

Kenny Scharf

Jungle Jungle Jungle

Sep 4 — Oct 25, 2025 | Brussels

Almine Rech Brussels is pleased to present 'Jungle Jungle Jungle,' Kenny Scharf's fifth solo show with the gallery, on view from September 4 to October 25, 2025.

It's always best to start at the beginning

Kenny Scharf's work first came to prominence in what's known as The New York Downtown Scene. It can be argued that much of the most influential visual art and music of the last fifty or so years emerged from this movement. Artists such as Futura 2000, Rammellzee, Keith Haring, Jean Michel Basquiat, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, David Wojnarowicz, Martin Wong, and many, many others were linked to this nebulous group of creatives. These artists exhibited together, "partied hard" together as "Club Kids," and ultimately changed the face of popular culture. Kenny Scharf was a key member of this group. Some noteworthy and legendary exhibitions from this period include 'New York/New Wave' (1981) and 'The Times Square Show' (1980), as well as galleries such as 'The Fun Gallery' (1981–85) and 'Fashion Moda' (1978–93). There are clearly many stories to tell about this iconic moment in mid-1970s and early 1980s New York history. It is equally interesting to focus on what Scharf is doing now. His deep engagement with nature and ecology and his critique of consumerism has perhaps been overlooked. Scharf's oeuvre is resolutely consistent. He has been painting and sculpting the same alternative universe for over fifty years. Today, Scharf-world is more refined and concentrated than ever.

In many ways, Kenny Scharf was a Post-Internet Artist, before we knew what the Internet was. He has been depicting information overload, infinite remix culture, and warped-out cartoons forever. The inspiration for these images comes from a world that predates mass digital communication, mobile phones, Tik-Tok, and triple screening. Through some form of strange osmosis linked to 1950s and '60s science fiction, Scharf's Pop-Mysticism seems to have predicted the atomized world we inhabit today, and also seems right at home here. If anything, the paintings still point the way to a technicolored intergalactic possible future.

The new works for his Brussels exhibition combine Scharf's archetypal combinations of organic forms and figures. Humans and nature merge with the man-made world. "Angular buildings and machines" evoke "The destructive forces of humanity." The past, present, and future all exist in the picture plane. Scharf's universe has been updated to contend with AI and machines with cognitive capabilities. The future is not how we imagined it would be. The paintings hint at this dystopia, but also leave it behind. In the same way Dorothy left Kansas, Scharf's parallel reality is a visual whirlwind we are invited to step into. The process of making the paintings is instinctive and well-practiced. A ritual the artist has spent a lifetime perfecting. The images begin life as backgrounds. Moods. Environments. The fun begins. Oil paint. Acrylic. Spray-paint. Silkscreens. Music in the studio sets the rhythm and pace of production. The music is in the painting. The "freedom and flow" is in the painting. The colors in the work represent ambience and create tension. If the work is monochrome, grey, it's to focus the eye on the image and brushwork. For Scharf, "Colors are emotions." This is why the paintings often feature complimentary colors. "Putting opposites together. Yellow and purple. Red and green. Orange and blue. Black and white." Optical dissonance has always fascinated the artist: "I remember when I was a kid and the arrival of the color television. When no one was looking, I was not watching what was on the TV, I was staring, literally, an inch away from the screen. Watching this crazy psychedelic light show of colors. That's the saturation that I love."

The new body of paintings has been produced at a slower tempo. The work has had time to grow organically, with each painting taking up to two months to make. The exhibition includes works from the ongoing series Scharf calls Jungle Paintings. These anthropomorphic explosions of interweaving branches and foliage read like details from Hieronymus Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights (1503–15) put through a Candy Crush filter. "You start with nothing. Then it literally grows, like a jungle. The trees, then the leaves, then the vines, then the insects. It goes on and on. The way a gardener will start with some dirt, and the plants start to do things. I start, and then the painting tells me where to go." The symbolism of the trees in these works is as much art-historical as spiritual. The trees represent eternity. Protection. Nature. Mother Earth. The world we need to protect. Scharf's trees are also bound to icons of popular culture. The talking apple trees in the 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*, are a clear reference point. The multi-layered iconography and complex ideological narratives in *The Wizard of Oz* are a perfect spectrum through which to view Scharf's work. Like many people who grew up in the 1950s, the film had a profound effect on Scharf as a child, and remains his favorite film to this day.

The optimism of growing up in Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley also influenced Scharf's work and world view. The Hanna-Barbera aesthetics of the space race permeated his landscapes and graphic motifs. "I thought space is so fun! I thought, when I grow up, in 1984, you'll just be able to buy a ticket and get on a rocket and go to the moon. You'll dance around the moon, weightless. It's going to be so fun." Another nod to failed utopias in Scharf's painting are the silkscreened texts and words, often referencing global warming, deforestation, plastic consumption, and micro plastics, subjects Scharf has been obsessed about his whole life. These prophetic words and phrases are cyphered from newspaper articles and magazines. "The real world."

In the end, Kenny Scharf is an artist, making art in a world of polycrisis. It is in times of multiple uncertainties that we need artists more than ever. We need visionaries to pull apart the norms and ideas we are used to. We need artists to open our eyes and challenge perceived notions. We need artists to remind us to always pay attention to the man behind the curtain.

— Cedar Lewisohn, writer, artist and curator.