

CONTEMPORARY CURRENTS

# Kenny Scharf

*Closet No. 9*

The Queens  
Museum of Art  
Queens NY

22 October -  
22 December 1991



# Kenny Scharf

Kenny Scharf's art emerged with memorable flamboyance into the art world, causing excitement and controversy. Scharf—like his good friend and artistic compatriot Keith Haring—was a leading participant in the exuberant East Village art scene of the early 1980s. Only 20 years old when he made his art debut, much of his early work was created for exhibitions and performances in nightclubs. To many art world observers, Scharf seemed more interested in having fun than producing serious art. Yet his fast, visually loud, upbeat paintings were clearly original and had a contagious appeal. Kenny Scharf became an art star as his work was embraced first by his East Village peer group, then the fashion world, the popular media, and finally—over the angry objections of conservative art critics—it entered museums and other fine arts venues.

Scharf is a quintessential product of affluent, postwar America. Born in 1958 in Hollywood, California, he is part of the "television generation," latter day baby boomers who were the first to grow up with a steady diet of TV viewing. If Pop Art had not already existed, Scharf and his generation certainly would have invented it. Even as a young child he made paintings inspired by television. Scharf's mature work continues to reflect this seminal influence. He uses the bright fluorescent colors of television and often incorporates TV-derived images from animated children's cartoons such as "The Jetsons" and "Felix the Cat." Schooled on television, Scharf seeks to create an art that is quick, entertaining and has broad popular appeal.

In the 1960s, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and other Pop artists incorporated popular imagery and commercial techniques into their art, effectively challenging the barriers traditionally separating high and low art. Pop Art initiated a dialogue between art and life that was rich in possibilities for Scharf and other young artists of the 1980s.

Scharf's unique blend of art and life can be seen in the display of "customized" household appliances at the Queens Museum of Art. Scharf has attached objects onto functioning electrical appliances and painted on them, creating a hybrid: useable art. "I think it makes life better if you're using art every day, like talking on a customized phone," says Scharf. According to art critic Gerald Marzorati, a distinct evolution has taken place from the Pop Art of the 1960s to Scharf's brand of 1980s "Post-Pop." "He brings painting to objects like Robert Rauschenberg brought objects to painting. It's still Rauschenberg's line between art and life; Scharf is just working the other side of it."

Scharf's all-encompassing ambition to fuse the real world with the world of art can be seen in the "Closet" installation he has constructed for the Queens Museum of Art. This day-glo, sci-fi, blacklight environment is the ninth in a continuing series of closets that began with the closet Scharf created for the midtown loft he shared with Keith Haring in 1980. It is the first closet that Scharf has made in almost six years. Each new closet incorporates objects Scharf has saved from earlier closets that have been dismantled. Like all of Scharf's creations, the closets are created spontaneously with no working plan.

Inspired by the psychedelic environments of the 1960s, Scharf's closets are retreats for silent meditation and dreaming. Upon entering, the viewer is surrounded with a mix of images and visual sensations drawn from the collective subconscious of the postwar generation. Scharf has coined the phrase "Pop Surrealism" to describe his hallucinogenic dreamscape vision. It is a zany, carnival world of bright colors, mutated media images, ancient archetypes, children's toys, broken appliances, plastic, rubber, biomorphic shapes, graffiti and expressive abstract painting.

A key element in Scharf's fantasy world is a 1960s science fiction vision of space age life. "A month before I was born the first satellite went up," Scharf explains. "Every one was telling us that we would be able to go to space and I believed it. They weren't only telling us, but literally putting it into our everyday lives, with space age designs in our cars, household products, architecture, everything. Then when the Vietnam War came and the boredom of the 70s set in, people stopped trying to sell that dream. I didn't want to stop so I continued it."

Scharf's upbeat Post-Pop art accorded well with the affluent, consumer oriented 1980s. The 1990s have started on a more sober note—a fact that Scharf knows all too well as he has lost many friends to the ravages of AIDS. The changing times have subtly altered our reading of Scharf's art. The cartoon characters in Scharf's paintings have always reflected adult passions. The giddy hilarity has always had a manic edge. Beyond the fun and nostalgia, a poignant darkness has always existed. Now it has begun to emerge.

Marc H. Miller  
Guest Essayist

Louis Grachos  
Project Director/  
Director of Exhibitions

cover:  
Closet No. 8  
1985

Sogetsu Museum,  
Tokyo, Japan  
(Installation:  
October)

top left:  
Comunicado  
Ultimida  
1986

Acrylic, jewels, and  
plastic toys on stand-  
ard push button  
desk model tele-  
phone. 11" x 13" x 9"

top right:  
Cheekee  
1981

Acrylic and glass  
Television tubes on  
vacuum Cleaner  
16" x 22" x 7"  
Collection of  
the artist

bottom:  
Closet No. 7  
Biennial 1985  
(Installation:  
13 March-9 June)  
Whitney Museum  
of American Art,  
New York



# Kenny Scharf

**BORN 1958, Los Angeles, California**

**SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

- 1991**  
 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York  
 Studio Trisorio, Naples  
 AC & T Corporation, Tokyo
- 1990**  
 Galerie Beaubourg, Paris  
 Hans Mayer Gallery, Dusseldorf  
 Akira Ikeda Gallery, Tokyo
- 1989**  
 Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1988**  
 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York  
 Akira Ikeda Gallery, Tokyo
- 1987**  
 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York
- 1986**  
 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York  
 Akira Ikeda Gallery, Tokyo
- 1985**  
 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York  
 Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich
- 1984**  
 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York  
 Larry Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1983**  
 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York  
 American Graffiti Gallery, Amsterdam
- 1982**  
 Fun Gallery, New York
- 1981**  
 National Studio Artists, P.S. 1,  
 Long Island City  
*Customized Appliances*, Club 57,  
 New York  
*The Jetsons*, Fun Gallery, New York
- 1979**  
*Celebration of the Space Age*, Club 57,  
 New York

**CLOSET INSTALLATIONS**

- 1991** *Closet No. 9*  
 The Queens Museum of Art, Queens, NY
- 1985** *Closet No. 8*  
 Sogetsu Museum, Tokyo, Japan
- 1985** *Closet No. 7*  
 Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC
- 1984** *Closet No. 6*  
 Palais De Luxembourg, Paris, France
- 1983** *Closet No. 5*  
 Palacio De Chrystal, Madrid, Spain
- 1983** *Closet No. 4*  
 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, NYC
- 1982** *Closet No. 3*  
 Fun Gallery, NYC
- 1981** *Closet No. 2*  
 P.S. 1, Long Island City, NY
- 1980** *Closet No. 1*  
 Scharf/Haring Loft, NYC

**SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

- 1991**  
*The 1980s, A Selected View From the Permanent Collection*, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York  
*Metropolitan Home Showcase 2*, New York

**1989**

*Don't Bungle the Jungle*, Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York

**1988**

*The Frederick D. Weisman Collection*, California State University at Fullerton (traveling show)

**1987**

*Comic Iconoclasm*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London

**1986**

*Picture From the Inner Mind*, The Palladium, New York  
*Television's Impact on Contemporary Art*, Queens Museum, New York

**1985**

*Biennial 1985*, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York  
*East Village Artists*, Holly Solomon Gallery, New York  
*Investigations*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

**1984**

*New Hand Painted Dreams: Contemporary Surrealism*, Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York  
*The Human Condition*, Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco

**1983**

*Surrealist Show*, Robert Miller Gallery, New York  
*Bienalle de São Paulo*, São Paulo, Brazil

**1981**

*The Times Square Show*, Times Square, New York  
*New York, New Wave*, P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York  
*Beyond Words*, Mudd Club, New York

**EXHIBITION CATALOGUES**

**1990**

*Kenny Scharf*, Galerie Beaubourg, Paris

**1989**

*Kenny Scharf: Jungle Book*, Art Random, Kyoto Shoin International Co., Inc., Kyoto

**1986**

*Television's Impact On Contemporary Art*, The Queens Museum, New York

**1983**

*Kenny Scharf*, Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York

**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**1988**

Roberta Smith, "Kenny Scharf Grows Up," *The New York Times*, September 23.

**1985**

"A Talk with Keith Haring," Kenny Scharf, *Flash Art*, January.

"Kenny Scharf's Fun House Big Bang," Gerald Marzorati, *Art News*, September.

**1984**

Dan Cameron, "Saint Kenny and the Culture Dragon," *Arts Magazine*, January.

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**Queens  
 Museum  
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