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KENNY SCHARF PLAYS UP POST POP



Kenny Scharf *Vulaza* 1998 oil on canvas with cast iron frame 26" x 32"

KANTOR GALLERY
BY ELIZABETH SHEED
PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT BALDRIDGE

When I saw Kenny Scharf's show at the Kantor Gallery, I understood the very key to our existence in this universe. The thing that made the socks form, the plants grow and the clouds float, was the urge to play. If our cells hadn't thought it would be fun to subdivide we would not be here today. Scharf's paintings, which could easily be mistaken for highly developed doodles, are actually imposed patterns of objects at play. Scharf's medium is oil and his forms are often organic, but bright air-brushed colors give his surfaces a uniformly rounded, plastic quality. Scharf's art rests at the cross section where the abstract and the representational, the profane and the futuristic, the plastic and the organic, and the friendly and the angry, come together to party.

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There is a freedom in staying with cartoon-like imagery from your childhood.

Over the years I did let it go, in the late 80s. I had run out of things to say I had come back to it in the mid-90s with a show called *Roll Cords*. When I stopped doing cartoons the things I was choosing to paint were still from my early childhood, like models of cars from the late 50s and early 60s. I look at things the way a child does. That era has something so optimistic. I give myself the freedom to go back and forth or in circles. I've been accused of repeating myself lately. If you look very closely at what I'm doing now, it is very refined and only what could be done by someone who's been doing it for so many years.

In your work I see someone who is fighting to make his vision of the future a reality.

I look at it more as a Utopian future which I long for and won't give up. You have to be optimistic or it's just too depressing. I was doing things about what's happening to the environment and the rain forests. Now I don't want to show someone the bad.

The way you give inanimate things feelings is almost like Buddhism. Do you have any spiritual beliefs?

The one thing I worship is nature. It's the only thing that's pure and the one thing that inspires me. I have this thing called a "Time Split". It's not time, every time. All time past and future collide. Time is kind of suspended. And it has to do with the infinity of the small and the infinity of the large and

the way they look. I read about science all the time. I see things as different forces. Things keep each other in check. If everything was all one way everything would all fall down.

Do you let your daughter watch as much TV as you did?

God no! I have two daughters. Actually, I was only allowed to watch Saturday mornings, and I think a couple of shows on school nights. I think it makes people stupid. They watch a lot of the old shows on Nickelodeon, like *Gilligan's Island*.

Your work could be seen as a comment on the effects of TV on children.

You mean don't watch too much TV or you'll end up like Kenny Scharf? I'm not commenting on it, I'm reacting to it. It's embedded in my sub-conscious.

Does pop imagery liberate you to express things that you could not express through other styles?

I like to think that I am making new imagery, but I look at the past, at someone like Bosch, and there's nothing I could do that's wider than that. Cartoons are a new thing in our visual language. That's why I may look subversive, but youngest people really get my work.

Are there any new directions you'd like to explore?

I want to do animation. I had some characters like *Tom and Jerry* back in '85. The problem is that artists are ahead of their time. I'd like to make buildings. I'm ready to do it. I just met Maurice Lapsius and I see so much of myself in him and all the crap he got for his architecture. He was putting so much joy and happiness into his buildings. I'd like to travel around the country in a Winnebago and do something like a circus with Ann Magnuson. We also wrote a script together about when we first got to New York and starting *Chad 57* and our friends, like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. I want to get their essence out there because they were just so fabulous. It's strange to be the only survivor of a group of people.

It's like going through a war. We went through a lot at an early age. Jean Michel wanted success but when he got it it wasn't enough. That didn't happen to me because I grew up in LA around a lot of success. And when my friends got famous before I did I decided I wasn't going to do it like them — I wasn't going to cut off my old friends.

22 — COVER



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BACK