

# L.A.M.A.

L.A. Arts & Culture | Fall

ART, CULTURE AND THE CITY

Zoë Bleu Arquette  
wearing Runny Babbit  
and Eckhaus Latta

Photographed by  
Daria Kobayashi Ritch





Kenny Scharf photographed by Mark Hanauer inside his current exhibition, "Optimistically Melting," at Honor Fraser Gallery.

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# ABSOLUT KENNY

Celebrated by both the fine art and commercial worlds, Kenny Scharf's wacky and distinct style makes his work immediately recognizable whether on the walls of a gallery, museum or in a poster for Absolut Vodka.

STYLING BY REBECCA PYNDS  
HAIR BY MARK HANAUER





Longtime friends Honor Fraser and Kenny Scharf inside his current exhibition, "Optimistically Melting!" at her eponymous gallery.

## “I’m so sorry, *Bubbe!*”

Kenny Scharf emphatically exclaims, as if expressing a stream-of-consciousness apology to his late Jewish grandmother for painting on a sacred household fixture: the couch. “Back in the day, my grandparents covered their couch in plastic. I would have gotten in big trouble for this,” he cheekily states, as he silkscreens, spray-paints and sews rainbow-colored thread onto a series of Salvation Army sofas strewn haphazardly around the asphalt parking lot behind Honor Fraser Gallery on La Cienega Boulevard.

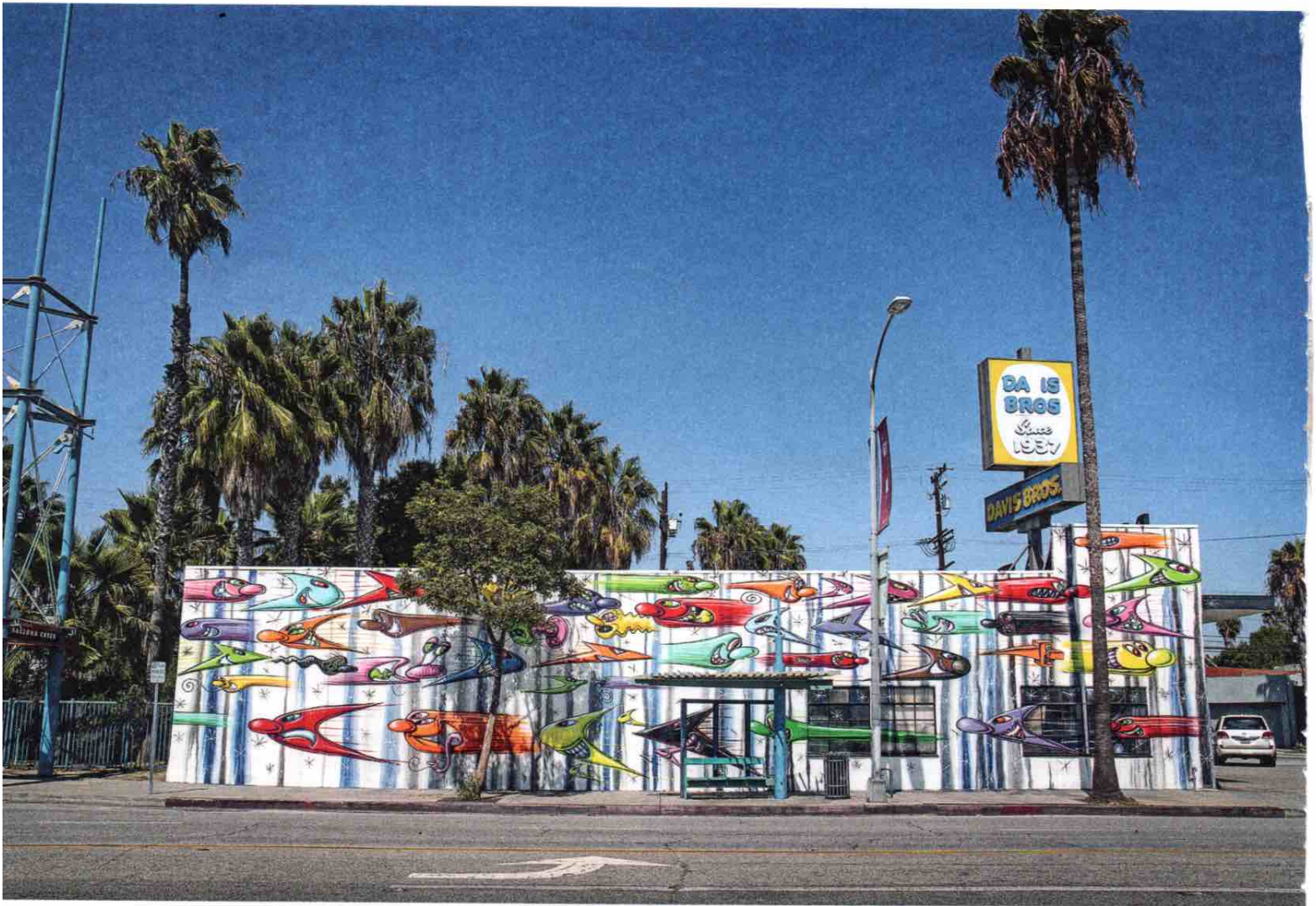
At 61, tanned and toned and donning brown Birkenstocks, shorts and a silkscreened T-shirt with headlines about global warming that shows off his muscular physique, Scharf seems like Spider-Man, running, bending, crouching, moving and slinging his can of spray paint as he tags the secondhand couches. Squeegeeing paint across a silkscreen, Scharf reveals an image of a cobalt blue rocket he’s emblazoned on the tufted cushions. “Rocket pillow!” he and Honor Fraser excitedly exclaim together. “I love it! Fab, Kenny,” she says, delighted by his creations, which are set to furnish her gallery for a party in celebration of his current show, “Optimistically Melting!” on view through November 16.

It is this energy and enthusiasm that Scharf translates directly into his paintings, with faces and vibrant whooshes and swirls that make the eye dance and dash right along with them. He has a propensity for breaking the rules that is reflected throughout his dynamic career. This current exhibition touches on omnipresent themes in Scharf’s work and life: the proliferation of consumerism and pop culture through mass media and environmentalism. Scharf has long incorporated activism into his art, and his work contains direct references to the consumer habits he tries to quell. He paints on the backs of old televisions, not so much as a message about technology, but as a statement about consumption and waste. “It’s the garbage of today,” he says. “It had a use and now it doesn’t. There are so many levels.”

Scharf’s life and practice have been strongly influenced by the mixing of fine art and commerce popularized by his late friend, mentor and idol, Andy Warhol, whom Scharf, a Los Angeles native, credits in part with bringing him and his contemporaries, including the late Keith Haring, to New York in the ‘80s. “It had a lot to do with Andy Warhol and the Factory,” Scharf says. “We wanted to be like Andy. He transformed the role artists had and what artists could be—much bigger than what people liked to think artists’ roles are. It was very liberating; it was more like a lifestyle.” Yet, Scharf has a different relationship to consumerism than Warhol—and a warning. Instead of glamourizing modern pop culture and consumer habits, Scharf eschews plastic in life, but uses it routinely in his work to draw attention to the catastrophic effects of consumerism on our environment and ecosystems.

He points to the plastic assemblages dangling from the gallery’s roof, an unofficial billboard for the show—Scharf is surprised they have not been cited by the Department of Building and Safety. He calls the assemblages a labor of love. “They are incredibly hard to work on. It takes many months and an enormous amount of effort because there are so many surfaces,” he explains, “whereas my spray-painted canvases are very fast—and sell quickly.” He continues to make the assemblages as an artistic form of protest because, he says, “Petroleum is not letting go of its power—plastic, gas are all petroleum—and it has no problem with leading us to doom, just to hold onto money.”

While his warnings against consumerism are showcased in museums and private collections, Scharf has simultaneously been influential and successful in the commercial driven art market, and has not shied away from that. His work can be found everywhere from an Absolut Scharf ad for Absolut Vodka to Swatch and Movado watches bearing his signature graffiti faces to clothing collaborations with The Hundreds and Gap to the Holy Grail of pop culture: being canonized tagging a wall



Fun faces on the move in Scharf's recently completed 2019 mural appropriately zooming around the exterior of Culver City's Davis Brothers' Tire Pros.

in Springfield as a character on *The Simpsons*. "I've always believed in art in different places and breaking boundaries," says Scharf, whose very first solo show in 1979 celebrated the art of the New Wave and was put on by the Italian fashion house Fiorucci. "I thought Andy Warhol really crossed that boundary in the '60s, and I was surprised when I was doing collaborations and it wasn't so accepted in the art world—not even in the '80s."

Scharf recalls a time when his commercial endeavors were not always lucrative, such as his attempt at retail with Scharf Shack, selling custom T-shirts. He says, "I could get into a story about how much I lost on that..." Although the model has taken off online today as Scharftees, which he now runs with his daughter Malia, at the time, he remembers often feeling "punished" for forays into the commercial world, while others were celebrated and given a free pass. He says he never understood why. "It was not until the late '90s, with Murakami's store-museum-factory, Kaikai Kiki, that commerce

and merchandising were all of a sudden considered cool," he says. "I thought Andy Warhol got rid of that stigma, but the art world considered it tacky or selling out, which is so stupid because you're just offering accessibility." Scharf has always attempted to blur this line to demonstrate how art can be a commercial product that can be seen, talked about and experienced by everyone. That is what makes his work instantly recognizable, fun and very "Kenny."

On the changing world of art and commerce, Scharf says, "I'm not going to pretend that I don't like money, because I do, and art has always been a commodity, but when I started in the late '70s and early '80s, people didn't just talk about price, they talked about art." Scharf sees the proliferation of galleries and the growing art market as a good thing in that it means the audience for art has grown tremendously, but he worries that the focus is no longer on the art itself. "Of course I want to be a trillionaire—that'd be great—but I want people to talk about the art and why the art is important enough to spend that

much money on," he says. "It bothers me that no one talks about art anymore. They used to talk about what the painting was, who the artist was, why this painting was particularly important—which I don't find at all anymore." Scharf observes a lack of knowledge and understanding in the current market. "Curators and many of the art buyers that collectors hire don't know art history. They just know what's hot and what they think they can get for it, and that's terrible," he bemoans. "I want to talk about art; I don't want to talk about money."

Scharf believes art should be open and accessible to everyone, and his pet project Karbombz! is just that. "I was painting a mural in Alabama—don't ask me why—and someone drove by and said, 'Can you paint on my car?'" he recalls. "So, I painted on their car and took a picture. As soon as I got back to New York, I put it on Instagram and said, 'Hey, bring me your car. I'll paint your car.'" Immediately, Scharf had takers. The project is intended as art purely for the enjoyment of everyone. Scharf says, "I do it for free, and the rule is that no one can sell it as an art piece. Every time I paint someone's car, I put it on Instagram, so it's a snowball effect. Now I've done like 280 all over the world, mostly in Los Angeles." With their winking headlights and pop swirls and flourishes, Scharf's Karbombz! have become a mobile public art project, spreading joy to car owners—and to those stuck in traffic on the 405, if they're lucky enough to spot one.

At the gallery, Scharf and Fraser settle into one of the couches. The two, who originally met through Fraser's husband, Stavros Merjos—an old friend of Scharf's—and Scharf's ex-girlfriend, artist Samantha McEwan—a cousin of Fraser's—have been longtime collaborators and friends. "There's no bullshit about Honor," Scharf says of the one-time model and former muse to the

late Alexander McQueen. "Other people in the art business tend to make up stories. She'll just tell you, and I love that so much." Fraser's longstanding eponymous gallery, which originally opened along Abbot Kinney and is now located in Culver City, has been a popular fixture on the LA arts scene for over a decade. The gallerist is inspired by her artists and in particular by her working relationship and friendship with Scharf and his calls to action.

Fraser says, after Scharf's show, her gallery will undergo a transformation. She is changing the way she works with her artists and taking a political turn. "I will be working with all of the artists I've been working with over the years," Fraser says, emphasizing that the gallery will continue. "I'm just not going to be representing artists in the same way. I want to focus on some of the issues that I think are really urgent for 2020. It's going to be the most significant year politically of our lifetime—and for many of the things that I believe so strongly in, everything relies on the result next November."

She hints at various plans she has in the works between January 2020 and January 2021 for a year-long project in relation to the election. Her vision is to create a space that facilitates a vibrant cross-cultural dialogue on a myriad of social, political, technological and creative issues in modern times, much like Scharf does with his art. "Kenny is an activist—and actually all of my artists and so many of my friends feel this way," she explains. "I think people need a place to go where they feel like they can actually contribute—and not with money, which I think is the biggest problem in American politics today." Fraser remains mum on whether this project will turn the traditional gallery model on its head, but Scharf chimes in "We're making the rules now," to which Honor emphatically agrees, "Yes, we're making the rules."

With his characteristic exuberance, Scharf spray-paints and silkscreens Salvation Army sofas for a party celebrating his current show.

