

## Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

### The World Catches Up to Kenny Scharf

by Michael Slenske  
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"I'm not a kid anymore, and it's kind of funny to have someone in their fifties running around spray-painting walls—but it's fun, I like to do it," says Kenny Scharf. He's not the only one. After putting up a mural on the Goldman Properties wall at Houston and Bowery—the site of



Keith Haring's famous 1982 mural and subsequent treatments by Brazilian street artists Os Gemeos, Shepard Fairey, and Barry McGee—it was bombed (twice) by graffiti writers. Although going over someone's work is more or less the law of the street, especially at this spot (see: Fairy, Shepard), the controversy ratcheted up a notch this month when Tony Goldman installed security cameras at the site. "Spraypaint has this connotation of graffiti and graffiti has this connotation of gangs," says Scharf. "It scares some people."

Not Scharf, apparently. He's still bombing walls across Los Angeles and near his Bushwick studio, in the basement of which he hosts mind-bending, Day Glo Cosmic Cavern dance-a-thons. He's recently reconstructed these environments for The Hole, and will replicate it again in Moscow in March, and in April - as the original Cosmic Closet—inside the section dedicated to the East Village's legendary Fun Gallery at LA MoCA's upcoming "Art in the Streets" show. He's also painting murals in Chelsea for marketing media company Mediacy Outdoors' "Gatescapes" series.

Come January 27, he's opening two solo shows, "Naturafutura" and "Three Dozen" at Paul Kasmin. The former, at 293 Tenth Avenue, is a tour through Scharf's pastel and neon-tinted paradise. In four wall-size canvases, airbrush-like oil and acrylic work meet with spraypaint to form Wonka-like swamps, cartoonish oceans, and cosmic jungles of inflatable purple palm trees. "I don't look at any picture, there's no silkscreen imagery," says Scharf about his methods of invention. "But the things I'm obsessed with I've been obsessed with since I was a little kid: nature, the effect of man on nature, the past, the future, outer-space."

# T O T A H

Many of the lush, tropical, and otherworldly, environs surrounding his studio in Bahia, Brazil inspired the work. It's not all pretty pictures, though. Despite the overall cheeriness—the seahorses and sharks and razor-teethed creatures of his oeuvre that ultimately leave viewers with a smile despite their menace - the black globules in Scharf's BP oil spill-inspired Oil Painting (2010), may represent some of his most politicized work to date. "It's literally a protest painting. Most of the paintings are celebrating nature, but this one is screaming about the destruction of nature."

Against the bubbly darkness of Oil Painting, Scharf shows a suite of 36 two-by-two-foot paintings of donuts, to be shown in a grid at Kasmin's 27th Street gallery. It's a classic pop moment, but it isn't a totally saccharine gesture. "A lot of people ask me why I do the donuts and there's a million reasons," says Scharf, who's been painting the breakfast pastries since the Nineties. "They're kind of bad for you but they're great to look at and they're great to eat. Also I like this theory that the universe is shaped like a donut. They're just a great image: It's cosmic, it's pop, it's everything I love."

He relates the two series through his childhood obsession with TV. "They're very different [bodies of work]. Almost like two different people painted them," he adds. "It's like changing a channel, one is watching Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom then you change the channel to the Dunkin' Donuts commercial. It's all from watching too much TV as a kid."

Since the Eighties, when the L.A.-born Scharf broke onto the scene as a street artist with Keith Haring and Jean Michel-Basquiat, he's developed a space-age cartoon vocabulary (mainly via silkscreen and spraypaint) on walls, canvases, sculptures, surfboards, even his household cleaning tools. In 2009, he collaborated with Movado on a series of six watches.

But even if they draw headlines, fashion collaborations aren't career-makers, and institutions haven't taken his work seriously, or as seriously as he'd like. "I think, possibly, I've been ahead of my time and the rest of the world may be catching up to it. It's funny because they say, 'When it rains, it pours.' So I'm running with it," he says, noting there's one mountain he's yet to conquer. "One day I would like to have a museum show. I've been in museums, I'm in the collection of a lot of them, but I've never gotten my own show even though all of my contemporaries have," says Scharf. "I have thousands of paintings dating back 30 years, and no one's really seen them." The world has a lot to catch up on.

**"NATURAFUTURA" AND "THREE DOZEN" OPEN JANUARY 27 AT PAUL KASMIN.**