

Kenny Scharf Dives into the Artist's Mind Amid the Pandemic

By Eliza Jordan
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Photograph Courtesy Almine Rech

Kenny Scharf has always stayed true to his cultural milieu, translating the times, the places, and the feelings that surround him through art. As a painter, he's formed an iconic aesthetic with signature characters—curvaceous, bubbled cosmos with wide eyes and smiles, often zooming through the air. In countless cities around the world, these grinning psychedelic creatures have popped from the sides of buildings and cars, and from solo exhibitions and group shows, all while growing recognizably synonymous with the artist's name.

Scharf's latest works are included in his inaugural exhibition "Kenny Scharf: DystopianPainting" at Almine Rech through October 31. For the first time, the artist created every work in isolation, brought on by the outbreak of COVID-19. While still quintessentially Scharf, they translate a time in which the artist felt free to paint what he pleased without time or place constraints.

Whitewall spoke with Scharf about his show at the New York gallery, how he's supporting the upcoming U.S. presidential election, and why his studio is his favorite place.

Whitewall: Can you tell us about creating your works included "Kenny Scharf: DystopianPainting," and how they translate your state of mind amid isolation?

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KennyScharf: Most of the paintings were made in a very good moment for me where I had no plans and felt very free to do whatever I pleased. The greatest place to be is free. I painted these paintings on a path of discovery that took me to new places unfamiliar yet urgent in their message and emotions. Then COVID struck and life as we knew it would be forever changed. My sense of urgency felt even more of a premonition, and in the aftermath, I found some freedom and solace in the quiet skies to be completely free and alone.

WW: You recently held a car rally called “Karbombz!” in Los Angeles, bringing together a lineup of cars you’ve spray-painted for free over the years. Why was this something you wanted to do?

KS: I’ve been wanting to do a “Karbombz!” rally for many years and could never seem to find the time and place to stop the merry-go-round and just do it. Having my current show “Moodz” at Jeffrey Deitch helped it along, as Jeffrey is such a great organizer of events, and with his help, we did our first annual “Karbombz!” rally.

Initially, we wanted more of a gathering outside with games, music, food, and all the cars parked after the parade in one place. But as we see how COVID is still gripping our world, it became an almost perfect way to have a show, or an “opening,” these days. Group gathering by cars seems to be the perfect venue for these times, as well as for the city of Los Angeles. It was really exciting to see the lineup moving before my eyes and I definitely want to continue this route!

WW: You’re also included in the “Artists for Biden” auction. Why was this important for you to do?

KS: I’m not taking any chances on another four more years of watching the downfall of American civilization at least put the brakes on it for a while. Biden is our only chance at saving the world as another four years of fump is absolutely dire. Just the inaction on climate change alone gives us no hope with the current administration, let alone the other calamities like white supremacy and COVID comeback even bigger this winter.

WW: Can you describe your work TV BAX that’s included?

KS: TV BAX is part of a series using the backs of found televisions that are part luxurious oil painting and part robot tiki gods!

WW: Do you remember your first work?

KS: I do remember painting at three in nursery school and I still have a strong tactile and visual memory of finger painting with joy!!

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WW: You've been both a Los Angeleno and a New Yorker for decades, and both cities have changed exponentially in recent years. How have these changing landscapes you call home impacted your work?

KS: I live in Los Angeles, and although I'm always a New Yorker at heart, I grew up in Los Angeles as well. I have the honorable curse (for L.A. art) as well as the honor of making my name in New York City. New York at the time of artistic discovery and camaraderie was an amazing place to be. Now I feel more of a global citizen and everything everywhere is connected.

WW: Do you collect art? What's seen in your home?

KS: Yes, I collect art. I have been mostly trading with artists since the 70s. My collection includes Keith Haring, Andy Warhol, Jean Michel Basquiat, Ed Ruscha, Basil Wolverton, Tseng Kwong Chi, Francesco Clemente, Dennis Hopper, Cindy Sherman, Marilyn Minter, KAWS, Eric Parker, Bruno Schmidt, Kitty Brophy, Robert Williams, and many more!

WW: What's a day in your studio like?

KS: My studio is an old 1922 department store in Inglewood by LAX called "Mode 'O Day." It's inscribed on the terrazzo floor. It was a chain of ladies' clothing stores on the West Coast from the 20s to the 50s. It's my dream studio and I am finally in a place without a landlord!

It's my favorite place. I get to do whatever I want and have simultaneous projects which I can start and stop anytime. I have great people around me to help, and on weekends it's super quiet and I have it to myself. I have a great coffee machine and listen to music and smoke some homegrown—called Ingleweed (LOL)—and go with the flow!

WW: What's next for you?

KS: What's next is very soon and too big to announce at this moment!