

# T O T A H

The New York Times

## That's Not a Basement, It's Art

By PENELOPE GREEN JUNE 3, 2009



Michael Falco for The New York Times

Last Friday, Kenny Scharf, the ever-youthful psychedelic painter, performance artist and “customizer,” as he puts it, of home appliances like ovens and blenders, was showing off his latest Cosmic Cavern, turning on the black lights and picking out plastic empties he found tucked among the painted toasters and glittery Tide boxes. (There had been a party the week before, and he was still cleaning up, he said.)

Set in the basement of the Bushwick warehouse where Mr. Scharf has been living and working for about a year and a half, the Cavern is alive with the spirit of the early '80s, lined in the Day-Glo-painted trash-bedecked panels he once deployed in nightclubs and galleries. (They can be seen in “Kenny Scharf,” a new monograph on the artist from Rizzoli, with essays by Carlo McCormick, Richard Marshall and Ann Magnuson.)

# T O T A H

After a 20-year hiatus from New York and its party scene, during which he worked and raised his daughters, Zena, now 25, and Malia, 21, in Miami and then Los Angeles, Mr. Scharf, 50, is back in the city and hosting parties, which he still considers a joyous extension of his artwork. “My art is a lifestyle,” Mr. Scharf said. And painting household objects the way he does “is a way to make your mundane tasks and objects magical,” he said. “If your appliance breaks down or wears out, it’s still useful because it remains ... art.”

Mr. Scharf’s first dance party, in 1981, was put on in an environment he designed called the Cosmic Closet, in the Times Square apartment he shared with Keith Haring (the Closet soon changed into a Cavern and migrated to P.S. 1 and, eventually, to the Whitney Museum). Those were the days Mr. Scharf used to walk his silver-painted, embellished vacuum cleaner along Broadway, like a pet.

Last week, Mr. Scharf showed this reporter two adorable Roombas — disc-shaped robotic vacuum cleaners that drive themselves — that he has customized as wild-eyed characters. “That’s Spic and that’s Span,” he said, and sat down on a Dumpster-harvested sofa painted with the word “fun!”

Nearly 30 years ago, Mr. Scharf’s cartoony do-it-yourself environments were a retort to a grimly professional art world — and a whole lot of fun. They still are.

---

A version of this article appears in print on , on page D3 of the New York edition with the headline: That’s Not a Basement, It’s Art. Order Reprints | Today’s Paper | Subscribe