

Curator



**“Lately, I feel the need to utilize all of the dire headlines we are all confronting on a daily basis as we enter the most dangerous and stressful moment in our ecological human history. Come on everybody we need to get together and do something!”**

## — Kenny Scharf

Interview by Dan Golden

Kenny Scharf (born in Los Angeles, 1958) attended Manhattan's School of Visual Arts and came of age in the 1980s New York downtown art scene alongside his contemporaries Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. A painter and performer inhabiting the visual worlds of both street art and popular culture, Scharf's graffiti paintings gained him notoriety and established a vernacular language all his own. Often working with improvisation, he creates playful, gestural pieces that blend stylized motifs with references to the surreal, science fiction, and icons of popular culture. Many of his larger works still adorn New York streets to this day. Scharf was included in the 1985 Whitney Biennial and again in their show "Fast Forward: Painting from the 1980s" in 2017. His work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the Miami Center for the Fine Arts, Florida, and the Queens Museum of Art, New York, among others. Work by Scharf is held in the permanent collections of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Broad Foundation, Los Angeles, and The Jewish Museum, New York, in addition to others worldwide. He currently lives and works in Los Angeles.

### **HANGIN' WITH KENNY**

I originally connected with Kenny Scharf last year, but it has taken me a while to prepare this interview. Why? I think it was because Kenny is one of my art heroes and I struggled with finding how to best represent the experience of meeting and hanging out with someone as unique and dynamic as Kenny.

That said, in this crazy moment in the world, where we can all use a bit of fun and sunshine in our lives, it felt like the right time to finally share this interview with the amazingly prolific (and cool, and vibrant, and talented, and fun, and larger-than-life) Kenny Scharf.

## **PART I: FIRST CONTACT**

IN WHICH I CONNECT WITH KENNY VIA EMAIL AND HE ANSWERS A FEW QUESTIONS

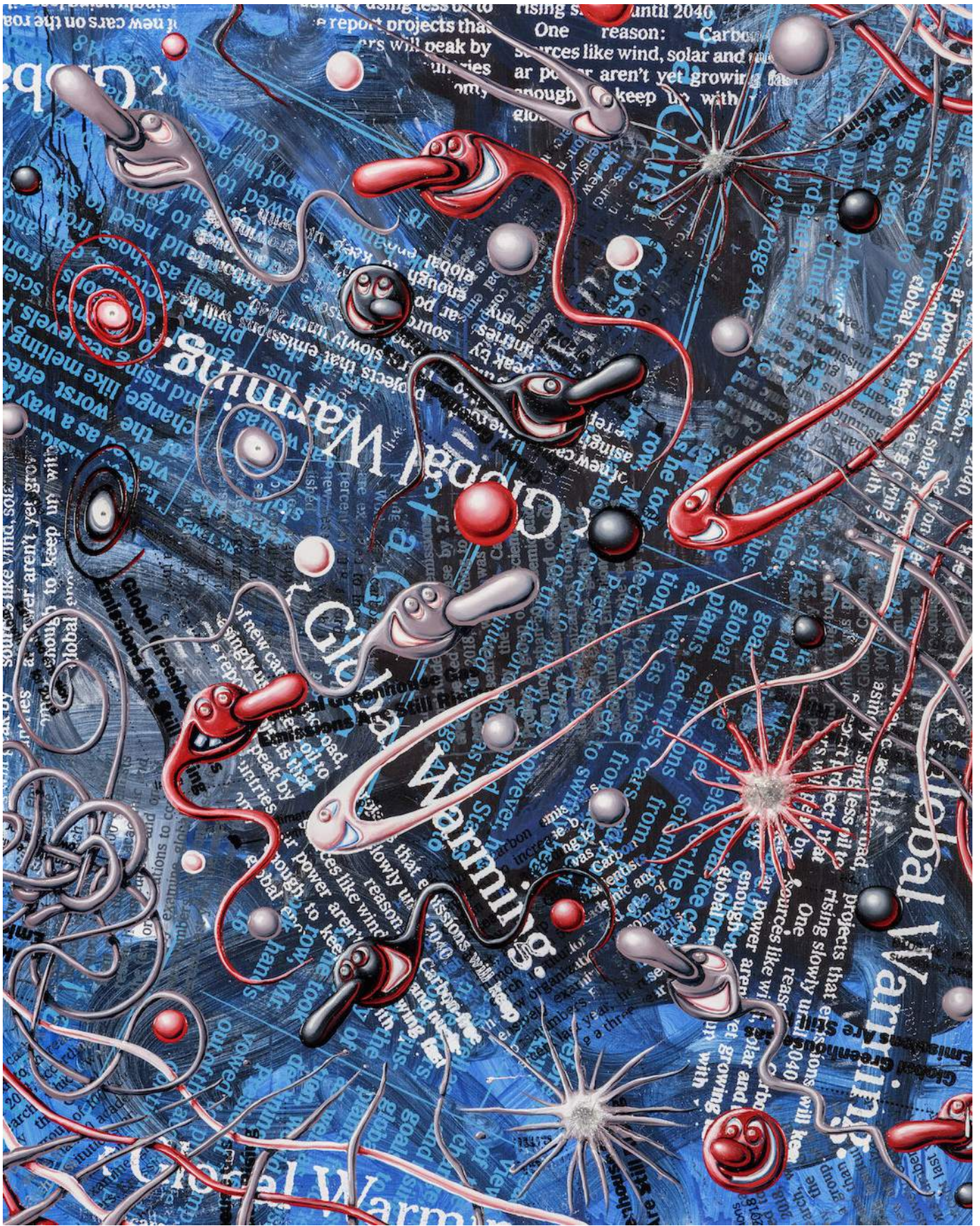
**Dan: Hi Kenny! So jumping right in... you first came to prominence in New York in the early 1980s. But, for the past twenty years or so, Los Angeles has been your home base. What drew you back to the West Coast, and how do you think that the choice of location has impacted your life and work?**

Kenny: New York will always be my city. My desires, dreams, and ambitions were shared by like-minded young minds in a strategic time in our evolutions as artists. Growing up in LA shaped much of my visual language. Living back here where I grew up feels good and allows me to be connected to the art world, yet I am much closer to the sky, trees and the Pacific Ocean. I left New York in the early 90s feeling lost and sad about the deaths of many of my close friends and loved ones. There were times when I wanted to come back and I actually did briefly a few years ago but I felt priced out of the kind of space that I needed and was used to working in. LA was much more open and easy at that time. Now I live a few blocks from my grandkids so I am not going anywhere far away for too long!

**Dan: Some of your recent paintings have referenced global warming and other environmental issues. Do you think it's important for artists to**

## **have a political voice?**

Kenny: I feel that I can't be quiet about my obsessions which have always been our environment and the danger to our fragile ecosystem. I have been making this my main focus pretty much with all of my messaging either blatant in your face or underlying and subtle, but it's always there. Lately, I feel the need to utilize all of the dire headlines we are all confronting on a daily basis as we enter the most dangerous and stressful moment in our ecological human history. Come on everybody we need to get together and do something!



Kenny Scharf, *WHAT ME WORRY? (BLUE)*, 2019, oil, acrylic, silkscreen ink and mylar on linen with aluminum frame, 60 x 48 inches, courtesy of the artist and Totah Gallery

## **Dan: What is inspiring to you right now?**

Kenny: I am waking up every day excited to continue to learn and explore. This is what I find exciting, not knowing where I'm going and being open to "mistakes" which almost always lead to new discoveries. I listen to a lot of music when I paint. Lately, I've been vibing on Anderson Paak's new album *Ventura* — it's really uplifting.

## **PART II: THE PHONE CALL & THE STUDIO VISIT**

IN WHICH I TALK WITH KENNY AND THEN VISIT HIM AT HIS STUDIO, AND HE MAKES ME A DELICIOUS ESPRESSO

## **Dan: Hi Kenny. How are you doing?**

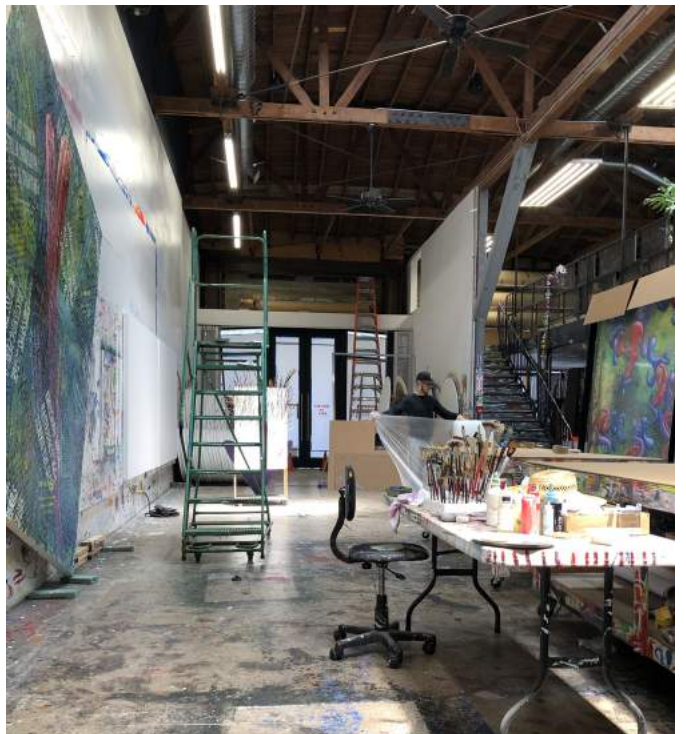
Kenny Good. How are you?

## **Dan: Good. It's such a treat to talk to you. Is this still a good time to talk?**

Kenny: It's all good. Sometimes you think that I'm lost in the thought, I'm painting, so once in a while I'll go silent, and then I'll resume. So don't worry if I get silent every once in a while.



Exterior of Kenny Scharf's studio (secret entrance around the back)





Studio view



Studio View



Studio View



Studio View

## **Dan: Cool. So, you live in Culver City, right?**

Kenny: Yeah—well, I grew up in LA and I knew Culver City for the movie theater. When I was in high school, I used to go to the movie theater and for the jean stores. Oh, I remember it was called the Surprise Store, but that's about all I knew in Culver City. And then so when I was coming to move back in '98, I moved in '99 I wanted to live in Venice because I liked the beach and then it was already too expensive. So then I looked in Mar Vista and I didn't find anything I liked. And so I said, "Okay, I'm gonna go further east." And I saw this hill and I was like, "What is on this hill?" It was very weird, like I don't remember this hill. And then I went up the hill



on the list of the next place I was going to look at and I found this crazy garden on this hill. And so that's why.

And everyone kept saying, "Why are you in Culver City?" Because back then there was nothing, like absolutely nothing...one coffee shop and a Thai restaurant and that movie theater and no traffic at all. It was amazing. It was a dead zone over there where I am. Where I am now I can't even leave the house. I'm locked in. It's rush hour.

I used to have that hill all to myself. For years, I would take my dogs up there and there was all this weird stuff before it was a park and no one even knew it was there and it was very bizarre because I'd be like, "how can I have this to myself in the middle of LA?" But it went on for like 10 years. I had that.

**Dan: And when did the galleries start coming in? Was it Blum & Poe or Honor Fraser?**

Kenny: I remember that that guy Honor shared the gallery with David Quadrini. He has a space that was big and then Honor took half and then eventually took it over from him. So I remember that. Yeah, I was there way before the galleries or restaurants or anything like that. It was interesting, when the galleries came there, because I'm part of Honor Fraser and I was like, "Oh this is so cool, right near my house."

**Dan: So were you with them already before they need to Culver?**

Kenny: Well, not really, she had a space in Venice that I would go to the openings, but I don't think it was anything official like now, that I've been with her for so many years already.



**Dan: I'm curious about the relationships between artists and the galleries they work with—sometimes its purely a business relationship, sometimes its personal, and sometimes it's a mix.**

Kenny: I think it was a mix, pretty much. I knew Stavros, and I went to their wedding and then I found out that she's a cousin of one of my closest friends who lives in London, a Scottish girl. And so I immediately... You know, there was that connection there.

**Dan: So you're from California, and moved back here after years in LA... but you also mentioned that you had toyed with going back to New York.**

Kenny: I did move back to New York. I had a place in Brooklyn for about five years back around 2000-2005. So I did go back, and then I was going back and forth and I was like, "I'm tired of the back and forth." So I just stayed here because it's so much nicer. And my grandkids. I like being with them.

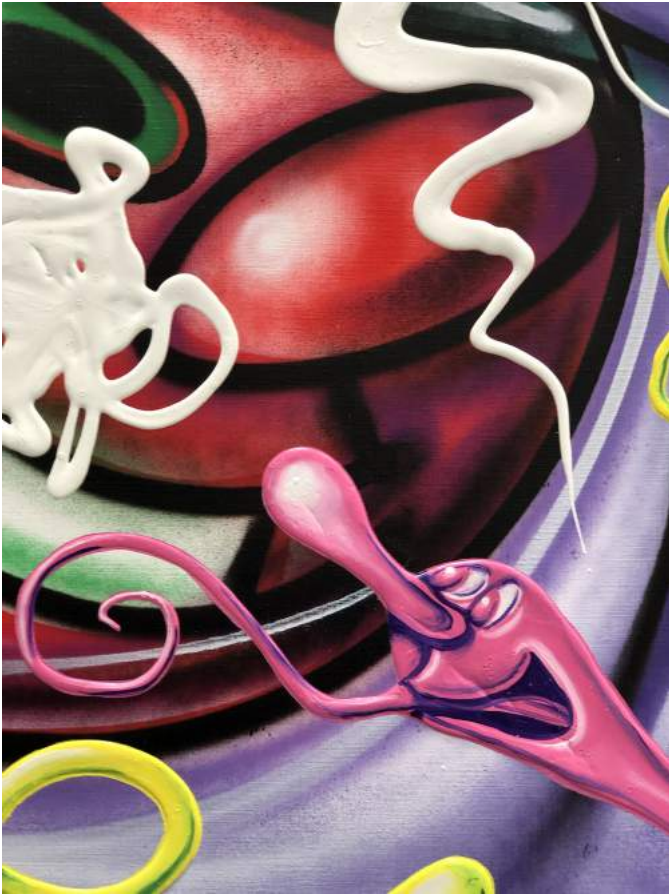
**Dan: That's great. Are they close?**

Kenny: Oh yeah, they live in the neighborhood. So I see them all the time. And then honestly, you know, New York has changed so much that sometimes I feel that it doesn't really matter where you are, kind of. Like, you can kind of function anywhere. And my door, when I would open in Brooklyn, would be like trucks banging. And then in my yard in LA, I have, you know, hummingbirds. I was like, hmm, why do I want to live up there?

**Dan: So, you're working a lot in your studio. Do you have a community of artists you get to hang out with, or is it mostly studio work and family?**

Kenny: Well, I don't have a lot of time. People can come visit me, but then I have to kick them out because I don't want people around all the time. And then, you

know, so it's like unfortunately I don't get to see my friends very often. But yes, I do have artist friends, Ed Ruscha's Studio is underneath my house. It's kind of wild, but it's true.



Kenny Scharf painting (detail)



Kenny Scharf painting (detail)



Kenny Scharf painting (detail)



Kenny Scharf painting (detail)

**DG: That is wild! So, I'm curious to hear about how you originally developed your painting style.**

Kenny: All my life experiences growing up, you know, with cartoons and pop and plastic and colors and TV and movies and blah. And then living down and out in New York City in the late seventies, the contrast and the painting that I saw on the street, of course, and the people that I met who were painting in the street, the whole combination.

I mean I felt a lot of similarities between this kind of street art, which is more like, in LA when I grew up would be van art, like those airbrush stuff and bubble lettering. It was very similar to the stuff I was seeing on the trains in New York. And those are the kinds of things that I looked at as a kid and that I was like, you know, making sketches and stuff and doodling and things like that. So I felt an affinity immediately towards the subject matter of cartoons. And you know, the bubble

lettering is actually very hippy when you look at it. It's psychedelic. So that's totally my world as well.

**Dan: Did you have dreams of being part of the gallery art world?**

Kenny: Well, you know, I had major ambition. Enough to get me to move to New York, you know, but you don't really know what you want so bad, but you definitely want something. And for a while it was a lot of fun trying to get there with your friends and that was the fun part of it, when I was in New York. And then it happened when people started to attain it and then everything got a little different. Whereas, you know, there was like competition, all of a sudden and people were threatened and that whole...the ambience changed. As well as people were dying of AIDS at the same time, so the party, you know, wasn't so fun. Even though we were making money and successful at that time, it just wasn't as fun because we didn't get to enjoy it when people are dying....it's kind of hard to celebrate your success when people or friends are dying.

**Dan: Was Keith Haring one of those friends?**

Kenny: Yeah, Keith was a very close friend of mine. We shared a space together up by Bryant Park. You know, he became my daughter's Godfather. We were very close. He was one of the most important people in my life... he still is. I was very close to Keith. Jean Michel I were close to very early on. I introduced Jean Michel to Keith. I met Jean Michel in '78 and we used to go around the streets together and we had a very, kind of, intense relationship. And then it kind of soured it was very volatile for many years. It was stressful for me. We kind of reunited and I didn't know he was about to be gone, but we did, kind of, reunite before he died.



Andy Warhol with Kenny Scharf, circa 1986. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Kenny Scharf, Andy Warhol, and Keith Haring at Elizabeth Saltzman's birthday party at Il Cantinori, 1986. Photo courtesy of the artist.





Andy Warhol, Jacqueline Schnabel, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Julian Schnabel and Kenny Scharf at the opening of Indochine, 1984. Photo courtesy of the artist.

**Dan: When you say it was intense and volatile with Basquiat, can you touch on that just a little bit more?**

Kenny: Oh yeah. He would sabotage me all the time, and then apologize. I would be so happy that we were going to be friends again, and then the very next day it was as if that never happened and he just treated me the same. After that I was like, "Okay, that's it. I'm not falling for any of this again." And then we kind of reunited towards the end, right before he died.

**Dan: Did you see it coming or was it just a complete shock when he passed away?**

Kenny Well, we saw that he was depressed and that he had problems, but no one thought someone was going to die, you know. That was a shocker. I mean we had AIDS going on, but no one thought that he had that, he seemed fine just more into the drugs... but then he was gone.

**Dan: So speaking of mental health... your work feels really happy and it seems like you value things like living in a good place and being around family. Do you have any general philosophy?**

Kenny: Yeah. That's funny. I just talked to some lady in Spain, in an interview today, and I was talking about that optimism and I said basically I'm a realist and I see every little piece of shit that's freaking out. And if I'm not an optimist I will kill myself. So I maintain... this optimism is out of necessity. I need it. I have to create it myself because it's just too overwhelming, the negativity, and I feel I need to fight it all the time. It's a battle. Without being on optimism, why be alive? I just don't get it. I just can't do it.

Success and happiness don't really go hand in hand. And you know, that happens a lot. People work really hard and attain the success and it doesn't make stuff better, you know, that wasn't good to begin with.

**Dan: It's just kind of shocking when that happens because it does seem like certain people have it all... Like Anthony Bourdain.**

Kenny: Yeah, I was just thinking of him. He had it all right? He was so witty and what a great show and, so sad. I was so shocked. And then I think, of course, it's like, "How could you?" I understand it—when you're in the throes of that you can't see reality, but he had a kid so I don't understand. Like, that's the bad thing because that's really going to be hard for that kid forever. I don't understand how you could do that to your child, no matter how depressed you are. Then again, I've never been that depressed where I really wanted to kill myself. Because I maintain my optimistic war, so.



Kenny Scharf, *TOTALBZ*, 2019. oil on linen with aluminum frame, 72 x 60 inches, courtesy of the artist and Totah Gallery



Kenny Scharf, *GREYSVILLANDIA*, 2019, oil on linen with aluminum frame, 36 x 40 inches, courtesy of the artist and Totah Gallery

**Dan: Do you feel like the happy figures in your drawings and paintings are part of that?**

Kenny: Sure. I want to feel that happiness and joy. It makes me happy if I make a perfect smile, I feel like that smile, you know?

**Dan: Yeah. I find that more and more. I mean, I love color and bright things and I just realized, like, surrounding myself with that stuff makes me happy. And I just want to do that more and more.**

Kenny: Yeah. And then don't be embarrassed about it. I think, for a long time people were like ashamed. You can't enjoy stuff because it's not serious if you really enjoy it. I think that's a problem that's still going on. Like, if it's enjoyable, it's not really serious and it's not very important.



Kenny Scharf, *GRAPPY*, 2020, Spray paint on canvas, 40 Inches diameter

**Dan: There's that route, the road that a lot of artists go down to do that kind of austere work. And so that's obviously something you've had to think about, but that's just not who you are as an artist or a person it sounds like.**

Kenny: No, not at all. I mean, why do anything unless it's what is true? You can't change that. Nor you should ever try because you're ruined if you do. Even if you want to, then you're ruined.



Is Kenny Scharf the coolest artist on the planet? (see below for answer)





Quite possibly.

**Dan: So essentially, just do what comes natural and what feels good.**

Kenny: Yeah, you have to believe in it all the way. You can't fake anything. You can get away with it for a while, but I don't think you'll get away with it in the end. That's my true belief. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe the faith will live on, but I believe it.

**Dan: That makes perfect sense. So, have you been traveling a lot, or are you based here for a while?**

Kenny: Well, I'm so happy to be back from all the travels. For two weeks I went to Ibiza and New York and I just painted murals, and had openings and it was so intense. And then I got back and I did a giant mural, like a five story parking garage. I couldn't believe it and I was so tired and now I'm recovering and I'm so happy to be back in my studio.

**Dan: How do you tackle a five story mural?**

Kenny: It's fun. I spray paint, it's super fast, you know? It took me three days.



Kenny Scharf mural at the Bluffs at Playa Vista, 2019



Kenny Scharf mural at the Bluffs at Playa Vista, 2019

**Dan: Do you have like a team?**

Kenny: I had a guy driving the lift, like a cherry-picker lift. But I don't have anybody to help me paint it. It's just spray paint and nobody can really help you. And I make it up on the spot, I don't really know what exactly I'm doing anyway, so how could I... You know, it's not color-in like you can have someone else do it for you.

**Dan: Right, and so it's like on the spot. It's like as improvisation as you do it.**

Kenny: Exactly. And I was telling this guy who was interviewing me there, I was like, "Think about it." I was like "A jazz musician who has all of their repertoire, their notes, their tricks, you know, they learned it, they're good musicians. And they have kind of an idea of where they're going to go, but they kind of go where they, where it takes you." And that's very similar to how I paint those murals.

**Dan: Like you have an art kit, you know where you're going, you're a musician and then you just go and it always works out.**

Kenny: Yeah. And you and you have faith and you learn things on the way. You didn't know where you were going. It's very adventurous. It's exciting for me not knowing, you know, what it's going to be. I love it. Like right now I'm painting little tiny details, with oil paint. And last week I was painting a giant mural using my whole body. It's really fun, you know. It's like bang, like you can do a giant mural and change the whole space in a few days, it's great.



Studio detail: Fred Flinstone.



Studio detail: an interesting plant.



Studio detail: as you wander around the studio, you come across various "Assemblages" — collages created from plastic detritus that Kenny has collected over the years, and which thematically connect back to his longstanding concern for the environment.



Studio detail: another Assemblage work.

**Dan: What kind of spray paints do you use?**

Kenny: I use this brand of... They should sponsor me because it's the only brand I use, it's called "Montana Gold." And it's not as poisonous for me cause it's acrylic. It doesn't give me this lingering sick feeling. But I know it's not healthy and I do wear a mask. But yeah, I use this "Montana Gold," they've got a lot of beautiful colors.

**Dan: Do you have a favorite art store here in LA? Because I mean remember there was "Pearl Paint" in New York which closed down.**

Kenny: Yeah, well I live right near Graphaids and they have the paint. So it's always on my way, so I go there.

**Dan: Before I moved to LA, and was just visiting, I would come through Culver City and I remember seeing a garage with a mural on it that you had done.**

Kenny: Davis Brothers.

**Dan: Yeah, that was it. That was cool. Did you just do that as like a favor to them or was that special?**

Kenny: Well, I did, but they thought of it as they were doing a favor to me, which is fine. This guy I met, his name is Warren. He's into like graffiti art and stuff like that, walls and stuff, so. He said, "All right, hey, I have this wall and I live in Culver City." So yeah, I was like, "I'm happy to do it." And it's pretty cool because it's about five, six years already, so that's good amount of time for a mural. When something lasts a long time it's always surprising.

I have another mural in West Hollywood. It's seven stories high, it's getting covered over by a building in front of the West Hollywood Library parking garage. I haven't been there, but I keep hearing like, "they're covering up your mural."

**Dan: And how do you feel about it?**

Kenny: Well, I feel bad. I mean, I can't believe they're doing that because basically that means they're building in the park. And I really thought that mural was always safe because it faced the park. But obviously they're not.

**Dan: Shifting back to your family — you mentioned being a grandfather. How old were you when you had your kids?**

Kenny: I was way too young to know what I was getting involved with, but I was 25. 25 thinking I was a full on adult and I should have a child. But now I have grandkids from her, so it was all worth it. I went with it and then the marriage didn't last but the grandkids did and the kids and everything. I'm so happy. I'm so lucky and blessed.

Having a kid is really, really hard and sometimes you kind of are jealous of friends that don't. But then I have to say having grandkids makes it all worthwhile, because you just get all the good and then you don't have all that unbelievable responsibility that it is so hard. I mean so responsible. So, it's the best I can tell you. And they're so cute and you get to experience that childhood again. It's amazing. Because I'm like a five year old, so I hang out with five year olds.

**Dan: What's your secrets to have that kind of, fresh mindset?**

Kenny: Well, I always have that child thing going on in my brain. I'm always looking at everything and being bewildered and amazed by rainbows, butterflies, flowers, you know, I look at flowers and trees and I focus on all that stuff. And I think it's fascinating.

**Dan: I know I have more questions, but this is great. I mean I think this is like tons of good information.**

Kenny: It's always better to talk a little in person. You should come by the studio. I didn't realize you were here.

**Dan: Yeah, I would love to. When's a good time?**

Kenny: Any time. I'm home. I'm here, I'm back in town.

**Dan: Then how about later this week if you're around, that'd be cool.**

Kenny: Yeah, come by later this week. We've got the interview part over, so now you can just hang out for a minute.

**Dan: Oh, that'd be perfect. I'll bring a beer or like a non-alcoholic cocktails drink thing, it won't ...**

Kenny: I just smoke weed.

**Dan: Okay. Oh good. Okay, cool, man. I'm looking forward to coming over.**

Kenny: Me too, bye Dan.

BYE, KENNY!





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