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EXCLUSIVE

# LAST MAN STANDING

**KENNY SCHARF** AMERICA'S PREMIER POP ARTIST SPEAKS CANDIDLY ABOUT HIS CONTEMPORARIES WARHOL, BASQUIAT AND HARING AND WHAT'S LEFT FOR HIM TO CONQUER.
BY KEVIN SESSUMS

## YAYOI KUSAMA
BY CARRIE NIEMAN CULPEPPER

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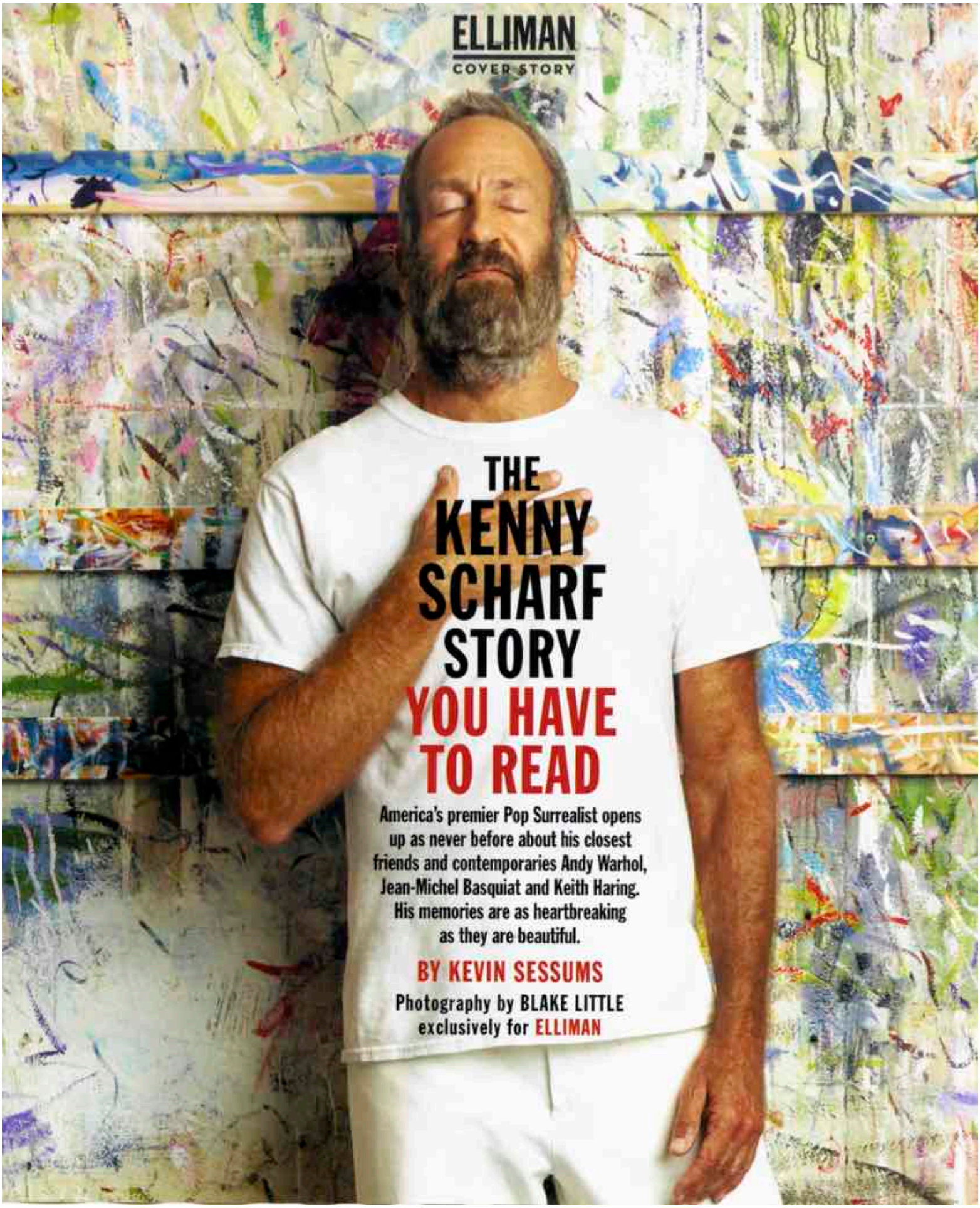


# THE KENNY SCHARF STORY YOU HAVE TO READ

America's premier Pop Surrealist opens up as never before about his closest friends and contemporaries Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. His memories are as heartbreaking as they are beautiful.

BY KEVIN SESSUMS

Photography by BLAKE LITTLE exclusively for ELLIMAN

"Put on some Jonesy," artist Kenny Scharf says as he's being photographed inside his block-long Los Angeles studio in the gentrifying-though-still-edgy-with-echoes-from-occasional-gunfire West Adams neighborhood. He has just invoked the name of guitarist Steve Jones, who played with the Sex Pistols and Iggy Pop, among others, and who now has a radio show from noon to 2 p.m. on LA's KLOS. Scharf no doubt invoked it knowingly—what artist is not knowing?—since I'm here to write this article about one who has always been part punk himself, part prankster. Scharf has always had a jones for the images of pop culture (Jane Jetson, Fred Flintstone, Betty Rubble, Bobby Sherman), which are strewn about the sprawl of his detritus-filled studio, which looks as if it's been carefully left uncleaned for the last 17 years he's been encamped here with his muses and his music and the cartoonish sinew of his work. I was going to write "Scharf barks the order to a studio assistant," regarding his radio request. That would have been a great way to start an article about a scruffy 1980s New York City wunderkind artist still angrily scuffling along as an old man in 2016 Los Angeles, but Scharf is not that kind of artist nor, indeed, that kind of man. Kenny Scharf is not angry. His art is not. Never has been—though he, and it, went through a dark period in the 1990s. He doesn't bark. Scharf, like the swaggering sweetness of his art, playfully suggests. And let's get this straight right away: The man doesn't scuffle. With a skill honed from decades of experience and, yes, a resilience that resembles a young man's daring, the 58-year-old dude is more than still standing. The guy is dancing—as he so often does, headphones in place, music privately blaring, jazz, glitter rock, hip-hop, Brazilian, while painting one of his massively engaging murals—into his sixties.

And yet.

I keep focusing on that radio station's call letters—KLOS—as I stare at the bearded man before me, who looks like a rueful rabbi of rubble and, well, Rubble, as he stands amidst

his work: Wilma Flintstone's best friend, Betty, affixed to the filing cabinet next to me, the backs of old discarded televisions mounted on the wall and painted so that they look like twerking butts gloriously clothed in Day-Glo panties. The rabbinical rue balances the revelry of the art, the cacophony of colors, as Jonesy jostles with a guest on the radio. Scharf, in this moment of attention being paid, seems to be jostling with the ghosts of his past, whose images add a visual landscape of loss to this otherwise joyous space. The art and the repurposed garbage on which so much of it is painted are scattered haphazardly about the studio, but as I survey it all, I come upon pointedly placed images of his old roommate Keith Haring as well as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol. Even more pointedly, more poignantly, "andywarhol" is the password for the studio's Wi-Fi network. Warhol remains the "open sesame" in Kenny Scharf's life.

Scharf and I were each part of the Warhol orbit back in our 1980s days. I was Executive Editor of Andy's *Interview* magazine when Kenny and his buddies Keith and Jean-Michel were just beginning to make names for themselves in Manhattan's art world. Now Andy is gone. Keith is gone. Jean-Michel is gone. Our innocence: long gone. The last time I saw Kenny before today was when I was an usher at Andy's memorial service at

**CREATIVE ARTISTS**
**"Andy Warhol redefined the role of the artist and what you could be," says Scharf.**

(PREVIOUS SPREAD)
***ENERGALA*, 2013**
**Oil and acrylic on linen**
**72" x 60"**

(BELOW)
***SQUIRTZ*, 2013**
**Enamel, rhinestones and spray paint on fiberglass**
**96" x 48.5" x 74.6"**
**Edition of 4 • 2 AP**

(OPPOSITE)
***SQUAREGET*, 1988**
**Oil on canvas**
**96" x 96"**

**"I do sometimes think, how come we were all together for that bit of time and I'm the one who survived, I'm the one who's OK?"**

(FROM TOP)
*GLAZED • CALM*, 2011
Oil on linen
24" x 24"

*CHOCOLATE DONUT AT TWILIGHT*, 2007
Oil on linen
40" x 40"

*Moda de Mangue*, 2010
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas
101" x 129.25"

(OPPOSITE)
*ABELIA COME*, 1984
Oil and spray paint on canvas
84" x 108"

St. Patrick's Cathedral and sat Keith and him in their pew. Of all the people that day in that 2,000-strong throng of fame, throbbing with sadness and an even deeper sense not only of occasion but of themselves experiencing it, I was most taken by that downtown, downcast duo suddenly tagged with sorrow. It was the first time I encountered that rueful countenance of Kenny's, which I am today recognizing anew, even as I am now recalling it. As we settle into the studio's garden, out by his baby-blue fabulously finned 1959 Cadillac, we remember that day that the deeply Catholic Warhol was memorialized at St. Patrick's and how, so soon after that, Kenny would mourn as well his friend Keith, who died of AIDS, and Jean-Michel, who died of a heroin overdose.

"You're now the same age as Andy was when he died," I tell him. "He was 58."

"Wow," says Kenny, and can't seem to say anything else for a moment as that realization sinks in. It's a very Warholian response, that simply stated "Wow," the astonished little whisper of it. How many times did Kenny and I hear just that whispered little "Wow" from Warhol himself? "I sometimes think I might have a guardian angel," Kenny quietly continues. "I do sometimes think, how come we were all together for that bit of time and I'm the one who survived, I'm the one who's OK? It's been a long time now. At the beginning, it was really difficult. I went through deep mourning. I had survivor's guilt. It's not something that you're really aware of at the time you're having it. In retrospect, you do kind of feel that way. It was hard. It was a hard time. That's probably why I left New York in 1992," he says, charting the migratory phase of his mourning with his years living in Brazil and Miami and, since 1999, back home here in Los Angeles where he was raised. "I just felt like all the memories were sad when I walked the streets in New York. All my friends were dead. You can't really escape, though."

"People think that Andy mentored you three guys, that he was an usher himself as he escorted you all into the art world," I say. "There's a lot of truth to that, but I think, in important ways, you guys mentored him, too, and energized him at a juncture in his life when he needed it."

**PARTY'S OVER** "Going out never felt the same anymore," says Scharf. "How could you go out knowing that Andy Warhol isn't going to show up?"

*FLINTSTONES*, 1982
**Acrylic and spray paint on canvas**
**36" x 48"**

"You know, there were so many aspects to Andy. I think his take on fame was a little more fun than his just being smitten by it or consumed by it," says Kenny. "I think what I loved so much about him and why he is so much a part of me, really, is—and [Marcel] Duchamp did the same thing—that he sort of redefined the role of the artist and what you could be. That's what really excited me. Oh, I could be a filmmaker. I can be a personality. I can be everything. That was exciting to me. I remember going to a show of his not long after arriving in New York in the late 1970s. It was at the Whitney—a lot of the portraits. He was hanging out with the Studio 54 crowd back then, and all of the kids and I were saying, 'We don't like this shit. We're cooler than this.' We were downtown types. There was a moment I wasn't really going for his work. But not too much later—three or four years later—he began to hang around with us instead of that Studio crowd, and if you look at his art at that point, it got a lot better. In fact, he started hand painting again. I remember watching him and seeing the work and saying to him, 'You've got the touch, Andy. I want the touch.' He was just one of the greatest artists who ever lived. Every great artist has his or her moments when they are not—'great' isn't the word—but 'intense,' I guess. They go slack a bit. I think the relationship he had with Jean-Michel and Keith and me gave him a good energy."

**"I remember watching him and seeing the work and saying to him, 'You've got the touch, Andy. I want the touch.' He was just one of the greatest artists who ever lived."**

There was something about Warhol's regard for Basquiat and Haring and Scharf that transcended mentorship. There was a familial quality to it. Andy, himself a mama's boy, was, in turn, a kind of bewigged mama to those three boys. In his earlier days at The Factory, he engaged in a rather warped mentorship to those who would find themselves among its shiny, silver walls as he, in his storied detachment, enabled their bad behavior. He was more of a foil-like den mother amidst the din of tinfoil. "Maybe Andy's Catholicism also came into play with his friendship with you and Keith and Jean-Michel," I venture. "He was paying a kind of Catholic penance for those earlier days."

"Very much," Kenny agrees. "Yeah. He was super supportive. I was so grateful to have his friendship."

"Where were you when you heard he had died?"

"Keith and I were down in Brazil. He was visiting me. There was no electricity where I lived. Keith had gone into town to make some phone calls and he came back with the news. We lit a bonfire on the beach. We were in shock." He pauses. He smiles, yes, ruefully, somewhere in there beneath that beard. "Going out never felt the same anymore," he says. "How could you go out knowing that Andy Warhol isn't going to show up? If Andy showed up, then everyone knew they were at the right party. So no one ever knew if they were at the right party anymore. It just didn't matter anymore."

Yet remaining focused on his own art and starting a real family of his own made things matter again to him. "I was going to funerals and hospitals and at the same time coming home to these babies and all this new life," he says about the height of the AIDS years in New York. Although he's divorced now from his Brazilian wife, Tereza, Kenny is still close to his two children, especially daughter Malia, an actress and filmmaker, who's making a documentary about her dad. "Being a new father during that time really helped me because I was just devastated so much of the time. I'd come home, and there were these little innocent angels waiting for me."

It's precisely that dichotomy of innocence and world-weariness coexisting in Scharf's distinctive Pop Surrealist renderings of a kind

**"It's not like we were against the art-educated. We weren't against them. But we wanted all the audiences, not just the art-elitist audience. That's why we were in the street."**

**KEEPER OF THE FLAME**
**"I do feel like I'm holding the torch for all of us," says Scharf.**

(FROM TOP)
*BLOLBZ 2*, 2014
Oil on linen
60" x 48"

*TVBAKATAK*, 2016
Oil, TV tubes and rhinestones on television body
18" x 19.5" x 17"

of post-apocalyptic universe of his imagining, that he fills with woeful amounts of amoebic wonder. Such a dichotomy has also come to define his alliterative artistic vision. Scharf delights in his daffy derision of the dire and dares us to do the same. His post-apocalyptic universe is a place where the Jetsons and the Flintstones can meet, preen a bit, and have a laugh about the present as well as the pretensions of the art world that may hold sway at any moment in it.

I remember again that Warhol memorial service at St. Patrick's and the words of its celebrant, Monsignor Anthony Dalla Villa, who said that Andy would "take the very simple and ordinary objects of life and make them truly extraordinary." Father Dalla Villa could have been summing up as well Scharf's own burgeoning career back then and its anti-elitist mission. "We all had very different styles, Keith and Jean-Michel and me, but very similar philosophies. So sometimes, I do feel like I'm holding the torch for all of us. It is very much anti-elitist, yes, and about art's accessibility. It's not like we were against the art-educated. We weren't against them. But we wanted all the audiences, not just the art-elitist audience. That's why we were in the street—not to get attention—but to get as much play as possible. We were all kids, just trying to get our feet into the door, and the door was all this minimalist work that was going on back then, very elitist. You had to have a degree to understand what you were looking at. We were just like: This is boring. We were just going to do our own thing."

"Were you competitive with each other?"

"Of course," he says. "Very competitive. But it was very healthy competition. We used each other to make each other excited, even if it was tinged with jealousy. It lit a fire in you. And the same thing happened when they were gone. I was like, what do I do now? How do I gauge myself? I felt very lost. I felt alone."

"Do you feel less so now?" I ask.

"No. I'm pretty alone. I like to be alone. I'm happy to be alone. It doesn't make me lonely. What I do is very solitary. I spend hours and hours by myself."

"Yet Andy—by creating The Factory—found a way around the loneliness of the artist's life," I say.

"Well, he had a few solutions to that. He didn't labor over the work. So he wasn't spending those hours and hours and hours by himself. And he had the magazine, which was very social."

Scharf's own work does not seem belabored either, and yet its instinctive grace belies its creator's considered conceptual take on the tug between the commercial modernity of art and the dated term for its direct opposite: "human commerce." Moreover, like Arshile Gorky, an artist whose work Scharf's oeuvre (a term he probably hates) reminds me of, even more than his hero Warhol or

his contemporaries Haring and Basquiat, his surrealism rushes all corners of the canvas with disruptive force. "Disruption" is, in fact, the term of the moment in these technological times, but Kenny and Keith and Jean-Michel and Andy were themselves disruptive artistic forces long before technocrats roamed the Earth's valleys. They all preferred the canyons of Manhattan, and their collective disruptive force was—dare I say it?—a rather gentle one.

To repeat myself: Kenny Scharf is not angry.

But maybe still just a little sad, even if disrupting preconceived notions continues to cheer him up.

Scharf stares at the fabulous fins on his '59 Cadillac. He collects his thoughts. Again a smile, a much bigger one, emerges from where it's buried in that massive beard of his, a smile that refuses any longer to be smothered, and smoothes the prickly canvas of whiskers with its sudden presence, as if it has been stroked there by an artist with "the touch." It is a lot like one of the toothy smiles he embeds in his own canvases to make it less prickly. "You tell me to stay inside the lines, and that makes me want to burst outside the lines," he says when I bring up the comparison to Gorky. "But that's what art is about to me. You don't have restrictions unless they're purposeful and self-imposed. But I like the more rebellious aspect of being an artist. You mentioned disruption. I still have the same feeling of doing what I'm not supposed to do. I hate borders and I hate all the confinement that comes with that."

"So it's not even redefinition that you're talking about, but rebelling against definition itself?" I ask.

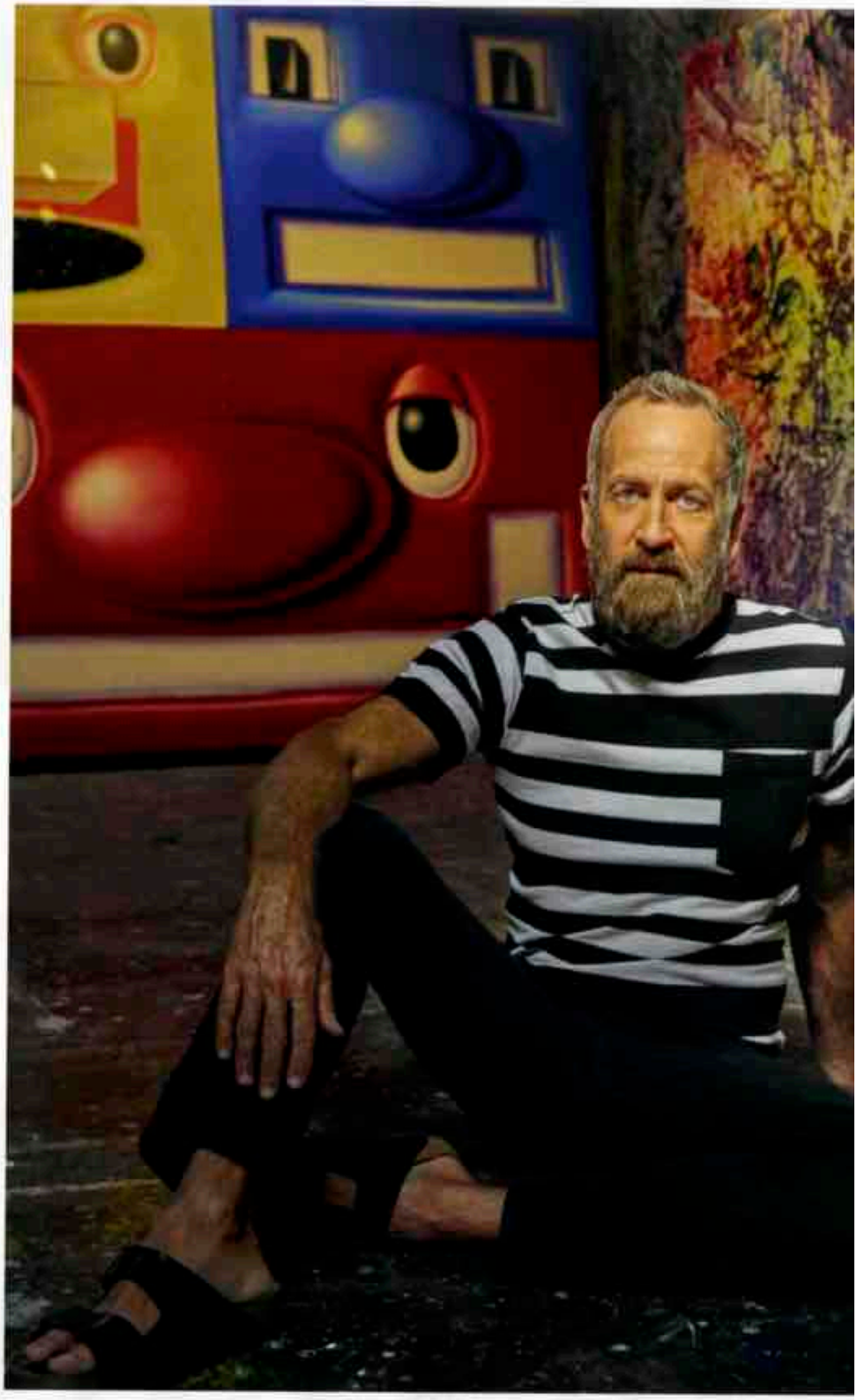
"Yes," he says. "The thing about art is that there are no rules, and if there are, then it's exciting to break 'em. It is always exciting to break a rule."

"Do you make your own rules and then break them?"

"Exactly," he says.

I was wrong. His smile, not the beard, is now the canvas. It is saturated with life and luck and love and an injured sort of joy—a rabbi's roux.

"I do that all the time." ■

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