



Art Artist Kenny Scharf: 'I'm carrying the torch for friends who couldn't keep it going'

He worked alongside Keith Haring and Andy Warhol in 1980s New York and now gets his first major institutional show in the same city

Osman Can Yerebakan

Mon 11 Nov 2024 09.42 CET

In the mid-1980s, Kenny Scharf biked from his Queens studio to his East Village apartment every night at around 3am. The ungodly hour would allow the young artist to “bomb” the walls of Manhattan’s east side with his energetic cartoonish figures. He had grown up making oil paintings outside Los Angeles, but upon moving to [New York](#) at age 19, he was fascinated by the graffiti all across the subway. Keith Haring – his roommate at the time – encouraged him to paint outside. “I immediately grabbed a spray can and learned how to make a painting on the run,” says Scharf.

Four decades later, the tireless painter of harmonically chaotic street art-infused dreamscapes opens [his very first institutional show](#) at the Brant Foundation in the East Village. Scharf relocated to LA more than two decades ago, and the self-titled outing marks his return to his stomping grounds where he rose to fame along with Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. About 70 paintings and a few sculptures trace the 66-year-old’s lustrous career of many highs and comebacks. After a 1995-dated exhibition which started at Marco in Monterrey, Mexico, failed to tour, he – unlike his peers – never received a career-defining standalone affirmation from a museum. “Most people think they know my work, but they have never seen it in this volume, and they will be surprised,” says the artist.

The show is bookended by 1978’s Barbara Simpson’s New Kitchen, in which a 1950s housewife tames a wild dragon in a neon pink kitchen, and last year’s Juicy Jungle, a neon-colored erratic wonderland with entangled talking trees. “I find myself to be more crude in my older paintings – they are like looking at my younger self,” Scharf says. “There is something to be said about the youthful discovery in those works.”



📷 Photograph: The Brant Foundation

The artist gave carte blanche to the show's curators, art patron and the foundation's media mogul owner Peter M Brant and dealer Tony Shafrazi, who was among his first champions. "I stand behind the work and let them choose whatever they like," adds Scharf, whose paintings owe their timeless charm to his accessible imagery with comical figures in catchy colors. The intense, smirking bouncy blobs have become something of a signature throughout a career which was the subject of 2021's documentary *Kenny Scharf: When Worlds Collide*, co-directed by his daughter Malia Scharf. He attributes his hypnotic smiling faces to growing up in LA - "the land of automobiles" - in the 1960s. "I would see a smiling face in every crazy-looking car with fins and grills - their windows were like eyes," he says. "I could find a personality in everything I looked."

Beyond their carefree ease, however, the smiley faces in psychedelic panoramas resonate with the clash of emotions and the "duality of existence like suffering a disease while enjoying a nice meal". In fact, Scharf has been conscious about orchestrating a jubilant chaos which he thinks "allows the spirits to come out, like an explosion". He often paints without a plan, by moving to the next step with an openness to where the brush takes him: "I don't want to be stifled by own self because I want to reach outside myself."



Kenny Scharf – When the Worlds Collide, 1984. Photograph: Kenny Scharf/Artists Rights Society, New York. Photograph by Ron Amstutz

The career tour de force, 1984's *When The Worlds Collide*, is a loan from the Whitney Museum of American [Art](#), where it debuted in the 1985 Whitney Biennial. At a 209in width, the horizontal layout of color-busting mayhem places his contagiously optimistic blobs amid erratic swirls, fickle meteors and kaleidoscopic clouds. As an incarnation of the energy that swept 80s downtown New York, the painting is perhaps Scharf's own *Guernica*, a testimony to his motto of "chaos creating creation".

Scharf admits to have never experienced "a painter's block because I am never intimidated by the canvas". After his meteoric rise to artistic celebrity in the heyday of the East Village, he hung out with Warhol (whom he calls "my hero"); collaborated with Jeremy Scott, Levi's and Swatch; and created immersive closet-size rooms at the Whitney and MoMA. The first of his what are now called Cosmic Caverns was in the closet of the "very old decrepit Times Square apartment" he shared with Haring with a bunch of 1960s stuff from a poster shop and a black light.



📌 Kenny Scharf's Juicy Jungle, 1984. Photograph: Courtesy the Brant Foundation, Greenwich, Connecticut

"I was obsessed with finding electronic garbage, like radios, clocks and blenders, to create futuristic science fiction installations where we also partied and did psychedelics," he says. About 30 sites where he has created fluorescent-lit "completely chaotic but very serene" caverns include an Arrow motor engine and most recently TOTAH, where the installation still lives in the Lower East Side gallery's basement.

Although his mesmerically colored surreal paintings put him on the map, portraiture has been an outlet to connect with his friends on both coasts after moving back to LA. The show features portraits of RuPaul, Dennis Hopper, Patti Smith, the artist Ed Ruscha and supermodel Stephanie Seymour (the wife of Peter M Brant) who all sat for him at his west coast home with “very Hollywood lighting”.

As an artist heavily associated with a certain period of New York, Scharf avoids overly dabbling with the past. “I don’t take it lightly that I am still around and sad that a lot of my cohorts did not come along with me into the future,” he says about coming out of a circle affected by drugs and the Aids pandemic. “But I am not fixated on nostalgia.” He considers learning still as a part of his “process and philosophy”, and finds a responsibility in being still alive: “I am carrying the torch for friends who couldn’t keep it going.”

Kenny Scharf is on show between 13 November and 28 February 2025 at the Brant Foundation