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Artist Kenny Scharf Turns an L.A. Gallery into a Recycled Funhouse

Repurposing thrift-store paintings, artist Kenny Scharf examines the culture of disposable everything at a new solo show in L.A.

TEXT BY MICHAEL SLENSKE · Posted February 28, 2015



Kenny Scharf's solo show, "Born Again," at Honor Fraser Gallery in L.A.
Photo: Joshua White/JWPictures.com

"I've been making paintings on found thrift-store paintings for about 20 years," says Kenny Scharf, walking through his fourth solo show, "Born Again," at L.A.'s Honor Fraser Gallery, where scores of his repurposed pieces are hung in large rooms separated by white walls. Ten years ago, the artist took a landscape of a forest—which he found hanging in the Joshua Tree home of his friend and collaborator Ann Magnuson—and adulterated it with turquoise dinosauresque figures. After that piece, he began adding cartoonish figures (Kool-Aid-like pitchers, menacing "Tar" creatures and "Fukushima" monsters) to once-mundane portraits, including a rabbi holding books, a virginal damsel posed against a white picket fence, and tropicalia of all kinds.

"There's so many ways to think about are the painters? Were they artists? Where did it hang? Then I see Lilian Cooper," he says, pointing to the signature on a still life of a vase full of roses atop a table now populated with pairs of Scharf's frolicking "Furry Fellows." "And I wonder, What would she think?"

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Fukushima Landing, 2014, Kenny Scharf. Courtesy Honor Fraser Gallery

Photo: Joshua White/JWPictures.com

If the excited looks on the faces of attendees at the “Born Again” opening party were any indication, she would be delighted. In addition to paintings, Scharf also recycled detritus from the street and the studio—everything from detergent boxes and CDs to discarded toys and lenticular photos of NASA satellites—and set them in pools of painted gesso for his “Space Vomit” canvases. Like the Fukushima monsters, these works employ a kitschy Day-Glo aesthetic to address concerns about environmental disasters and pollution.

“I’ve been obsessed with garbage and the environment since I was growing up in the Valley with the ecology movement in the ’60s. The smog was so bad I couldn’t breathe sometimes, and it affected me,” Scharf says. “Back then I read about population explosion and pollution, and now all those predictions are here. But people still choose to go about their daily lives like it’s all fine and dandy.”

Elsewhere, Scharf’s iconic 1979 painting *Self-Portrait with Cadillac* provides some space-age nostalgia, as do videos of performances—many filmed with Magnuson and Scharf’s former roommate Keith Haring—that were originally screened in the late ’70s and early ’80s at New York’s legendary Club 57, The Kitchen, and at the groundbreaking “Times Square Show.”

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A set piece featuring videos by Scharf from the '70s and early '80s.

Photo courtesy of Honor Fraser

The works play on a loop from vintage console TVs within rumpus-room-like sets . “When videos are shown in museums or galleries, it’s usually pretty boring,” says Scharf. “I wanted to make it more fun, inviting, and visually stimulating.”

As artistic fun houses go, Scharf’s succeeds at every turn.

Through April 4 at Honor Fraser Gallery, 2622 South La Cienega Boulevard, Los Angeles; honorfraser.com