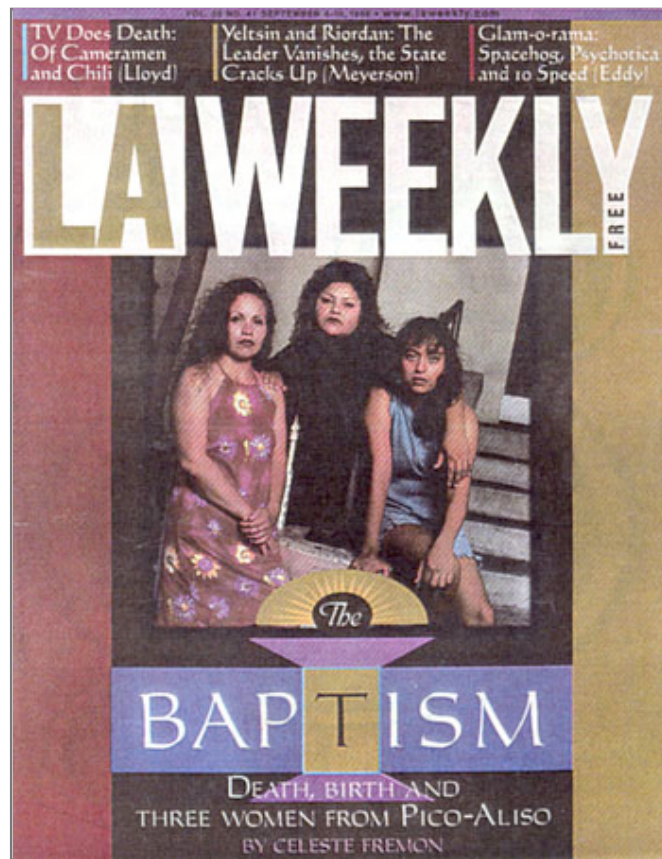


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## ART PICKS OF THE WEEK

## ED RUSCHA'S LIGHT, KENNY SCHARF

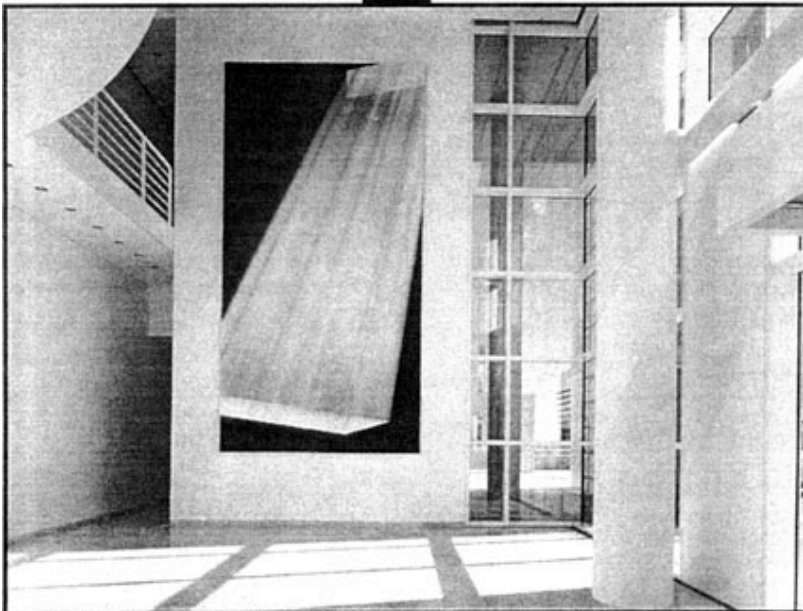
The artists commissioned to do on-site works for the Getty Center transcended themselves in realizing their projects. Ed Ruscha's painting for the lobby of the auditorium is no exception; indeed, it seems as if this quintessentially L.A. wit here reached quite deliberately for something not just deadpan, but genuinely serene and transporting. As the supporting exhibition of 20-odd works from various points in his career reveals, Ruscha has re-invested a cliché with meaning. In the commissioned mural-size work he unpacks our association of strongly visible light with the presence of a higher power, invoking a sense of revelation. The paintings and works on paper compiled as "explanations" for the mural, interestingly titled *Painting Without Words* — themselves explained succinctly with wall labels — explore in various ways the representation of the divine. Whether turning back to his Catholic upbringing with images of church windows and directed sunbeams or conjuring his characteristic words and silhouettes in the context of a rich, pregnant luminousness, Ruscha reveals a side of himself that at least on one level is profoundly un-ironic. To be sure, the cognitive dissonances here can come pretty thick and fast, perhaps even faster than with Ruscha's less exalted subjects. But it's the ultimate irony that religious themes figure as motifs — and that Ruscha renders those themes in several interconnected manners, none of them cute or snarky.

Ruscha's cross-generational buddy Kenny Scharf also teeters on the edge, separating the wise-ass from the truly innocent. Scharf's goofy pictures and objects, with their cotton-candy colors, psychedelic shapes, and elaborate tropes on cartoon-character subjects (Scharf was big on the Jetsons when everybody else was just beginning to warm back up to the Flintstones), come at you with such relentless silliness, such ferociously giddy puerility, that they defy you to take them seriously or to dismiss them out of hand. This is obviously the work of someone thoroughly dedicated to this vision, but the vision itself is obviously a humungous wallow in childish bad taste — fun to the 10th power, sweetness to the point of diabetic coma, television trippiness with no off switch. What charms us most about Scharf's world, which is familiar and even predictable in its Dr. Seuss-achieves-Nirvana extravagance, is his

unswerving dedication to it. He's been exploring this territory unstintingly for almost two decades, and he still makes it seem jolly and inviting.

"Ed Ruscha's Light" at the J. Paul Getty Museum and Harold M. Williams Auditorium, 1200 Getty Center Dr.; thru Sept. 13. (310) 440-7300. Kenny Scharf at Kantor Gallery, 8642 Melrose Ave., W. Hlywd.; thru Sept. 10. (310) 659-5388.

—Peter Frank



Ruscha's *Picture Without Words*, 1997, in the Getty auditorium lobby

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