
KENNY
SCHARF

Contents

THE GHOST OF FUTURE PAST

BARRY BLINDERMAN

Kenny Scharf's art infuses pop icons, Homeric chimeras, and sinuous biomorphic forms with a symbolism reflecting electronic media's insistent grip on our most primal fantasies. One of the artist's earliest childhood memories is sitting inches away from the color TV set and staring at the screen until going into a hallucinatory state. A space-age baby suckled on television and weaned on Pop, he osmotically absorbed media images, sci-fi design, and past art styles.[1] The futuristic symbols of the sleek Sixties that permeated all levels of culture, particularly in the artist's native Los Angeles, left an indelible imprint on Scharf's nascent sensibilities. While escaping into a nineteen-inch Nirvana in his living room, he really believed he'd be going into space in no time at all.

The future as envisioned in the past, particularly technology's failure to deliver its vaunted World of Tomorrow, is a theme that lurks beneath the veil of optimism exuded by nearly all of Scharf's work. In videos he produced in 1980, while still a student at School of Visual Arts, his ambivalent fascination with relics from technology's postwar golden age is clearly evident. *Carousel of Progress* is a sci-fi romp starring Keith Haring, Ann Magnuson, John Sex, Scharf, and other art luminaries who were regulars at Club 57, a film and performance nightclub in the basement of an East Village Polish church. Part of this video was shot in Queens, where the actors performed a Felliniesque carnival dance around the colossal steel Unisphere sculpture from the 1964 World's Fair. Any baby boomer old enough to remember air-raid drills and basement fallout shelters with canned goods stacked to the ceiling can

appreciate the portentous element implicit in the idealism of Kennedy's "new frontier." Nevertheless, the radiation sickness plaguing the band of survivors in *Carousel* annoys the actors far less than the absence of TV broadcasting.[2] Scharf, facing the camera dead-on in a scene preceding the space launch, laments "we want to go to space because it's . . . it's not good here anymore."

Yes, perhaps "it" was only good on TV. And what better symbol for the nuclear family in the throes of the information age than the Jetsons? Beginning around 1981, inspired by the cartoony pictorial graffiti styles of Lee, Fab 5 Freddy, Futura 2000, Haze and other "writers," Scharf began spraypainting Jetsons tags on walls along the route from his studio at P.S. 1 in Long Island City to his East Village apartment. Sometimes reaching mural proportions, these works featured Judy Jetson heads, Elroys with bug bodies, or two-headed Rosie the Robot mandalas, along with elements that would become longterm staples in the artist's iconography: space towers, puffy thunderhead clouds, galactic spirals, and illusionistically rendered orbs.

At the same time, he painted landscapes containing altered or metamorphosed Jetsons and Flintstones characters on small pre-fab canvases. An intriguing example is *Statue della Judy*, 1982, in which the ponytailed Jetson teen is shown naked on a pedestal, voluptuously straddling a vine, holding an atomic globe in one hand and a clump of grapes in the other. Attended on either side by a mirror-imaged Wilma Flintstone as a spiral-bodied sphinx, Judy paradoxically represents both an Apollonian muse of Science and a Dionysian priestess. The nonchalant convolution of time—Flintstones : past,

Street mural, New York City, 1981

Jetsons : future—is an early instance of a "future primeval" theme that was to appear steadily in the artist's work to come.[3] In addition, an absurd Pygmalion effect is at work here: Except for the recent movie de-animation of *The Flintstones*, we've only encountered these characters as cartoons. Scharf memorializes them as fictional aberrations "in the round" of images that have existed only two-dimensionally. Portraying Judy as disrobed and full-breasted adds yet another level of disjunctiveness to this little painting, which alludes to the idea of history as a fabrication promoted in large part by painted and sculpted representations. From this point onward, any socially engrained dualistic thinking became


Classified
Fun
all

Scharf will name one day, for instance, by pasting toy dinosaurs and baubles on a television set, subverting the icon of commerce and advertising. He'll do this while at the same time receiving a scholar from a distant town, not missing a beat, gluing the objects on the edges of the set, giving person and objects equal time.

Humor and patience guard a riotous style. It takes its cue from growth curves and tendrils, berries and leaves. Scharf sees plants not as inert clusters of green, but as co-presences, allies, the quiet oxygen-makers, worthy of tenderness. He follows that love into ultimate chlorophyll, the realm of the rainforest. Witness: *The Jungle* (1982), *Jungle Juice* (1984), *Juicy Jungle* (1983-84), *Junguloony* (1986), *Jungle Times* (1991), *Junglarama* (1992), *Wetlands* (1993) and *Humidungle* (1996). These paintings are meant as love letters to a wet, organic, wild-leafed sprawl. "There is no place more alive than the jungle," Scharf said recently in Miami. "The jungles of Asia, Africa and South America guard our future. Without them we die."

And so, in *Humidungle*, he draws a tree that is also a sentinel. He paints a smile on its trunk. He gives it vision with a single eye. Thus humorously enlivened, cartoon style, with outstretched branches becoming arms, the tree supports a world of vinous, twisting shapes: "growth, things evolving, the face of organic nature." Lost in tangled wildness, an imaginary garden is peopled with ideals: contrasts to the sterile lawns of suburban America. The wetness of the forest, what is more, rubs out memories of dryness and brush fires in southern California, which Scharf fled eighteen years ago.

Scharf takes his faith in the organic to levels literally cosmic. Out there, somewhere, he is sure, beyond the planet Saturn, beyond our galaxy, there is atmosphere, there is water, and a

RHIZOMATIC/SCHAR(MORPHOUS): SCHARF'S OUTER/INNER SPACE FUN

GREGORY BOWEN

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

— 1 Corinthians 13: 11

Kenny Scharf's world is smooth. Not the cool, hip or sly sort of smooth, although that could certainly apply, but, rather, smooth in a theoretical sense. Immersed in Scharf's phosphorescent colors and peeking through the gaping grins of his morphed cartoon characters are foundations of intriguing critical thought concerning our fractured contemporary experience. Faced with the spector of AIDS, jungle deforestation, rampant consumerism and myriad other adult issues, Scharf creates effervescent representations addressing "grown-up" problems filtered through the bluish glow of Saturday morning cartoons. Unlike most of us, when Scharf grew up, he failed to "put away childish things," because for him, it boils down to fun—spiritual, mind-altering, childlike fun. He has always said his work is all about fun, but fun has also brought him trouble. Lamentably, fun is only fun when we are young. Coming of age recontextualizes fun—it becomes leisure, but what is leisure in an age when work is life, and our sense of self is defined by our work?[1] In contemporary American society, there seems to be little room for fun, and thus little room for art about fun. Nonetheless, Scharf has always been serious about fun, and it is within this paradox that things get provocative. Scharf realizes fun has to be taken seriously because it is one of the few things we have left to keep us

smooth in our increasingly striated world.

> Labor performs a generalized operation of striation of space-time, a subjection of free action, a nullification of smooth spaces, the origin and means of which is in the essential enterprise of the State. . . .[2]

First coined by composer Pierre Boulez, the concept of smooth and striated space was thoroughly developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.[3] They theorize that time/space—and by extension, experience—exists as smooth, striated, or more commonly, as a mixture of both.[4] Striated space, the domain of the State (the university, the military, the corporation), is hierarchical and is ruled by order, purpose, routine, and control–all attributes that cannot exist in smooth space, which flourishes on possibility and choice. Striated space becomes smooth when confronted by the infinitely small or large. Imagine space as a three- dimensional continuum. Going inward, striation is defeated by declination, an "infinitely small deviation." Expanding outward, striation becomes smooth when confronted by the spiral or vortex, "a figure in which all the points of space are simultaneously occupied according to the laws of frequency . . . ."[5] Thus striated space is the space of limits (it is defined in relation to and limited by the smooth), and smooth space is the space of infinite possibilities. Stuart Moulthrop, applying smooth and striated space to the cultural and social domain, notes that "smooth social space is mediated by discontinuities. It propagates in a matrix of breaks, jumps, and implied or contingent connections which are enacted . . . by the viewer or receiver."[6] Plumbing the surface of a Scharf painting is analogous to jumping into this "matrix of contingent connections." The clamor and chaos of his surfaces acti-

Who Wants Gum? Apocalyptic Fun in Kenny's Jelly Jungle

Bill McBride

In Kenny Scharf's 1984 painting *Bubblegum Gush*, an almost palpably soft and luscious, pink, gummy goo dominates the top border of the canvas and is squeezed over to the right side of the painting much the way our tongues and teeth push out actual bubblegum in preparation to blow a bubble. In the painting, the teeth and tongue are replaced by a cherry-red, six-sided star creature encased in a blue and yellow vacuole which forces the pink stuff to ooze half way down the painting and result finally in a bubble, which in fact, we discover, is a bubble-head. More precisely it is one of Scharf's signature biomorphic bubble-gumby guys with big bulbous nose, single droopy eye and extra-wide grin. While this pink bubblegum substance and its resultant bubble-head creature are only part of an even more pleasurable and apocalyptically dense painting, it is the dominant insistence of this Bubblegum effect here and in so many other of Kenny Scharf's pieces which packs such an immediate painterly punch. Up until now "Bubblegum" as an aesthetic judgment has been wielded exclusively as a high-art put-down of the popular. Kenny Scharf is all about the popular. He purposefully dons the pop mantle himself by labeling his work "*pop*-surrealism." As to the cultural etymology of the term "Bubblegum," it gains parlance in the late '60s music industry when Leonard Cohen, heavy rockers like Eric Clapton, and critics searched for a way to express their self-important outrage at the wild popularity of the adolescent jingle-jangle of this candied pop rock.[1] Knowing full well this negative judgment, I insist on the term "Bubblegum" anyway in hopes of forcing the issue about the uncritically snobbish response that Bubblegum work like Scharf's "pop"

fun and freedom bring out in some of us some of the time. This typical anti-Bubblegum reaction is like our automatic groans when we hear a pun. And while Bubblegum brings out the fuddy-duddy in a few, it brings out the youngster in most. I plan to demonstrate how these exceptional paintings/customized objects/black light closets call for a sweetly playful stretching, shaping and popping of such a sourpuss aesthetic judgment as they both evoke and take us out of our apocalyptic bummers.

I

I don't believe you'd like it, you wouldn't like it here.
There ain't no entertainment, and the judgments are severe.
The maestro says it's Mozart but it sounds like Bubblegum to me
When you're waiting for the miracle, for the miracle to come.

"Waiting for the Miracle"(Leonard Cohen-Sharon Robinson), as recorded by Leonard Cohen, 1992

The argument against the colorfully dyed, chewy sweet treat and its aesthetic namesake is at once sober-minded and frankly parental: bubblegum loses its flavor overnight, it is ephemeral, doesn't last. It is a non-nutritional, nonsensical junk-food whose passing burst of flavor and sugar rot your teeth just as Bubblegum art and music rot your mind. One of the historically admirable traits of Bubblegum music, which Mr. Scharf's "cartoonish," Bubblegum paintings and their in-your-face frivolous titles share, however, is the ability to turn defeat into conquest in classic jujitsu style. So when I dub paintings such as *Bubblegum Gush* or *Red Jello Fello* as "Bubblegum," I intend it as a purposefully strategic, positive shifting of the term in order to praise this supposedly "immature," frivolous, hedonistic work *without* apology or guilt, and thereby embrace with pride a former put-down. In this manner I model my rhetorical strategy after, for example, the organizers of

***Bubblegum Gush*, 1984**
OIL, ACRYLIC, ENAMEL AND SPRAYPAINT ON CANVAS
120 X 96 INCHES