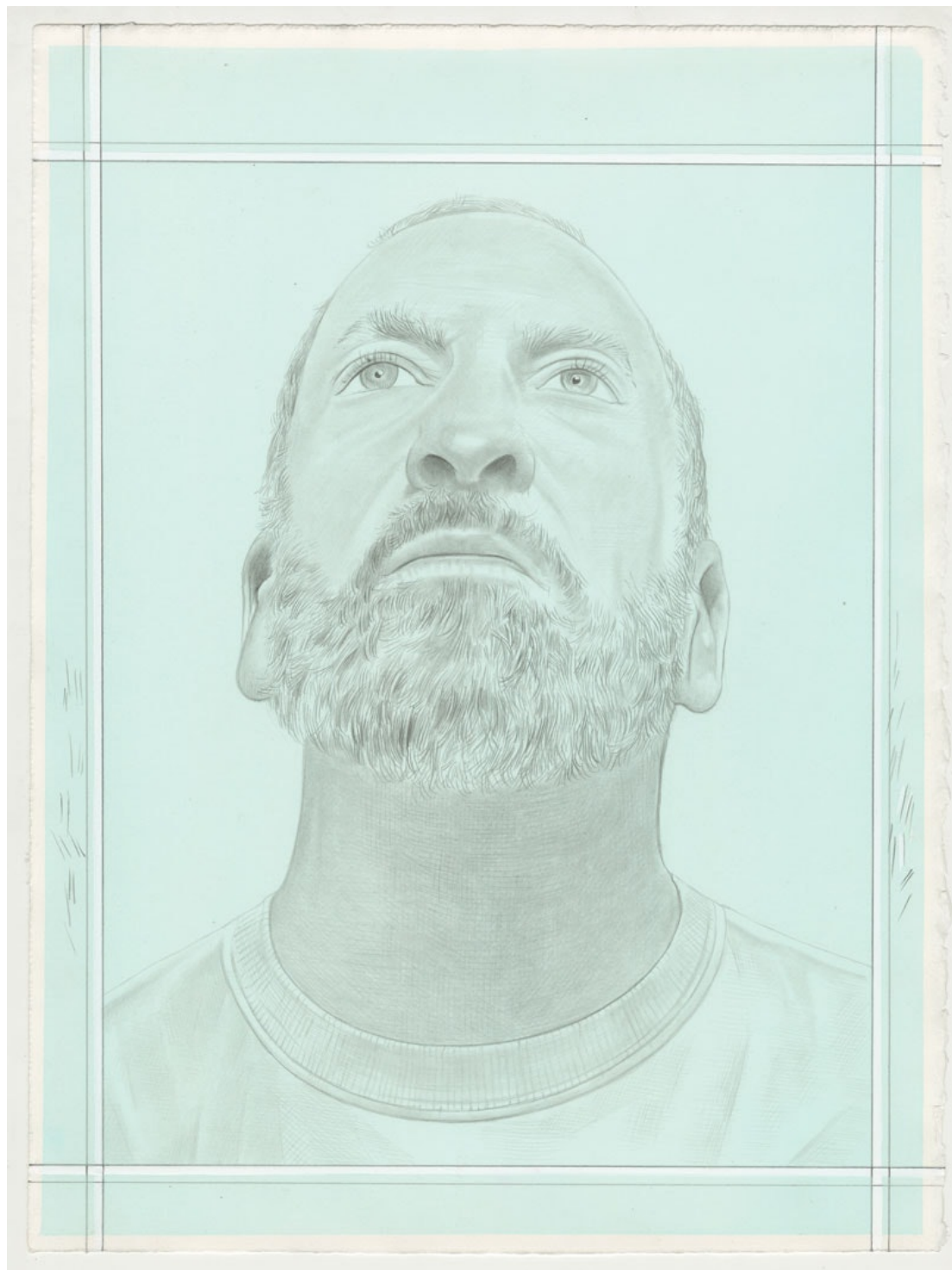


**Kenny Scharf with Jason Rosenfeld**

**"I've been making art out of trash forever, engaging the way that trash meets with technology."**

JUNE 2022



Portrait of Kenny Scharf, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui. Based on a photo by Robert Banat.

## TOTAH

Kenny Scharf: *WOODZ 'N THINGZ*

April 21st – June 25th 2022

California-born artist Kenny Scharf, who made a name for himself in the 1980s East Village street art scene, is having his second solo show at TOTAH, on view through June 25, consisting of paintings and two works involving the bodies of TV sets. Titled *WOODZ 'N THINGZ*, the exhibition opened the day before Earth Day and many of the works, all dated 2022, respond to the dire health of the planet, a long-time concern of the artist. I sat down with him at the gallery during his first visit back to New York in three years.

**Jason Rosenfeld (Rail):** What was it like going to the School of Visual Arts (SVA)?

**Kenny Scharf:** I got there in 1978 and I had this whole fantasy in my head of New York and New York artists. I applied to some twenty schools. I had been painting since I was three. It was the only school that would accept me.

**Rail:** You had a portfolio that you could submit for admission?

**Scharf:** Yeah. But they didn't like it. But then I got to SVA and I realized, "oh, they take anybody here." [Laughter] Which was fine! And then I looked around, and I saw the same suburban kids that I left behind in California. And I had this other idea of what it'd be like. But then within a few days I met Keith [Haring] and Jean [Jean-Michel Basquiat], the people I was looking for, in my mind. But my first couple of days, I thought, these are just suburban kids. They're from Long Island instead of the San Fernando Valley, but they look the same. The thing is, I didn't really care about art school. I just wanted to be in New York. My parents were freaking out, they said I had to go to school. You couldn't just go to New York. So, I also applied to schools in LA and Rhode Island, but the only one that accepted me was SVA, and I was thrilled because it meant I'd get to be in New York. As far as teachers go, I fought a lot with Paul Waldman. He ran the painting program and was the head of the fine arts department. People, even the students, got upset with me because I would be in class doing my thing, and I'd be laughing. I was melting plastic dinosaurs, just making this crazy shit, just having fun, and they got mad that I was having a good time. But who wrote the book that says you have to suffer in order to create? I suffered plenty creating, but that's not my goal.

**Rail:** What was Waldman trying to elicit? Was it kind of utterly serious abstract painting?

**Scharf:** Yes. He only wanted color field paintings.

**Rail:** [Laughter] Which by the way was twenty years old in 1978, right? And what do you think the impetus was for that?

**Scharf:** Sometimes teachers, in certain situations, are threatened by new stuff. But then I had other teachers like Barbara Schwartz, may she rest in peace. She was super cool. She just said, "Oh, you want to take all these televisions that you found in the street and stack them up and take them apart? And do this and that? Cool!" I felt a lot of support from her.

**Rail:** Was she a sculptor?

**Scharf:** Yes. And then there was Elizabeth Murray. Super nice lady. Very supportive. They had some really good teachers there, like Judy Pfaff. When you see my "Cosmic Caverns," I think I got ideas from her installations. Mine were plastic garbage, but there was that feeling of lots of stuff in an environment.



Installation view from *Kenny Scharf: WOODZ 'N THINGZ* at TOTAH gallery. April 21 - June 25, 2022. Courtesy of TOTAH

**Rail:** In school, the worst thing you can do as a teacher is to try to make students who do what you do, to find people who amplify what you do. That's just negative.

**Scharf:** But I have felt sometimes that if they hate you, that's a good sign. You're doing something right.

**Rail:** Well, you're not there to have them throw roses at you. Was there anyone at the school who was *so* ready to go that they didn't need any guidance?

**Scharf:** Keith. In fact, he stopped going to school. He was like, I don't *need* to be here. And I actually stopped too.

**Rail:** Did you ever finish?

**Scharf:** I didn't show up to get my diploma, because I was already off in the East Village. And then I found out that they were awarding me a prize. Elizabeth Murray nominated me for something. I don't know if it was a prize, but they actually did notice me. And then I was just gone. Years later, probably about ten years ago, some kids from SVA came to visit me in LA and they gave me my diploma. And now I'm kind of the artist from SVA that they're proud of. And I'm happy to support that. But at the time I fought with them quite a bit. And one of the things that was lacking was that it was all talking about art, especially the art at the time, which was very minimal and conceptual. I was yearning for some actual instruction, technical things.

**Rail:** The nuts and bolts of it, which they don't ever teach you.

**Scharf:** That's lacking. And it's a bad word, "craft." But it's just crazy to me. For example, if you want to make records or make music you could do it on a machine. But wouldn't it be good to know how to play some instruments, or read music before you do that? Same goes with art. You could end up doing stuff digitally, but wouldn't it be good to know how to paint before? I would think it would be. I had this teacher, his name was Noel Mahaffey, and he was a photorealist oil painter. He taught me a lot of the techniques of photorealism. I was like, "Okay, well, thank you! And now I'm going to try to make stuff look real that you can't photograph because it's *not* real." So that's why the kind of painting that I do is of objects that you feel you could touch.

**Rail:** Why wouldn't they teach materials and technique?

**Scharf:** That is a problem with art schools in general. I taught at UCLA and Otis. I couldn't do it very long because, honestly, it's hard. I'd have to go take a nap afterwards, it was so draining. But I remember going into a graduate painting class and I asked, "Has anyone ever taught you guys the most basic thing where you take a cube, a cone, and a ball, and you light it?" "No, no one ever taught us that." "Ok, so we're doing that." I think it's important, whether you use it or not, to have some skills. And that kind of was a disappointment at school. I just received an honorary doctorate from the New York Academy of Art. I remember going to visit that school, because Andy [Warhol] took me there back when the school started. It was on Lafayette. I saw that it was about life drawing models. And that's *all* it was about. And I thought, "Oh, wow, this is interesting, very traditional, no one's doing that anymore." As much as art evolves, and it's obviously idea based, it's important.

**Rail:** You need to have a certain skill set to be able to dump it.

**Scharf:** And I don't know why the word "craft" became so bad. I'm all for craft. I want that. I want people to know how to do stuff, because I like to see the artist painting. I like to see the touch. It turns me on. I want to see it, to feel it. And so often merely digital or conceptual art, I understand it and I appreciate it, but it leaves me cold. I need, I desire, I *seek* emotion. I want to feel it. I don't want to not feel.

**Rail:** Do you feel you're innately aesthetic?

**Scharf:** Very much.

**Rail:** Able to literally turn garbage into gold. I don't mean monetary gold, something of a larger value.

**Scharf:** I just love the idea of using an idea, an object, anything discarded that no one cares about.

**Rail:** Can that be taught?

**Scharf:** No. In fact, that's what I came to learn about school, and all this talk about philosophy and talk about talk and talk.

**Rail:** The theoretical armature behind it.

**Scharf:** Yes, the theoretical. It's exhausting. You can't teach someone how to be an artist. Either you are or you aren't. I think almost everyone is born an artist, all children. And then some people lose it. And some people just keep on it. And that becomes their thing. But you can teach some technical things. Those are things you *can* teach. So that's where I think art school fails. As a young artist, you have these ambitions. But I didn't want to do it the way I saw it being done. And I always believed, I still do, in art for everyone. But I don't want to limit it to only art—it's all for everyone. I just see myself as lots of different things. I want to be an artist that's giving and available. I do public murals. I don't charge for them. And I do t-shirts and whatnot. So that's for kids, you know, they fuckin' love it. And then I have my adult ambitions. I want museum shows. I want all that shit.

**Rail:** I reviewed the Whitney's *Fast Forward: Painting from the 1980s* show in 2017, and I love the way they opened with your big painting, *When the Worlds Collide* (1984). Which is so very different from the new work. The style has changed. The material to a degree has changed.

**Scharf:** I say the style hasn't changed.

**Rail:** You don't think so? These seem very beautifully controlled in a way, a controlled chaos.

**Scharf:** I think that comes with age. It's refinement. I've been doing this since I was three, but professionally in galleries for about forty years. It's funny. I look at my old paintings, and I think, God, it's so crude, I was learning in front of everybody. Just with age you hopefully get better. And more refined. I know I'm more controlled, and it just kind of comes out different. Maybe easier, actually. Less effort.

**Rail:** The theme of this show is related to the environment, woods, with Earth Day tomorrow?

**Scharf:** Trees, forests, initially, but I can't ever stay in the lines. Then I kind of branched out, and that's when we decided to call it *WOODZ 'N THINGZ*.

**Rail:** The titles are your own language?

**Scharf:** Always. I've been doing that forever.

**Rail:** In this first gallery these are all oil paintings?

**Scharf:** Yes, except the backgrounds in both *WOODZ* and *FUZZOODZ* are acrylic.

**Rail:** The background is acrylic and diluted?

**Scharf:** Yes. They're started on the floor. This is the puddle in the center, see. Because of gravity they do this thing.

**Rail:** It settles in the middle, the paint. Is that because they're not stretched?

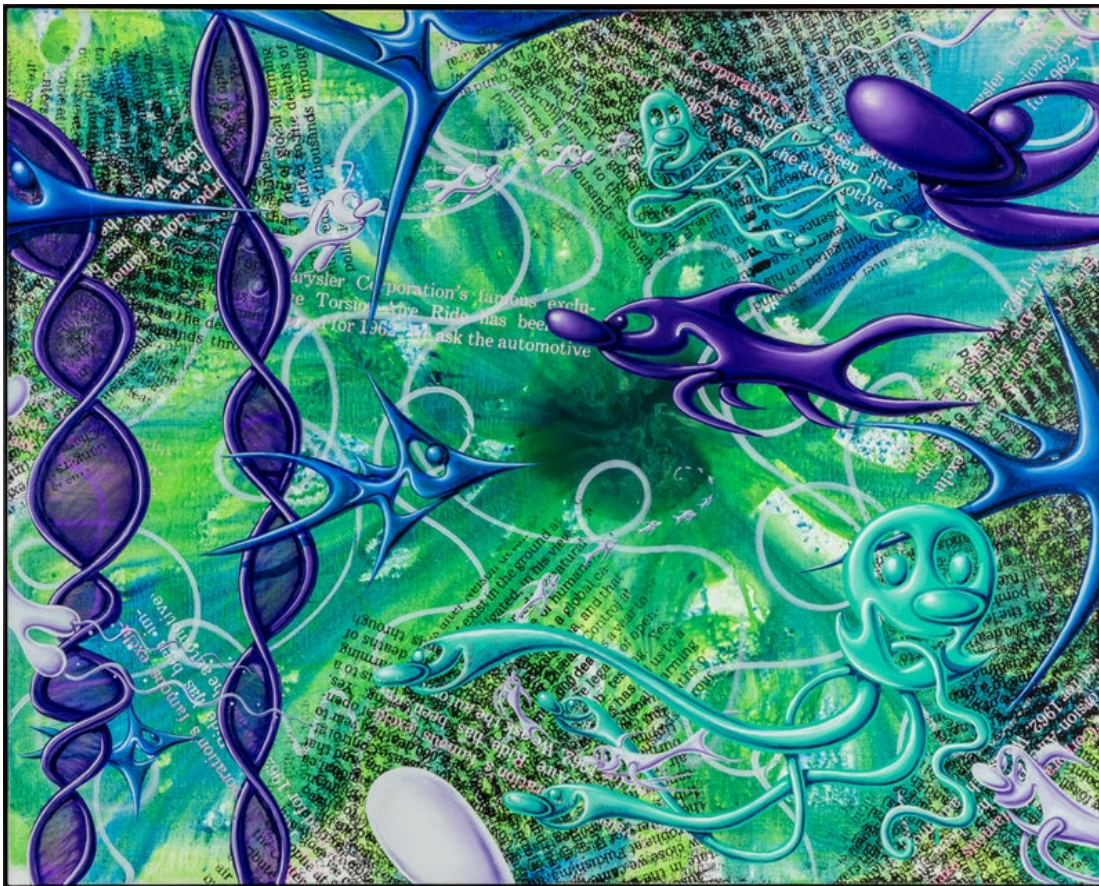
**Scharf:** They are stretched. Water hits gravity and then it just flows.

**Rail:** It just puddles in the center. And you have to wait for it to dry. It looks marbled in the middle, and it becomes like a black hole a little bit.

**Scharf:** Exactly. The edge is the highest because it doesn't respond to the weight of the water. And then it all seems to flow. And then the puddle becomes a vortex. There's one, two, three, four layers. It's the acrylic, the spray, then the silkscreen, and then the oil.

**Rail:** And this is *KELP US*.

**Scharf:** Kelp, but also like DNA.



Kenny Scharf, *KELP US*, 2022. Oil, acrylic, spray paint & silk screen ink on linen with powder coated aluminum frame. 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and TOTAH.

**Rail:** DNA strands on the left, these purple, shimmering sort of strands, interweaving lines. I just keep thinking of arabesques, that kind of fluid quality.

**Scharf:** Well, these are all shapes that we use, decoration coming from nature. And the motifs of nature that we repeat and I totally respond to. That's my language. And then each painting is different, but it's not really controlled. The fun part about this is its nature.

**Rail:** Literally organic.

**Scharf:** Yes.

**Rail:** You do the background on the floor, and then you put it up and paint the foreground elements.

**Scharf:** In oil. This one, *ZPRUNGZ*, is still very wet and mixed media. The idea was to do it real sloppy and not with the same refinement and then go back in and kind of mold it. And this is just basically it—put it down and apply it and walk away.



Kenny Scharf, *ZPRUNGZ*, 2022. Oil & acrylic on linen with powder coated aluminum frame 70 × 90 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and TOTAH.

**Rail:** It's still dripping.

**Scharf:** I have different kinds of techniques. That's why I said my style didn't change. My style is similar, but my technique in the process is always changing.

**Rail:** You think of the style in terms of the drawing and the general shapes and the flow of forms. I see these cartoonish arabesques all the time. But these drips do feel natural, like slugs, slimy.

**Scharf:** I use a lot of stand oil. And it stays glistening. Linseed oil that has been dried in the sun. And it keeps it glossy, gushy, wet, without varnish.

**Rail:** With pictures like this there's no composition, there's no preliminary sketch?

**Scharf:** None of them. It's a discovery in the process. Not everything I do is that way, but everything in this show is. And almost everything I've been doing lately is. I come to an idea, and I just start, and I don't know what I want it to look like. It's super fun and fast. It's like this real release. And then I start painting in the characters. And then I start cursing myself because it gets more and more complicated. It's almost like I've made this puzzle for myself. And I have to find a way out of it. To the end. So *ZPRUNGZ* is very much like that.

**Rail:** You paint yourself into a little bit of a corner—

**Scharf:** Exactly.

**Rail:** —and then you have to finish it to your satisfaction.

**Scharf:** I start off real fast and free and then I lock in to get to the end, and I find myself doing all the box faces, as in *'N THINGZ*.

**Rail:** All these forms look like spirographs, which we played with when I was a kid—

**Scharf:** Yes, I love spirographs.

**Rail:** That circularity with the sort of freedom of the flow. This is just the wet brush, going at a rapid pace. And then it becomes something mechanomorphic with all these characters.

**Scharf:** There's worlds beyond the world—a lot of the blocky things with faces are architecture in my mind, buildings and structures that we make. And then the others are emotional and characters. And most of the time I don't even know what it is. Often I figure it out later. And make up a story.

**Rail:** These figures and forms, it feels like it's sort of muscle memory, your characters, in repertory, that you've used for decades and decades.

**Scharf:** My cast of characters. And it feels natural to do it.

**Rail:** Do you think about these as individuals or as types?

**Scharf:** I liken them to emotional states. It could be mine. It could be my reaction. Spirits?

**Rail:** They do have very different expressions. Do you think that that's something that's evolved in your use of them over the years?

**Scharf:** Everything is evolving. And if it's not, then you're not going anywhere! [*Laughs*]

**Rail:** You're perpetually eighteen.

**Scharf:** Perpetually fifteen, probably [*Laughter*—I gotta keep myself excited. And the unknown. All of that is so important in what I'm doing and discovering. If you plan it all out before it feels like homework.

**Rail:** But these pictures are quite different from your murals. Because it's a discrete area that you're working with. And you're always able to see the whole thing. That's a different challenge from murals. This one is titled *STARGET*.



Kenny Scharf, *STARGET*, 2022. Oil on linen with powder coated aluminum frame. 72 × 60 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and TOTAH.

**Scharf:** A friend of mine died. I was still pretty sad about it. I decided I was going to make the darkest, darkest painting. And this color is deep Prussian blue, but I couldn't help myself. I put the light in there. I started out to do the darkest thing I could do, but then there was light, so it *isn't* the darkest painting.

**Rail:** You sort of painted your way out of it. Momentarily, at least.

**Scharf:** I think I offered a little hope to myself.

**Rail:** There's a famous painting by J.M.W. Turner, the English Romantic artist, *Peace—Burial at Sea* (1842), about the death of his friend David Wilkie. And he painted a ship with dark sails, and his famous line was: "I only wish I had any color to make them blacker," because he felt so melancholy and sad about his friend's death.

**Scharf:** I wanted to express that, but there's something in me that is always optimistic, no matter what.

**Rail:** *STARGET* has a different tonality from the other works, a centrifugal, gravitational pull. And there are all these spinning characters going around counterclockwise. There's a cosmic element.

**Scharf:** That's definitely a major theme. I was a child of the space age. Growing up, that was probably my biggest obsession.

**Rail:** You watched the moon landing?

**Scharf:** Of course. In '69 I was eleven. I totally remember it. My parents were visiting some friends and they had a kid my age. They had a boat. It was in a marina. I remember we got off the boat and we were running. And they're all watching it on TV in this marina clubhouse. But growing up, it was like, "Oh, yeah, in 1984 you will be able to get a ticket and go to the moon." And then, of course, I grew up in LA and the plastic world and all the cars and the gas stations and the restaurants and every single piece of architecture was like "outer space!" Those future-y, fantasy things were my first visuals. That in combination with all the messages that were being sent out to me. That's kind of my whole thing with the Jetsons. I identified with Elroy, that was me, I was a space boy of the future. Space, it's so spiritual to me.

**Rail:** Any desire to go up on an Elon Musk rocket?

**Scharf:** It's funny, because my whole life I was like, "Oh, I'm dying to go to space." Forget it. I don't want to go. First, I can't even go on a roller coaster. And you know what else? Space is right here. We are in space. I don't need to go to space. I'm already in space.

**Rail:** And the whole dialogue about these people paying all this money to go up there.

**Scharf:** It's disgusting. It makes me sick. I don't want to live on Mars. This is a *great* planet. Let's try to keep it. I'm not trying to go somewhere else where there's no air.

**Rail:** Exactly. You'd just be inside all day.

**Scharf:** My mom passed away, but I used to go visit her out in the desert. And if you go out in the summer, it's 125 degrees. And I remember getting out of the car, and then you go into the air conditioning. And I'm sitting in my mom's place, and you look outside and you go, "If I go out there, I'll die."

**Rail:** Yeah, you'll burn.

**Scharf:** And I thought, this must be like what it's like to live in outer space and you can't go outside.

**Rail:** Better to save this planet.

**Scharf:** I think so.

**Rail:** Make it habitable.

**Scharf:** I would.

**Rail:** Do you make a distinction between paintings which seem more activist than other works? Because *KELP ME* feels environmentally activist.

**Scharf:** Everything that I've been freaking out about my whole life is happening.

**Rail:** Was this something you were kind of aware of when you were young?

**Scharf:** This has been my main theme. Growing up in California in the sixties, the ecology movement was what I totally was built into. I grew up in the Valley. And back when I grew up, there were no emission controls. The Valley was especially bad, and I remember some days I could barely open my eyes and my lungs would hurt. This has always been kind of my thing.

**Rail:** You have an electric car?

**Scharf:** Yes. But I also have an electric bike, and that's how I get around to my studio and back. Which is seven miles each way. Because I go up and down the hills. I get guilt just flying here. I know I'm a hypocrite. And I'm conscious of it while I do it. It actually is killing me a little bit, every time I get in the car. And I can't stop thinking about it. I'm obsessed.

**Rail:** This is the new nuclear anxiety that we grew up with in the Cold War.

**Scharf:** It is.

**Rail:** Now it's the environmental anxiety.

**Scharf:** This is worse because we're watching it happen. Instead of this existential thing that it happens, and we're all gone. Fast. Or a couple weeks or something, depending on where it lands. And I have grandchildren. It's so upsetting. I just think about their world.

**Rail:** Do other works in the show sort of address these issues?



Kenny Scharf, *FUZZOODZ*, 2022. Oil and acrylic on linen with powder coated aluminum frame 60 × 48 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and TOTAH.

**Scharf:** Well, I think that in a way there's something you could find in all of them, like *FUZZOODZ*.

**Rail:** Very few people on the planet can speak this language. *FUZZOODZ*.

**Scharf:** This one I'd say isn't really very dire, more of a celebration. Sometimes I want to warn that there's beauty but it's fucked. And sometimes I just want to say, you know what, I need joy right now. So I decide to celebrate.

**Rail:** These happy creatures in the rainforest.

**Scharf:** Yeah, living in the jungle with my peeps.

**Rail:** This one here is made from the body of a tube TV, *RCA XL-100*?

**Scharf:** I had a whole series, probably starting ten years ago: "TV BAX," I call them. And I had a whole show with Honor Fraser of "TV BAX." Usually they're very brightly painted and I'll paint in eyes and nose and mouth. I find them when I'm driving around.

**Rail:** People leave them on the sidewalk.



**Scharf:** Yes. This one was hanging on my wall. I kept looking at it, and I thought, okay, I don't need to do anything to it. Then I just couldn't help it. I put these little googly eyes there. And then I painted it with this beautiful car paint. It's almost a readymade.

**Rail:** It's readymade aided, Duchamp would say. Tweaked.

**Scharf:** Yes. Readymade tweaked.

**Rail:** What's the appeal of the back of the TV? As a sculpted object?

**Scharf:** Well, *look* at that. I keep thinking about who designs these. Because each one is way different. They're all so imaginative. And I see faces in all of them. They're totally totem heads. No one looks at the back. Places that no one looks, I love. Well, they made that, someone actually designed it. Did they think that was a face when they designed it? Or is it just me?

**Rail:** Is this kind of a rejection of everything we see of video art, and installations with monitors—

**Scharf:** That too.

**Rail:** —and screens and the idea of, you know, pumping content in it?

**Scharf:** And then I find it in the garbage. I've been making art out of trash forever, engaging the way that trash meets with technology. Now you only find flat screens thrown away. They're kind of crazy objects. I take them and turn them back to where they really just become traditional paintings. And this is just a monitor with painting titled *PHILIPS TIME TO GO*. The surface is amazing. There is glass underneath. I just pour the gesso on it and it dries, like incredible, a smooth surface.



Kenny Scharf, *PHILIPS TIME TO GO*, 2022. oil on Philips flat screen TV. 20 × 30 × 5 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and TOTAH.

**Rail:** You do this flat?

**Scharf:** Yes. I pour on the gesso, create the surface. And I also love that you get this stuff from the garbage. It's already framed. They're ready to hang.

**Rail:** This makes me think of NFTs on monitors.

**Scharf:** Well, that's funny you say that, because I've been doing some NFTs. All of my paintings really are animated.

**Rail:** They're all moving. They're all flowing.

**Scharf:** And they're just one moment. You could say, oh, that's the middle. That's the end. This whole NFT thing is the way I've been envisioning making an animation forever. I first was approached a while ago by Nifty Gateway, the Winklevoss brothers, the ones who started Facebook, and they talked to me about this NFT. I thought, well, what have I got to lose? I'll give them a digital image. And then you make money. So, I did it and all of a sudden I'm making all this money. And then I started looking at NFTs and I thought, oh, well, it's really an animated thing. My first one wasn't animated. It was just a digital image that I chose from a mural that no longer existed.

**Rail:** And people bought them. And what do they do with them?

**Scharf:** Resell them? I don't know.

**Rail:** Display it?

**Scharf:** It doesn't make any sense. Show their friends on the phone?

**Rail:** This is the thing that befuddles the art historian—me—about it. What do you do with it?

**Scharf:** It's perplexing, it makes no sense!

**Rail:** You get a big monitor and you put it in your house—static image—which will burn out your monitor?

**Scharf:** Basically, my idea of how I want to make animations now has a venue. I always thought to take a painting and just make it move a little bit and it would come alive, and that would be a great animation—doesn't have to be more than thirty seconds. Now we have a venue for this. It's been cool.

**Rail:** And other artists have done some that I've seen, but they're not works you think of as animated, unlike yours. There is that quality, which is why it works.

**Scharf:** It definitely lends itself to this technology. This is a Westinghouse TV painting that I've animated. [*Showing me on his phone*]

**Rail:** The eyes move, the mouth moves, and the things swirl—and is it just a loop?

**Scharf:** That's it!

**Rail:** And the music?

**Scharf:** A friend of mine put it together for me.

**Rail:** Is the music always different?

**Scharf:** Yeah. Every single painting, I could do that. But this is my third one. With the animated stuff I just decided to do it on the flat screens.

**Rail:** And see what happens. It's a market which people are unsure about and the auction houses have been very quick to try to capitalize on it.

**Scharf:** Oh, everyone's trying to get in on it. There's a lot of things I don't like, and I still don't really understand that it's not tangible. And if there's no electricity, you have nothing. I've been making art out of broken appliances, trashed appliances. And part of the thing, when I first started doing it back forty years ago, is preparing for the apocalyptic day when we have no electricity anymore.

**Rail:** Back to the Stone Age.

**Scharf:** I would say it very jokingly, but when we don't have electricity, your customized appliance will be art. That's kind of my thing. The art doesn't need electricity. I would forever take a real thing, a tangible thing. I don't collect NFTs, but the thing that I do like about it, as an artist, is it's the first time I've ever experienced residuals. Who had ever heard of that? Also, it's kind of cool, the way it really gives *all* the power to the artists. Because what everyone needs is content. And earlier, the artist really needs the dealer, the artist really needs the museum, the artist really needs the press—so many outside things that you really need their help. Now you don't need anybody's help. Every fucking day I get an email or a phone call from some pretty big corporation. They want to collaborate. And I'm like, why would I collaborate? Why would I need you? I don't need you anymore. You need *me*. So that's also kind of a big change. All of a sudden it puts the artists in power. It's really hard to get that. It's the first time. I think that's amazing. At the same time, I have mixed feelings about it. But I'm still doing it. It's hard not to.

**Rail:** It's not surprising, because you're such a protean artist. The way that you disseminate your work, whether it's on the side of a cycle shop or on a billboard or on someone's jacket, or as what we call fine art at a gallery, you don't see any distinction. There's just a distinction in terms of the way that you have a life with it, maybe. You let these things out in the world and the murals, the paintings get traded, but the NFT you have more control, to a degree, going forward.

**Scharf:** You have all the control. To make it you don't need anybody.

**Rail:** You must have a studio that does the animation.

**Scharf:** I have a colleague who studied computer animation, and I tell her what I want, and she does a great job.

**Rail:** Do you have assistants who work with you on the paintings?

**Scharf:** No, I have two people. Dave, who's been with me for twenty-something years, and he's on the phone and he works shipping and taxes and all that stuff. And then we hired Julio not too long ago—a great guy—and he helps with stretching the paintings. We make the frames, do the gessoing, but everything else, the painting itself is just me. I've never had assistants because I don't really know what I'm doing. How could I tell someone else, "can you do that?" I don't know what I'm doing. I'm making it up on the spot.

**Rail:** Yeah, there's no sketch. Do you think that's the surrealist element of it? The idea of the unconscious.

**Scharf:** Very much.

**Rail:** And the idea that you're present when you're making it and it's always fresh, it's not preconceived.

**Scharf:** No, not preconceived at all.

**Rail:** The idea of surrealism, it always felt a little fatuous to me, that these artists are making these works, and they're so meticulously painted, but they're meant to be immediate responses from their subconscious.

**Scharf:** I would think that if they're particularly painted, in my case, too, it's more of a vision.

**Rail:** Yes, they are plastic looking, they are three-dimensional.

**Scharf:** But they're all in my head. The idea of taking something in your head and showing people that it's a *real* thing, I'm fascinated by that.

**Rail:** Literally realizing it. Was it the spray can which helped you to tap into something immediate?

**Scharf:** Growing up in surf LA, as a kid I saw a lot of airbrush work. Airbrush in the seventies was pretty big. We moved to New York and on the subways I saw a lot of similarities to that kind of hippie airbrushing bubble lettering that I was into as a kid, just on a bigger scale. And a lot of the language they were using was also similar to what I was doing with cartoon imagery, the bubble lettering, of course.

**Rail:** Almost like animated text.

**Scharf:** It's very much what I was already into. And then I was here in the late seventies. And I met all the guys and I said, "ok, I can do this," so I picked up a spray can. I got a studio at PS1, and I lived in the East Village, and I would ride my bike home at three o'clock in the morning.

**Rail:** What bridge did you take?

**Scharf:** I took the 59th Street Bridge. And so basically the whole east side from 59th Street down to the East Village, at three in the morning, I would just bomb it. I would spray.

**Rail:** You had a backpack with your cans in it?

**Scharf:** Exactly. And I would just stop, there would be no one in the streets. And so that's kind of how I learned how to do that.

**Rail:** Did you ever tag, or you were doing imagery?

**Scharf:** I was always doing imagery. I did have a tag. It was the "GE" that I would repeat. And if you see those paintings by Warhol, a lot of the ones with Basquiat, you see the "GE" is for me, because he did my portrait with the "GE" in the back.

**Rail:** Why did you use "GE"?

**Scharf:** Because it's General Electric. And I'm obsessed with energy and energy consumption and energy production. And when you look at the GE logo [*makes sound of spraying*], it looks like a graffiti tag. Which is perfect for me. But it wasn't like people would see it and go, "Oh, that's Kenny." I decided I wanted to do something that was from inside of me, which is all those cartoon characters like the Flintstones and the Jetsons, but also, I didn't want to make anything that was alienating or too obscure, when it's so personal. I wanted something that everyone could relate to.

**Rail:** Something more universal, which is a surrealist idea, in a sense.

**Scharf:** And it was a perfect thing because it was pop imagery that everyone knew. But Fred Flintstone is mine, too. I wanted something that was deeply personal, yet everyone could relate to. I want to relate to everybody. A lot of art is about communication. I don't want to be in my own little belly button.

**Rail:** I look at stuff by Yves Tanguy, I know you're a fan, but it's bizarre and weird, Miró too. I never connected with it.

**Scharf:** See I do. I look at Tanguy, and I'm like, "Wow."

**Rail:** What is it? What do you read it as? These anthropomorphic—

**Scharf:** I'm right in there. I feel the stones, I feel the surfaces. I see the landscapes and there's something primordial that relates to something universal that I connect to.

**Rail:** Does that have to do with nature?

**Scharf:** I think it does.

**Rail:** The hardest thing to teach is connoisseurship. Asking why is this better than this.

**Scharf:** Exactly.

**Rail:** And I always put curators on the spot when I bring my classes to museums.

**Scharf:** That's good. Have them tell us why.

**Rail:** Yes. What's great about this? From your perspective, because everyone's going to have a different opinion.

**Scharf:** Why is that important and why is that not important? And honestly, as you know, there's some fucking great shit out there that should be exalted, and no one's ever seen it. It's just, unfortunately, with any art that gets famous, it's a roll of the dice. I mean, what are the chances? It doesn't mean that it's good just because it's famous.

**Rail:** It's just a question of who has recognized it, and the market around it.

**Scharf:** Doesn't mean it's better. Hopefully it is. But not always, as we know. And then years go by, and it doesn't have any validity anymore.

**Rail:** You gotta trust yourself.

**Scharf:** It's the test of time. For art to really be valued it needs time. Because at the moment, there are a million people who think it's the greatest thing in the world. But it's hard to tell what it's going to look like in five, ten, twenty years.

**Rail:** And it's not a question of nostalgia, because I feel that sometimes about old photographs. They're always going to be interesting because it's a lost world.

**Scharf:** Exactly. It's like time travel. But no, I think that painting doesn't need to lose that and doesn't need to be that. In fact, you don't really want it. I hate when people say, oh, I got my eighties clothes on to come to the opening. I'm like, that's nice. But I'm not stuck in the eighties, and I certainly don't want to be thought of in that way.

**Rail:** Well, in that Whitney painting of the eighties show nothing felt dated. It all felt fresh.

**Scharf:** Because if it's real art, it shouldn't be a fashion.

**Rail:** There can be a style that evolves. But the art itself—

**Scharf:** It should always have that almost classic look. Yeah, that's what you want.

## **Contributor**

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