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Kenny Scharf's Chair at Auction. Those Lips and Eyes!

By JOYCE WADLER MAY 5, 2010



The Kenny Scharf chair, Chairee. Joshua Bright for The New York Times

THE artist Kenny Scharf's contribution to Unframed, the [art auction](#) held in Manhattan last week by ACRIA, the AIDS Community Research Initiative of America, was a duck-yellow B&B Italia chair he had ornamented with red lips and big blue cartoon eyes. The guest we thought would have the greatest affinity for it was a tall woman in a black tutu, whose lean upper body and long white-stockinged legs gave her a birdlike air.

The woman, Angela Altchek, a nurse, and her husband, Dr. Douglas Altchek, a dermatologist, did spend a lot of time hovering over the chair, which we had been told was named Chairee and which, like many Scharf works, seemed as much creature as object. At the beginning of the evening, it carried a handwritten, don't-you-dare-spill-your-drink-on-this-chair-or-even-pet-it sign: "This chair is valued at \$30,000." The floor bid was \$7,000, and only bids in increments of \$2,000 were to be entertained.

Nonetheless, after several minutes of interspecies eye lock, it was clear that Ms. Altchek would not be welcoming Chairee into her home.

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Kenny Scharf and Malia, his daughter, at the auction. Joshua Bright for The New York Times

“I’m trying to visualize it in our apartment,” she said. “We have rather conservative early American furniture. We need something different, but there’s something about a piece of furniture that stares back at you.”

“It reminds me of something from ‘The Great Gatsby,’ ” her husband said. “What is it? Oh, yes, the ophthalmology sign, with the eyes.”

Ms. Altchek was studying Chairee’s lips.

“They could do with a little plumping, a little filler,” she said.

Ah, well, she is married to a dermatologist. Would they be bidding?

As with “a lot of pretty women,” Dr. Altchek said, “you look, but you don’t take them home.”

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ACRIA has been holding art auctions to benefit AIDS research for several years. The two-day event, kicked off Wednesday evening at the Manhattan House apartment complex on the Upper East Side, was hosted by the designer Nicole Miller; Margaret Russell, Elle Décor editor in chief, and Mr. Scharf. A half-dozen handsome young waiters offered exceptionally pretty orange and yellow cocktails at the entrance of the 4,500-square-foot penthouse, which formerly rented for \$28,000 a month and will be going on the market somewhat “north of \$10 million.” (We talked to Brian Fallon, a partner at O’Connor Capital Partners, the Manhattan House developers.) Partygoers at the preview on Wednesday roamed the rooms, checking out works by new and established artists at cut-rate prices.

“Naked children and kitty cats, I don’t think so,” the designer Richard Mishaan said, turning on his heel after an instant assessment, suggesting to us that he would be a very efficient fellow to shop with.

The star was Mr. Scharf’s chair, which was sitting in the living room with the wraparound terrace, along with two black B&B Italia sofas that resembled blackened marshmallows. It had personality and made people smile, but we didn’t think that many people wanted to live with it.

“I think it would be perfect if I had a 6-year-old with a romper room,” said Jeffrey Podolsky, a freelance writer who reports on design. “But it reminds me of ‘Howard the Duck.’”

And you, Ms. Russell?

“It wouldn’t be right for my house, but it’s not about me, it’s about the art,” said Ms. Russell, who not for nothing has been editor in chief of a fancy magazine all these years. Then, on safer ground: “Look, Ross Bleckner for \$1,200. The original is in the Guggenheim.”

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How about you, Cesar Angel? (Mr. Angel, 35, a trainer for the national health literacy program at ACRIA who lives in Brooklyn, was looking very fit with his muscular and heavily tattooed arms bulging out of his T-shirt.) What are your thoughts about Chairee the chair?

“I saw the little lips and it kind of reminded me of a rubber ducky,” Mr. Angel said. “I would have something like that in my house. I like a mix of old and new.”

He gestured toward a small part of the room: “Of course, my apartment would fit in that corner.”

When the party was well under way, Mr. Scharf arrived, wearing a pale suit. Our discussion of Chairee the chair was sidelined as he told one of the evening’s organizers that he was not happy to see his chair up against the wall — he had very specifically made it three-dimensional on all sides, like sculpture. As we had missed that Chairee had lips on her back as well as her front, he had a point.

That done, we told him of our survey: People enjoyed the chair, but most didn’t want to live with it. It seemed to us that the tiniest flicker of annoyance passed over his face, two brief diagonal lines above the cheeks and under the eyes.

“What can I say?” Mr. Scharf said. “I just do what I do.”

He had put faces on his some of his own furniture, he added, and he didn’t limit it to furniture.

“It’s not just chairs with faces, it’s everything — everything has a face,” Mr. Scharf said. “To me, it’s pretty natural. I take everyday things and animate them. Some things are kind of boring — you can turn them into a magical experience.”

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He was growing rather animated himself. A pretty young woman in a brightly colored shirt with cartoon faces that seemed kin to Chairee hovered on the outskirts of the conversation.

“A boring telephone that everybody has,” Mr. Scharf was saying. “If you can customize it and you use the phone, you are using art and making it part of your life.”

Who might this young lady be?

It was Malia Scharf, 22, Mr. Scharf’s daughter, wearing a shirt he had designed for Todd Oldham in the ’80s.

“Vintage,” Ms. Scharf said. “I take all my mother’s clothes.”

“She’s the best art piece,” her father said.

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