While complex and often contradictory, religion nonetheless lies at the crux of Scharf's artistic production, and an analysis of its formations and manifestations is a necessary part of understanding his message.

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