

Kenny Scharf is an artist who has worked with objects, interiors and kitsch for his whole career even if he's best known for his paintings. He made TVs, cars, telephones, a crib for his daughter, pillows, boomboxes, a piano, a mixer and exhibited some of them in the *Customized Appliance Show* at The Queens Museum of Art, New York in 1991. They are not self-made, they're customizations of found junk, halfway between artifacts and acts of resistance to the industrial aesthetic.

Scharf is usually associated with the East Village scene of the late '70s and early '80s. A dear friend of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, often at that time his practice was read as graffiti art even though he wasn't painting so much on public walls. Probably the reason is that he was

KENNY SCHARF Bringing the fantasy into reality

INTERVIEW BY FRANCESCO SPAMPINATO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY YE RIN MOK

acting in the public sphere, customizing daily appliances and appropriating pop imagery from advertisements and TV in the same way graffiti artists were customizing the urban landscape.

Wikipedia says he lives in New York but he's constantly moving between his houses. He says he bounces around a lot but can feel at home anywhere as long as he's getting enough sleep. He's the kind of guy who feels most at home in nature. He has a huge loft in Brooklyn. However, he passes as much time as he can in his places in Brazil, a paradise on the beach, and Culver City, LA. His house is up on a hill with a terrific panorama and a magic garden filled with rare plants from all over the world. While Inside it is a mix of flea market memories from the '50s, rustic furniture, artworks of him or friends' and customized found junk.

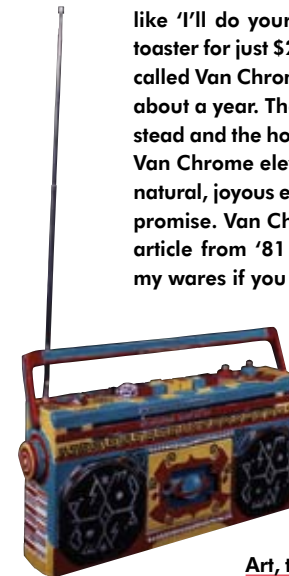


Hi Kenny, can you tell me something about Van Chrome?

Van Chrome was an alter-ego of mine who made house calls and customised people's appliances for a fee. I'd arrive with my kit and spend the day customising. I'd do the phone and blender, then I'd survey the house and recommend other items, like 'I'll do your TV and toaster for just \$200 extra!'. It was my job. It was called Van Chrome's Customised Appliances for about a year. Then I began selling paintings instead and the house calling custom job stopped. Van Chrome elevated mundane tasks to supernatural, joyous experiences and delivered on his promise. Van Chrome loved his job. There's an article from '81 in the Soho News advertising my wares if you want to see it.



Above: Chrome on the Range, article on Kenny Scharf's customizations, Soho News, 1981. Below: Untitled (Boom Box 1), 1985 and Untitled (Telephone), 1984



Is there any difference between your private customised objects and brand-commissioned objects? Over the years you've done watches for Swatch and Movado, jewellery for Afsoun, toys and vases for Cereal Art, the chair produced by B&B Italia

for the Unframed benefit art auction for AIDS and ties, guitars, bicycles and t-shirts. The main difference is the customised objects are one of a kind. They're also often a reaction to the boring beige design we're usually given. My optimum design dream is to actually design the object from the start instead of treating something that's already done. But I'm usually happy to transform the given, as I'm adaptable.

You've always been interested in exploring Sixties American Pop Culture. In fact you became popular using images inspired by Hanna Barbera cartoons like The Flintstones and The Jetsons. What about The Book of Everything, the series of drawings of inventions you made in 1963 when you were only five years old?

I loved the fun and fantasy of the design world of my childhood. I really believed we could drive to Saturn! I've always had a wild imagination and my Book of Everything was full of inventions

inspired by the advertising of the day - and The Flintstones and The Jetsons. One invention I remember was for a turtle mop 'very good for housewives but you kind of have to have a funny floor'. The accompanying drawing showed a floor with big holes to accommodate the turtle's feet.

In 1978, when you were a student at the School of

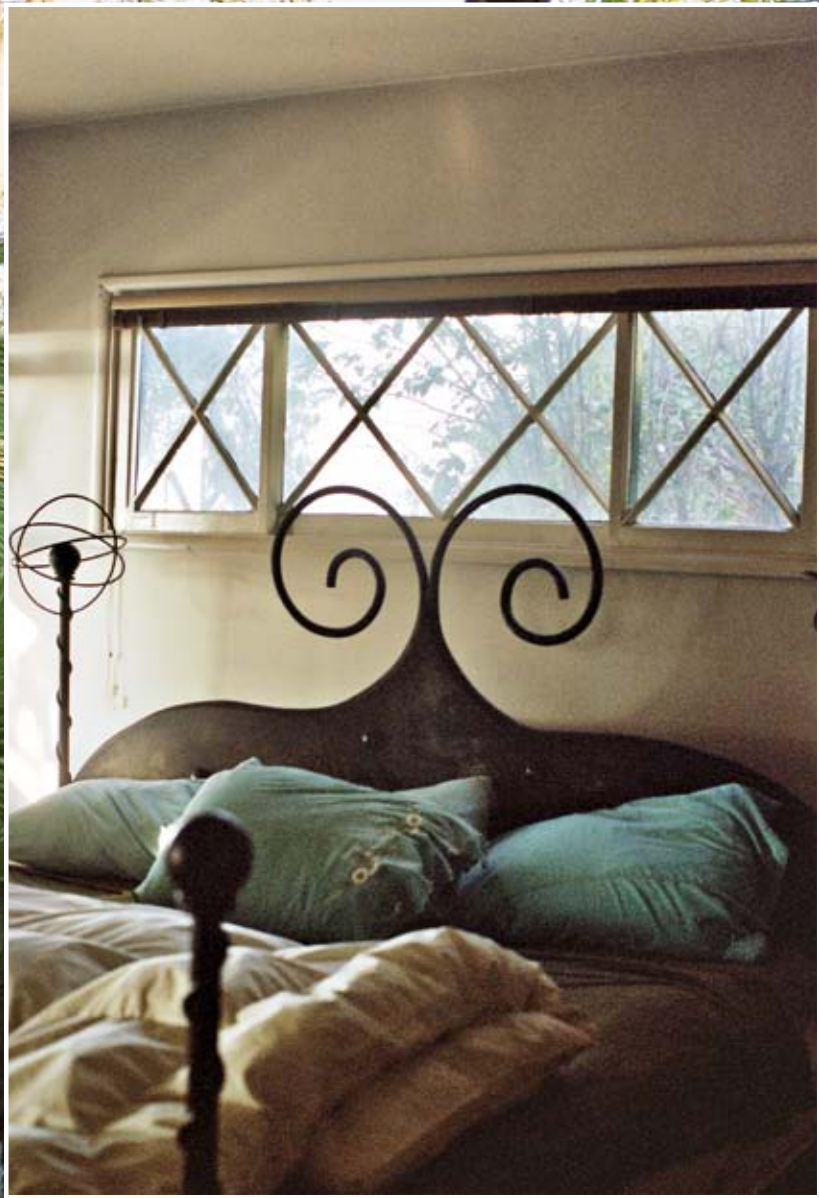
Visual Arts in New York, you did a portrait of Barbara Simpson as a housewife in a gracious sixties-style kitchen. Everything's so comfortable, the furniture's pink, Simpson has a shiny smile and wears a clean apron but she has a Chinese dragon close by. How did you come up with this image?

I did that painting before I moved to New York. It's lifted from an old ad for a new kitchen and I added the dragon from a Jefferson Airplane album cover! I've always been aware that the happy consumer is just a façade. There are monsters lurking underneath that unfortunately are beginning to rear their ugly heads in our present day consumer society.

I met you at the opening of Hot Glue Hullabaloo, the show you did in collaboration with the art collective Dearraindrop at The Hole gallery in New York last October. You exhibited Cosmic Cavern, a reconstruction of a day-glo environmental installation you had in the basement of your studio in Brooklyn. Did you make it all in once or did it grow day by day? By the way, I heard of crazy parties in that basement during the months before the show.

The Cosmic Cavern was a series of panels I took from my Brooklyn basement. That was where the allnight dance freakathons happened with the fantastic musical stylings of artist/DJ extraordinaire Scott Ewalt, and the amazing additions of the wonderful artists/dancers/performers/voyeurs that made the Cosmic Cavern such an unforgettable experience of boogie freedom! I'm sorry you never got to come but one day it will return.





Where do the objects in the Cosmic Cavern come from? Are they all customisations or are there also readymades?

The installation itself is a constantly evolving space that I add to all the time, depending on what gems I find in the garbage. Some of the crap actually dates back to 1980! Besides the garbage it can be anything that comes my way. I'm fascinated by garbage. Almost all of it's plastic.



A mural by Keith Haring at Kenny Scharf's house in Ilheus Bahia, Brazil, restored 2009.

What was the role of Dearraindrop in the installation?

The Cosmic Cavern Hole was the one of the first times I actually let someone go off and do what they wanted (with some minimal instruction). It was hard to let go and not be a control freak! They did a great job though. I love the Dearraindrop additions!

You're not new to this kind of thing. You did your first environmental installation in the closet of the loft you shared with Keith Haring in Times Square in 1981, The Cosmic Closet. What's the story behind it?

I'd come across a black light and I put it in the closet in Times Square and started to collect stuff and paint it fluorescent. I wanted to create a refuge from the crazy city out of the city's refuse. I found the chaos calming and fun inducing!

The Cosmic Closet then moved to MOMA PS1. Was it part of the legendary New York New Wave show curated by Diego Cortez? Was the blurring of art and life the main feature of the generation of artists in that show?

The closet did move to PS1 but was not part of New York New Wave. It was actually the studio I was given there (the one where I rode my bike and bombed the eastside from). The blurring of art and life has always been a big theme in my art and I still consider it to be very important. A desire to elevate the mundane and boring.

The Cosmic Closet was the first of a long series of numbered closet installations right? The same year you did a black light one at the Fun Gallery and then, in 1985, you did one at the

Whitney Museum Biennial. When you were working on that, you used to get night time visits from friends like Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat. How did they affect the way you worked?

It was pretty great to be able to make a closet at the Whitney. It was done in the hallway where the bathrooms are and the telephone booths used to be. I gave all

my friends the numbers of the phone booths so they'd call and hang out while I worked. It was a constant party. I'm not sure all the Whitney staff loved it though...

What changes when you move the closets from your house to an exhibition venue?

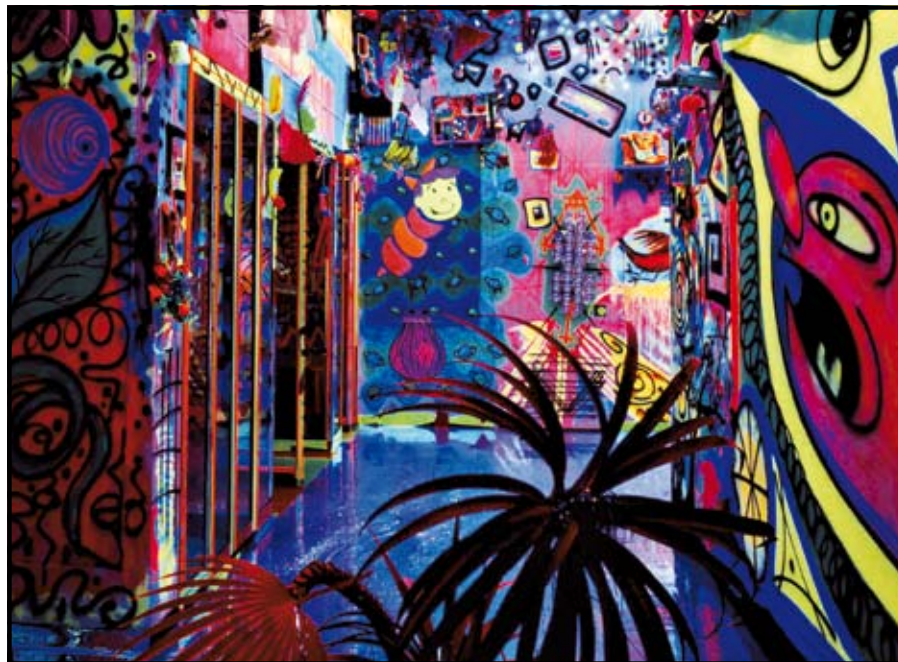
Every cavern changes according to the space, the mood and the crap that appears while I'm making it, but they all have the same vibe as they all follow the same formula. It works!

1985 was also the year you, Haring, Basquiat and Francesco Clemente made site-specific works for the Palladium (a famous night club in New York that Steve Rubell opened after the decline of Studio 54). That was the first time you worked on the 'interior design' of a place that was neither your house nor an exhibition space. What did you do there?

I was given the basement and bathrooms and telephone booths again (for a while I felt like a toilet artist). I happily transformed the space into my world using customising, paintings, and in the hallways, black light mirrors and fun fur. It wasn't my first foray into nightclub interiors. I'd been active in the nightclub world for a while with Club 57, Mudd Club and Danceteria, among others. The clubs were the first places we were able to show our art and dance too!

You performed a lot in clubs with your friends Haring, Klaus Nomi, John Sex and Ann Magnuson. In your last monograph for Rizzoli they said 'everything Kenny did - and still does - is a performance. Sometimes these performances are on canvas, other times in clubs...' Were clubs more 'attractive' than private apartments and lofts at that time?





Above: Customized Appliance Show, 1991. Queens Museum of Art, New York. Photo by Beth Phillips. Below: Closet #7, 1985. Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo by Tseng Kwong Chi.

Clubs offered many young artists the chance to show their work in a fun, relaxed setting free from any expectations about its 'seriousness and value'. It was very liberating. The galleries didn't care to see our work at the time... It was an example of art and life colliding. The clubs were our main source of income and our lives revolved around what happened there.

How long did you live with Keith in Times Square? Where did you move later?

Keith and I shared a crazy old house right next to Bryant Park on 6th Avenue.

I think it was for about a year or two, it's hard to be exact. We got kicked out after a stabbing victim walked into one of our parties and bled all over. The cops were there and the madness and chaos led to our eviction. I went back to 9th in the East Village and Keith got his apartment on Broome and Chrystie.

What are people supposed to do inside the 'closets' and 'caverns' you install in galleries and museums? By the way, what makes it a closet as opposed to a cavern?

They can do what they want in the cosmic caverns. They usually know what to do automatically! Dancing, dreaming, lying around, whatever. The name was always 'closet' but recently changed to 'cosmic cavern' in my basement.

We felt it was a better name for a party. I also did a room at the Tunnel nightclub in the '90s called *The Cosmic Cavern* so I felt like I owned the name. They're all the same, but a cavern is bigger and has more room for dancing.

Both names make me think of safe, private places, somehow protected from the outside world. At the same time they reveal a new hidden space, emerging from the dark through the use of black light and fluorescent colours. Are we talking manifestations of the sub-conscious?

Black light automatically brings you to another state of consciousness. The intensity of the colours and the deepness of the black, combined with the attention to detail, make for a mind-bending, drug-free hallucinatory experience.

Do you always use your house or studio as a model for these installations? These works remind me a lot of Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau. Do you know it?

There are no rules about the conception of the caverns. They're often born in the home environment, but they can easily be done anywhere so long as there's no natural light. I'm more familiar with Kurt Schwitters' dada collages, which I love. I must look into the Merzbau.



What happens to your installations when the exhibition is over? Do you recycle the objects for other works and sell the panels as paintings?

I used to throw everything in a box and reuse the objects later. Lately I've been making panels. It makes it easier to reinstall later by just putting them up, switching on the black lights and filling in the cracks with new junk.



Above: Closet #16, 1997. Queens Museum of Art, New York. Photo by Beth Phillips. Below: Interior Design for the Tunnel Club, New York, 1995.

You had your first solo show at Fiorucci in 1981. Then, for a while in the '90s you had a booth shop on Prince Street, Soho: the Scharf Schak. And in Miami a few years later, the

Scharf Schop. Were these ventures part of that blurring of art and life we were talking about? Did you sell industrial products, artifacts or customisations there?

My first show was put together by Joey Arias of Fiorucci in 1979. It was called Fiorucci Celebrates the New Wave and featured a performance by Klaus Nomi. I always loved the idea of bringing art to the masses. I was inspired at an early age by [Claes] Oldenburg's store and Pop Art's use of consumer goods in general. Later, when I had the Schak, I wanted to sell industrial products but

could only afford to produce t-shirts, buttons, magnets and so on. We did have a few other products like Swatch watches, Zippo lighters and fountain pens. It was a way of making art accessible to everyone.

You coined the term 'Pop Surrealism'. It's been appropriated and abused recently to describe different genres of lowbrow and underground aesthetics. But your idea was to elevate the ordinary and the mundane (a word you like a lot), through pop imagery, to the surreal, transforming daily space into a psychedelic, uncanny hallucination.

Yes. I coined the term in 1981 to describe a very matter-of-fact, surrealist way of making art yet the images coming from the subconscious was full of pop imagery from the constant bombardment of the media at an early age. I recently coined a new term, 'Folkpop', to describe folk art that's infused with pop, like the profound and amazing Bedrock City in Arizona. My customisation is a direct way of infusing everyday existence into extraordinary, magical experiences. Just imagine sitting in traffic if everyone customised their own car!

Where do the cartoon creatures you paint come from? You did a short animated series for Cartoon Network some years ago right?

The cartoon creatures come right from my head and are a mutation of the future (Jetsons) and the past (Flintstones) with a little Felix the Cat thrown in. They combine to create a time splat where all time no time every time makes the infinitesimal mutations which are my creatures. I did a 20 minute animation for the Cartoon Network in 2001 which I hoped would become a series called the Groovenians with Dennis Hopper, Ann Magnuson, Vince Gallo, Paul Reubens, Drena Deniro, Debbie Mazar, Rupaul, the b52s and Devo. But after airing it once they never spoke to me again and never aired it again - although it was nominated for an award. I thought it was great. So much for Hollywood. I'd love the chance to do it again.

When did you move to Brazil? Can you tell me something about your place in Ilheus Bahia?

I moved to Ilheus Bahia, Brazil in 1982. I went to visit my friend Bruno Schmidt and immediately met my daughters' mother, Tereza, who's from Ilheus. When we got the place it had no electricity or roads and was super wild jungle on the beach. It's still amazing, but now it has roads and hotels.

It sounds magical. I believe it's going to be the set of a documentary about the life of Keith Haring, since there's a mural there that he painted. How do you feel about having a film set in your house?

The film's about Keith in Brazil. It uses the restoration of a flood mural he painted as the spine of the film. I'm always happy to promote Keith and his art - and get a restored cabana floor in the process!

You used to make a lot of videos during the happenings at the various Downtown clubs. Do you video parties or family moments?

I was big into video before MTV and made a few videos with plots and sets and actors like Keith and Ann Magnuson and John Sex. I also recorded a few of the Club 57 performances. I'm not so good at the family moment videos but we do have some.

Do your two daughters still live with you? Are you alone much at home or in the studio?

Sometimes we live together. I'm often alone as well. It's a revolving family. There's not much rhyme or reason to it all.

Do you like to listen to music while you work? Name me one favorite from the '80s, one from the '90s and one from the '00s. Tell me how - and if - they help you get into a surreal mood.

Music is a big part of my creating. I love to sing while I paint. I love so many different kinds of music but for the '80s - I guess the b52s. In the '90s I went back to glitter rock from the '70s. And now I listen to everything from new music to old stuff - swing, motown gogo, jazz, punk, you name it.

In 1991 you designed the Metropolitan Home ShowHouse. Can you tell me about it? It seems way more complicated than your other environmental installations. Was it the first time you worked with interior design as an 'architect'?

When I did the ShowHouse I guess it was my first attempt to bring my aesthetic to a conventional setting. It was a benefit event to raise money for AIDS. It was organised by Metropolitan Home magazine in Manhattan. They brought artists and designers together, and we each designed a room. I tried to make a 'tasteful' interior designing pillows, armchairs, a table and a sofa that a steel artisan built for me.

And what about The Cosmic Cavern you did in 1995 at the Tunnel Nightclub in New York?



That was really space-age, in a Barbarella kind of way. I'd love to know more about that and the influence of sci-fi on your work.

The Cosmic Cavern Tunnel was a cosmic sci-fi fantasy. I've always been obsessed with outer space and infinity. I love the fantasy and the limitless frontier - and the way pop cultures have taken it on through the ages.

You were born in Los Angeles, California. How much west coast culture is it there in your work? What was the main difference between California and New York in terms of living spaces?

Growing up in LA in the '60s profoundly influenced my visual landscape. There were bright plastic colours and space age designs everywhere, from coffee shops to car washes. Cars and home appliances were more colourful too. When I moved to NY in the '70s it was a very drab place colour-wise, and I thought a little brightening up would help it a bit.

If you had to choose one place, only one, to live the rest of your life, where it would be? LA, NY, Brazil or somewhere else?

I could retire to Brazil and become a fully-fledged beach hippie. One day when I slow down...

In your houses in LA and Brazil you have amazing gardens. What's your relationship with nature? Do you need to get out of the built environment sometimes?

Nature is what feeds me. It's where I get my energy and inspiration from. Even an indoor plant in NY can soothe me. I relish the peace of pure nature.

You customised a lot of cars too. Do you use your car a lot? How much California Kustom Culture influenced your practice?

In LA I drive. Driving and cars have always been around. I'm obsessed with car culture and all the



Scharf Schack, Prince Street, Soho, New York 1992.

ramifications good and bad that go along with it. I was exposed at an early age to Big Daddy Roth and Kustom Car Culture and I obviously love the counter culture aspect of fun and fantasy involved.

Are you interested in cars as vehicles to explore and re-design space, like the space-ships in The Jetsons? I'm curious because in your paintings you seem interested in the abstract trajectories they leave behind.

I love the idea of car as spaceship, and I love the fantasy of private space travel - if only in my mind while gazing at a Cadillac fin. I love the suggestion of movement

in the wake of a fast moving vehicle! Zoom!

You customised a golf cart too and used it for a performance project at the Deitch Projects' Art Parade in Soho in 2007. I was in the parade with my own project and remember you rushing around like crazy in the cart with your crew of Flinstones-like ravers. And transforming New York into a wonderland in the process. Are you interested in 'acting' in the public sphere, involving a random audience of people who aren't expecting it?

I always love to surprise and take people out of the boring mundane (that word again) and open them up to the infinite possibilities of fantasy!

It seems to me, after this conversation, that your work has more to do with researching a conceptual kind of space than with pop surrealism in a fine-arts way. You make surrealism expand daily life, not only through paintings and sculptures but through living environments as well. You use your life as a tool to turn reality into a dream. Is it there anything you'd like to add? I love your interpretation of what I do and I think you hit it right on the button! Bring the fantasy into reality! Why settle for less?

All artwork imagery courtesy of Kenny Scharf & Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York.

