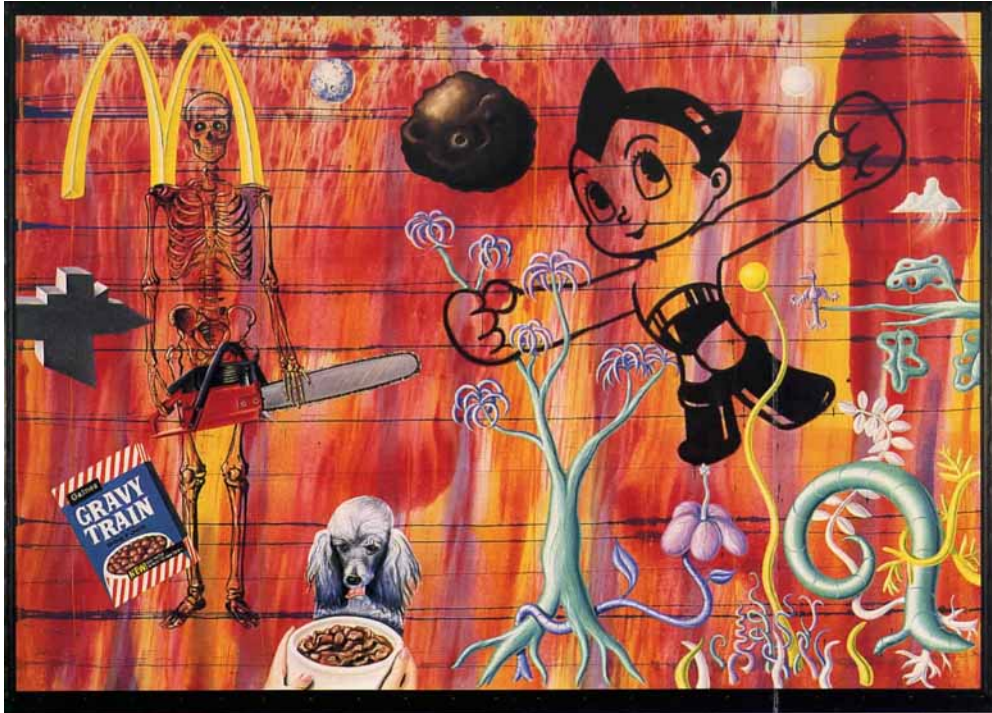


**Kenny Scharf:  
When Worlds Collide**





The first color TV sets were colored dots on a black surface, so if you looked really close it was like hallucinating. Kenny Scharf, 1983

In a 1980 video entitled *Carousel of Progress*, Kenny Scharf staged an end-of-the-world space launch party featuring Keith Haring, Ann Magnuson, John Sex and other New York art luminaries avorting around the colossal steel Unisphere relic from the 1964 World's Fair. The future as envisioned in the past, particularly technology's failure to deliver its vaunted "World of Tomorrow," is a theme that lurks behind the veil of optimism in nearly all of Scharf's work to follow. Ironically enough, the radiation sickness plaguing the band of survivors in *Carousel* annoys the actors far less than the absence of television. Facing the camera dead-on, Scharf laments "we want to go to space because it's not good here anymore."

Yes, perhaps "it" was only good on TV. And what better symbol for the nuclear family in the throes of the information age than the *Jetsons*? For an artist born in 1958, a space-age baby suckled on television and weaned on Pop, scavenging media images and past art styles had the dizzying effect of painting a video camera at the TV monitor, it's connected to, and experiencing the strobelike image-within-image feedback. *St. Elroy Slaying the Dragon* is one of Scharf's earliest paintings featuring famous classical or biblical scenes invaded by characters unabashedly lifted from Hanna-Barbera. Here, Elroy Jetson – as a centaur – fills in for St. George, the hero in Paolo Uccello's 15th century work, freeing his sister Judy, who has metamorphosed into a butterfly. The phosphorescent colors highlighting Elroy's triumph herald electronic media's displacement of religion as myth bearer and trance inducer. In contrast to Warhol's and Lichtenstein's early 1960s appropriations of cartoon imagery, where such manipulation of found material was unthinkable, Scharf's work celebrated the arrival of a more primal and protean content in imagemaking. Notwithstanding the Pop artists' elevation of crass media vernacular, Scharf's acrid color schemes and outlandish subject matter seemed at first as vulgar and unesthetic as could be. He believed that his generation was *living Pop*, not observing it—that the cathode-ray tube had bombarded the collective unconsciousness with new archetypes to be combined and transformed at will.

Scharf's most resonant paintings are semiotic impositions, drawing media debris, vinelike organisms and architectural ornaments into an intricate 3-D vortex. By 1983

it is as if his earlier landscapes had been swallowed whole by image-starved bug-eyed creatures emerging from skeins of space that only begin to be defined by the term "allover." In works such as *When the Worlds Collide*, celestial bodies or lunar landscapes are often visible within the gaping grins of mutant plantinoids. Surrealism à la Scharf, unlike the 1920s variety, does not presume a disturbing co-habitation of space in which a dreamlike scenario invades an otherwise normal setting. In paintings following his cartoon-classic appropriations, nothing is real to begin with – the only reality is one of endless possibility and transmutation.

As in Warhol's self-referential *Reversal* series, Scharf began recycling his own imagery and that of his Pop forebears in the late 80s and early 90s. His billboard-scale paintings of this time combine photorealistically rendered consumables, line drawings of dinosaurs and Jetson heads, and an assortment of his trademark vintelike forms. In *The Chain of Events*, hyperreal objects including a Gravy Train box, poodle head, and Golden Arches drift in a brushed and splattered color-field sea, accompanied by an outlined skeleton and a Big Boy logo. Alluding to our technologically packaged "food chain," the painting is brilliant in its perversity. While a skeleton wields a chainsaw on the lefthand side, a lavender bird flies over a pastel-hued jungle on the right. Around the same time, Scharf painted his grinning plasmoid blobs and illusionistic globules over dense grounds of photosilkscreened 50s and 60s newspaper images and texts – themselves applied over drips, swirls and splats alluding to Abstract Expressionism. In *24 Hour and Dot*, media-graffiti replace the sproycan in a consumerist phantasmagoria.

Kenny Scharf's art infuses sixties pop icons, Homeric chimeras, and sinuous biomorphic forms with a symbolism reflecting electronic media's insistent grip on our most primal fantasies. His highly charged emblems have withstood the crossfire of the turbulent 1980s, restlessly evolving, recombining, and wriggling their way into the 21st century. Pulsating with energy and overflowing with information and libido, Scharf's paintings fast-forward us from ancient Dionysian fetes of excess to the confounding search for sanctuary in our jangled, jacked-in world.

Barry Blinderman, Director of University Galleries

## Rhizomatic/Schar(morphous): Scharf's (Outer)Space Fun

Kenny Scharf is smooth, and I don't mean smooth as in cool or hip, although that would certainly apply. No, Kenny Scharf is smooth in a hip theoretical way. Behind the bubble gum colors and through the gaping grins of his morphed cartoon characters are the foundations for intriguing critical thought concerning our fractured contemporary experience. For Scharf, it boils down to Fun. He has always said his work is all about fun, but fun has also brought him trouble. You see, fun is only fun when we are young. Coming of age recontextualizes fun – it becomes leisure, but what is leisure in an age when work is life, and our sense of self is defined by our work? In contemporary American society, there seems to be no room for fun, and thus no room for art about fun. Nonetheless, Scharf has always been serious about fun, and it is within this apparent contradiction that things get provocative. Scharf realizes fun has to be taken seriously because it is all we have to keep us smooth in our increasingly striated world.

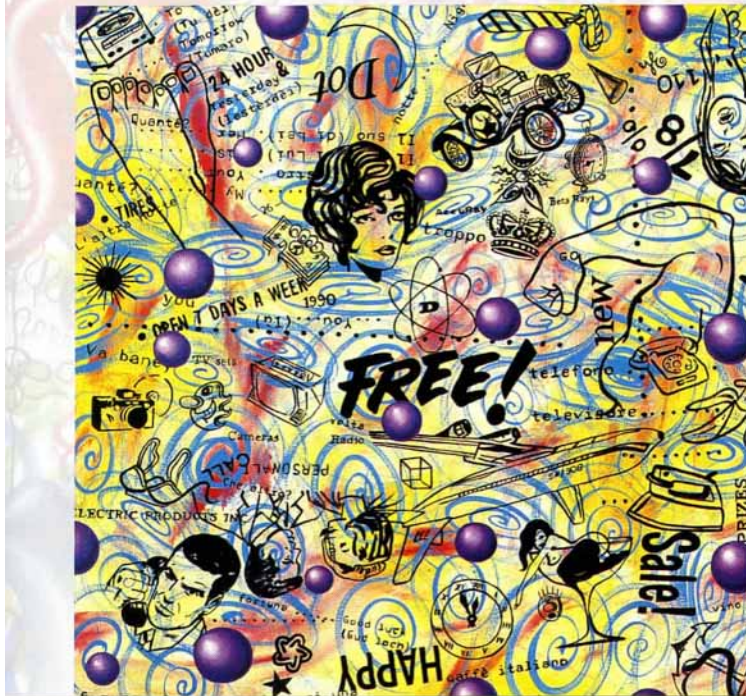
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari developed the concept of smooth and striated space in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. They theorize that smooth space is the kingdom of the nomad or wanderer – it is like the rhizome that branches out indefinitely with no nucleus and little order. Striated space, the domain of the State (the university, the military, the corporation), is hierarchical and is ruled by order, purpose, routine, and control – all attributes that cannot exist in smooth space which flourishes on anarchy and choice. Stuart Moulthrop, a leading hypertext theorist, notes that "smooth social space is mediated by discontinuities. It propagates in a matrix of breaks, jumps, and implied or contingent connections which are enacted... by the viewer or receiver." Plumbing the surface of a Scharf painting is analogous to jumping into this "matrix of con-

tingent connections." The cacophony and chaos of his facades activate the viewer's gaze, allowing her to embark on a smooth voyage through Scharf's fun tunnel.

The notion of limitless possibility (smooth space) has been a factor in Scharf's work from the beginning. In a 1984 interview with Keith Haring, Scharf commented that his work "... has a lot to do with infinity. Going in outer space an infinite amount, as well as inner space where an infinite amount is also the same thing." This concept is delineated in many of Scharf's paintings which contain worlds within worlds, contracting and expanding indefinitely. Paintings such as *Balloons*, *Moonray Man*, *Op Pop* and *When the Worlds Collide* provide a glimpse into outer space through the mouths and pupils of Scharf's ebullient creatures as they whiz across the surfaces of his paintings. Staring out at us with smiles, grimaces and half-hearted glares, Scharf's characters open their mouths to disclose vistas into worlds much more tranquil than the ones they inhabit.

As Scharf says, "the fun's inside." It is inside the spiraling vortex, the conduit to worlds beyond our quotidian existence. It exists in the smallest deviation between atoms, inside the code that constructs all that we know. Fun is smooth because fun exists as contingency and possibility, a diversion from work. Fun is freedom to do anything but what is needed for survival, and this freedom can only exist in a space free from the demands of striation. Scharf's world, with its animated denizens engulfed in pleasure for pleasure's sake, encapsulates these metaphors, offering us portals out of the striated and into a world of smooth sailing.

Greg Bowen, Curator of Exhibitions



# Kenny Scharf: When Worlds Collide

January 14 through February 23, 1997  
University Galleries of Illinois State University

Artist presentation and reception:  
Tuesday, January 21, 1997 at 7:00 p.m.

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