

KENNY SCHARF // CAMILLE ROSE GARCIA // ROA

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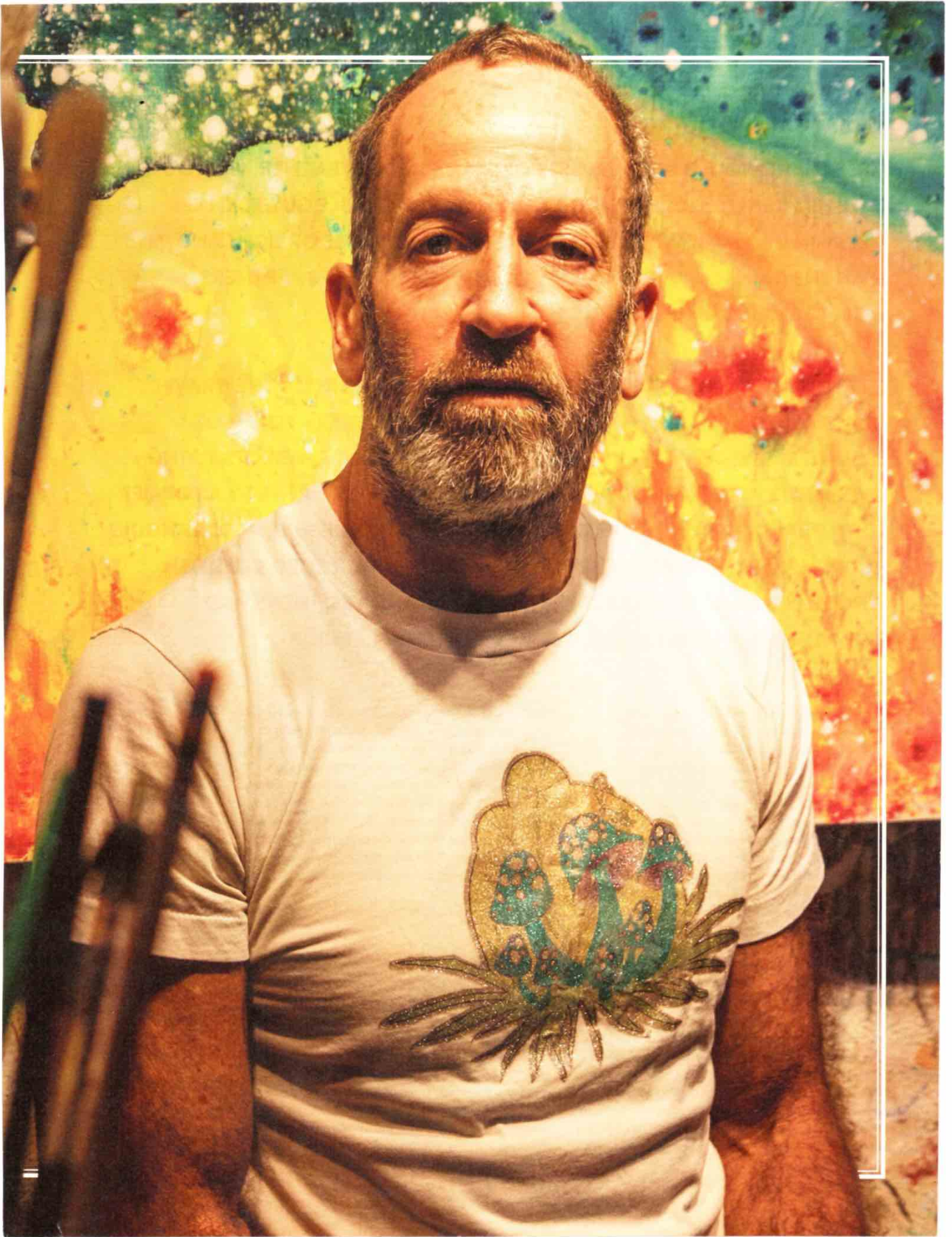


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KENNY SCHARF

Interview by GWYNNED VITELLO // Portrait by ESTEVAN ORIOL



MR. **SCHARF** WOULD BE THE MOST POPULAR SCIENCE TEACHER. WE WOULD CALL HIM KENNY BECAUSE HE'S A COOL, APPROACHABLE GUY. "CELLS—MELANIN GIVES THEM PIGMENT SO THEY ABSORB WAVES OF LIGHT AND SPAN THE RAINBOW! AFTER YOU'RE DONE WITH YOUR LAB PARTNERS, WE'LL CHECK OUT THE AVIARY."

SITTING OUTSIDE OF KENNY'S STUDIO, JUST OFF THE 10 IN LA, THE GRAVEL DRIVEWAY FRAMED BY A CADILLAC, MASSIVE CACTI, AND A TOTEM OF SMILING PASTEL TEA-CUPS, WE MARVEL AT THE FLOCK OF PARROTS FLYING OVERHEAD. INDEED, THE DOOR ADJOINING HIS OFFICE OPENS TO A FORMER TURTLE SANCTUARY, THE INHABITANTS HAVING SINCE BEEN SENT TO LANGUID RETIREMENT, AND THE SOLE SURVIVOR, A COUNTY FAIR SIZED GOLDFISH WHO'S SEEN IT ALL IN HIS LAST TWENTY YEARS. AND YES, THERE HAD BEEN A FLOCK OF PARAKEETS, BUT MORE ON THAT LATER.

Kenny's beyond Bill Nye, like a very hip, modern Mr. Rogers, whose neighborhood includes the famously black-lit Cosmic Cavern. Hey, this guy should have a TV show. Oh yeah, he almost did.

Gwynned Vitella: What are you painting right now?

Kenny Scharf: I am painting large color field semi-abstracts for my solo show at Paul Kasmin Gallery in NYC. Also making a sculpture for the show as well.

For someone who used to walk his silver-froed vacuum cleaner on a leash on Broadway, I guess it wasn't such a leap to see your painting transformed into sculpture by Gentle Giant Studios. Was that something you ever envisioned, and what was your reaction to that evolving process?

My vacuum cleaner was brightly colored and its name was Cheeky. I used to walk it on a leash when I lived near Times Square in the early '80s. Other dogs liked it, as well as the garment workers hauling boxes on wheels through the streets. It's always been a dream to fabricate sculptures based on my paintings. My imagery often consists of 3D objects of my imagination, so it's

not a hard stretch to figure it out and want to see them volumetrically. This takes dollars and collaboration, and I'm happy to be working at Gentle Giant to make these dreams come true! Working with them is like everything I've wanted to do my whole life. If you think of something, they figure out how to do it. I spend so much time painting by myself—there's all that time with the brush. I do get help with the sculptures, it's not like I'm making the fiberglass, but it's nice to work on projects that are more design-oriented.

Is there a reason why you're painting in LA but live in New York?

I paint and live in both places. I love NYC and it's the place I came to with a dream while still a teen, and as they say, if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere! I also love LA as it's my hometown and birthplace, and it definitely shaped my early imagination. I'm tied to the place in many ways and love the physicality and the nature that envelops it, especially the beach and mountains. My assistant Dave, who's a photographer, lives here, and he's my number one guy. He makes the frames and stretchers, stretches the canvases, manages the storage and

ONE

One of the nice things about being older is being able to relax. I know not everyone is going to like it, but I just want to do my thing.

TWO

I lived in Miami from 1991 to 1992, but there wasn't much of an art scene. I decided I'd rather be a little fish in a big ocean.

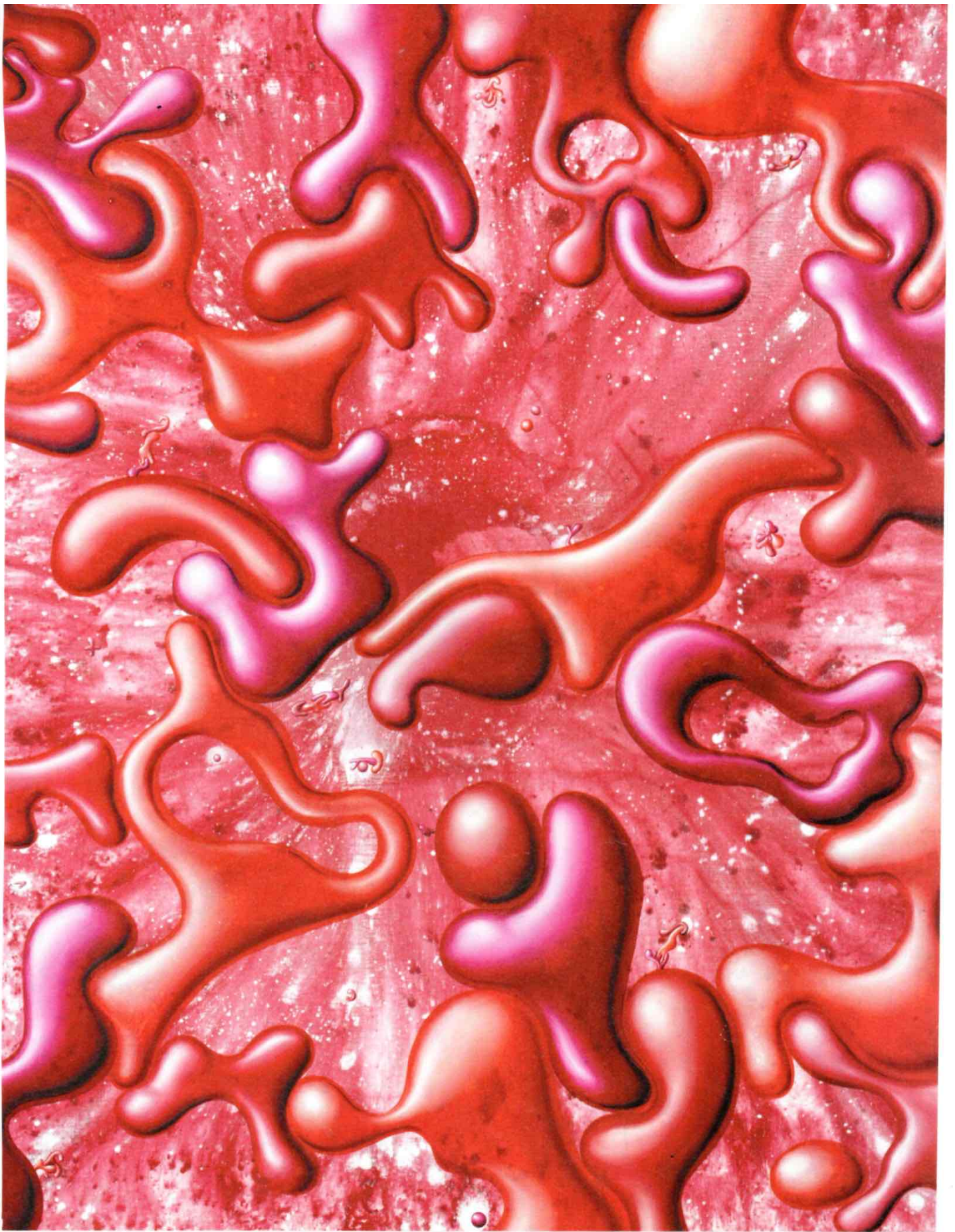
THREE

I may seem normal because I have a place to put my abnormal.

•••••

Red

Oil and acrylic on canvas
72.75 x 60.125
2012
Image courtesy of the artist
and Paul Kasmin Gallery





MY VACUUM CLEANER WAS BRIGHTLY COLORED AND ITS NAME WAS CHEEKY. I USED TO WALK IT ON A LEASH WHEN I LIVED NEAR TIMES SQUARE IN THE EARLY '80S.

White
oil and acrylic on canvas
72.75" x 60.125"
2012
Image courtesy of the artist
and Paul Kasmin Gallery

shipping, everything. And there's Gentle Giant, which I have been so excited to be working with. I like to spend time in NY in the spring and fall and LA in the winter and summer. Can you blame me?

I love that biographies give Hollywood as your city of birth, but you actually grew up in the Valley, right? What was a typical summer's day like for you as a kid?

Yes, I was born in Hollywood at Cedars of Lebanon Hospital (which is now the Scientology center), and even though I grew up in the valley I always thought it was glamorous to be born in Hollywood! My very ordinary suburban childhood summers consisted of playing with the neighborhood kids, lots of Hot Wheels, painting, summer camp and the neighbor's pool. I also raised ladybugs from eggs. No kidding.

Tell me more about the ladybugs.

There was a film *Life of a Ladybug* that I saw in grade school, one of those nature films you saw on a rainy day when there was no recess. There were the eggs hatching, they'd voraciously eat the aphids, they'd turn into a pupa and stay that way for a week or two, then emerge as a lady bug. Later, in my backyard in the Valley, I saw these larvae eating the aphids. Just like I saw in the film. So I got jars, put them in there, and kept feeding them and watching them hatch. This went on for a couple years.

Did you show your friends?

Oh yeah, all my friends in the neighborhood. My parents, I guess, knew what I was doing, but they were more like, "He's in the backyard doing something." Kids were more separate then, now everyone's doing it all together.

Were you a "lonely only" kid who withdrew into a fantasy world, or were you part of a raucous family where everyone in the neighborhood hung out? For some reason, I'm imagining your Mom had this wacky sense of humor.

Although I had neighborhood friends to play with, I was kind of a loner in my fantasy world of make

believe and ladybug raising. My Dad's family was from New York, and they had a couple businesses. There was trucking in Brooklyn, and they had a hotel in the Catskills in the summer where my dad and uncle were the entertainment. So they had their "schtick," very Schecky Greene, very Borscht Belt: comedy, a little song and a joke here and there. I never really got to hear him, but at weddings and bar mitzvahs, my parents would get a little drunk, my dad would do these little dances and my mom would be laughing and clapping her hands. And they became the "fun parents" as opposed to the usual ones telling you to clean your room.

I always wanted to get away and be alone, didn't see the need for anyone telling me to do anything, and I'm still like that. But really, the Valley was kind of a boring place to be as kid, so it allowed me to delve into my imagination.

In addition to nature films, how did popular media influence you? I'm guessing *The Brave Little Toaster* was a favorite, but why *The Jetsons* and not *Winnie the Pooh*?

I always loved *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons* as I feel they truly mimicked real suburban American life, which was what I knew. They were a combination of the past and the future, concepts that have always inspired me. They may appear light on the outside but are really metaphysical, representing more than a cartoon. *Winnie the Pooh* just doesn't have the same effect.

Were you a fan of haunted houses and trains at amusement parks? And conversely, how did you get commissioned to fashion a carousel?

I love amusement parks. My dream is to design one! In 1985 I was commissioned to customize a swing carousel for the Austrian project LunaLuna. It was to open in Hamburg as an art amusement park and travel the world and end up permanently in NY. Other artists included Dalí, Beuys, Lichtenstein, Hockney, Haring, and Basquiat among others. Everyone designed things and had them fabricated, but I chose to do it all myself, spending a month in Austria. The park

KENNY SCHARF

opened in Hamburg to constant rain and the mud pile closed, never to be seen again. I still don't know what happened to my piece and have been trying to no avail to get some answers. Oh well, one of the many dead ends in my career!

What's your opinion of Disneyland? Assuming it's not too sanitized for your taste, what's your favorite attraction? Or do you prefer a seedy carnival?

I grew up loving Disneyland but sadly I feel it's lost its original magic. Tomorrowland was destroyed and in its place is a weak concept of the future. Monsanto's Miracle of Molecules was really cool and trippy and you got to shrink down to molecular size. I do love a seedy carnival and especially love amusement parks that have gone bad and sad. Nothing like decrepit fantasy!

Is there anything that would surprise me about your high school experience, like you were a cheerleader or president of the math club?

My high school experience was pretty forgettable except for the drugs and sex.

Besides the friends you made, how did you benefit from the School of Visual Arts? Who did you meet there, and did you meet anyone personally influential whom our readers might not know?

At SVA I learned about using fan brushes from a photorealist artist named Noel Mahaffey. The idea of creating something real looking that you couldn't photograph because it was imaginary really got me excited. I didn't understand copying a photograph directly—what was the point if it already existed in a photo? I also got involved in video and made numerous short films with the help of my friends. I met Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Jon Sex (Jon McLaughlin) who was famous in certain circles as a performance artist/entertainer, especially in NYC. Most people don't realize that he was actually a very serious visual artist who reintroduced the burlesque show and taught me a lot about Dada, collage and silkscreen.

Tell me about Ann Magnuson's influence, especially about performance art. People should know how she made things happen.

Ann Magnuson was and still is a very important artist. One day John Sex, Keith Haring and I walked by this hole-in-the-wall which was the basement of a Polish church. We walked in, saw a jukebox, started dancing and Ann came out from behind the bar. What was a





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bar doing in a church basement? We got ourselves deemed a Youth Group, so were legally allowed to have these parties. Back in the Club 57 days, Ann was regarded in the same importance as Keith and Jean-Michel. She really was a driving force and inspiration to all of us, and her "happenings" almost every night at 57 were inspirational, influential and loads of riotous fun. She also put on this show, New Wave Vaudeville, where people like Klaus Nomi had their coming out. And everyone did everything; if you were in a band you could also be a visual artist. No one was making any money, so why specialize in just one thing? The idea of art as entertainment was new and really before its time and was the driving force of our scene. She ridiculed the capitalist consumerist society while celebrating it as well.

But you did get captivated by the lure of TV.

I made efforts in the '80s, and came to LA with the help of John Gould who had been Andy Warhol's boyfriend. But I was way too early; it was way before the Simpsons and they just thought I was this nutty guy. Yet I still wanted to do it, so figured I'd move to LA and make a go. They wanted to develop my idea, and I thought, "I've made it!" Well, they don't really pay for development—it was like 25¢ an hour during those three years. And you go to meeting after meeting, where everything has to be approved by some higher-up. It was to be an adult show, you know, with drugs and sex. We had music by Devo and the B-52's, were the first to have the voice talents of stars. And so they turned around and said, "We want you to make something for children." So I did, and proceeded to draw some inspiration from *Pee Wee's Playhouse* and make something parents could watch with their kids.

So what do they do next? They go and put it on Adult Swim. Why didn't they let me do something for adults as I first pitched it? Everyone who had worked on it got fired before they even aired it. I never heard from them again. All that wining and dining, and they could have said, "You know what, everyone hated it." They could have just told the truth. It's much harder to be rude than to be polite.

But in retrospect, it was good. I was broke, my dreams were shattered, so I went back to painting, where I don't need anyone's approval. In 2001, I had my first show at Paul Kasmin.

It's almost surprising to see your riotous patterns on the pristine white Kiehl's products, a company with whom you recently partnered. How did you react to the proposition, and do you find any use for the color beige?

I was happy to be asked to collaborate with Kiehl's and honestly didn't realize how worldwide it has become! I know it from the one original store in the East Village, and now I know there are hundreds of them worldwide, but didn't really understand in the beginning. I was happy that the dollars raised from the sales went to children's charities. They've done a collaboration every year at Christmas. First was KAWS, then Jeff Koons, and I was the third.

For me, at this point, beige can be really wild. Around 2003 I did a series of paintings with lots of beige, grey and brown. It seemed really fun and different to use that palette as it was unusual and exciting! I was also feeling depressed and it felt right being drab.

Did you consciously drop out of the party scene, and how is it different now that you're "back?"

I did drop out of the party scene for almost two decades. All the death and suffering that was all around me in the late '80s put a sledgehammer to the parties. After so many years I wanted to introduce another aspect of my art to a new audience. It really happened without planning as I made my Cosmic Cavern in my basement and decided to throw a party there with my friend, artist/DJ Scott Ewalt, and the Cosmic Cavern-A-Go-Go was born! The ultimate art experience complete with great visuals, music, wild dancing and performance. I get a thrill when I see the room come alive with all the people dressed in Day-Glo dancing in my room! The relationship of nightclubs, dancing and parties has been integral to the development of my art and career since I arrived in NYC in the late '70s. Nightclubs were the venue where we were able to exhibit with open arms. The galleries at that time

previous spread
Black Rubble
Oil and acrylic on linen
with powder coated
aluminum frame
72" x 60"
2013

right
White
Oil and acrylic on canvas
72.75" x 60.125"
2012
Image courtesy of the artist
and Paul Kasmin Gallery



I'VE BEEN UP AND DOWN MORE TIMES THAN I CAN COUNT.
I'VE NEVER BEEN ENAMoured OF CELEBRITY,
THOUGH, OF COURSE, EVERYONE LIKES
A LITTLE ADULATION.

Americana

Oil, acrylic, and silkscreen ink
on linen
60" x 72"
2012

were not interested in what we were doing, and everyone we knew was involved in some way or another with night life.

Aside from working in your studio and either driving or taking the subway, are your days spent differently in these two cities?

The main difference, I guess, is in NY I bike everywhere. I live and work in Brooklyn and am riding daily over the Williamsburg bridge, so I'm a biker in NY. And in LA, I bike too but also drive. In NY I'm more social. I find myself going to events, parties, openings, etcetera, and it's very distracting from work. In LA I think I'm more focused on working and really get things done as I don't really go out.

Do you find a need personally or creatively to retreat for some alone time?

I spend a lot of time alone painting, and I do use it as kind of a refuge from the real world. I also like long swims in the sea and love to be in nature, which refuels me as well.

I have been lucky enough to visit you in one of your caverns in New York, but this is a whole different scene. The room next to your office has its own history, and unlike your caverns, you are the sole inhabitant (besides that gorgeous goldfish).

Ah, the Wildlife Room. I also had a full turtle thing going on, the floor was gravel with plants growing through, and the screen door was tangled with tree branches. There were parakeets flying all around, and for awhile it seemed great—and then it got gross. Parakeets are

distastefully dirty; they started pecking the canvas, making nests, and laying eggs. One day I walked in... and they were all decapitated. I guess rats had come in to raid their nests? There was one left with half a leg, so I gave it to a friend. Last year I released the turtles to a turtle refuge, so the Wildlife Room is over.

But we're sitting out here with the date palms and the wild parrots flying over head, and there's always another chapter.

I've been up and down more times than I can count. I've never been enamoured of celebrity, though, of course, everyone likes a little adulation. But when you don't get the approval, you fall back on your passion, which is what sustains you. People feed off the wrong things. I'm all about nature is nurture.

Have you read *The Secret Life of Plants*? They don't run around and lick you in the face, but I'm just as happy sitting under a tree. Hey, look up, there's another flock of parrots.

Kenny Scharf's Kolors will be on display at Paul Kasmin Gallery through May 4, 2013. For more information, visit PaulKasminGallery.com and KennyScharf.com

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