

SCENE CITY

The Artist Kenny Scharf Honored at TriBeCa Ball

Guests included Brooke Shields, Naomi Watts and Helena Christensen.



By John Ortved

April 22, 2022

“I used to think Bob Colacello was the most popular person I knew, but now I think Kenny might be,” said David Kratz, the president of the New York Academy of Art, which honored Kenny Scharf, the artist and contemporary of Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, at its TriBeCa Ball on Tuesday.

Mr. Colacello took the barb in stride. “I’ll be gracious and say being No. 2 isn’t so bad,” he said.

The ball took place on all five floors of the school’s building on Franklin Street, bequeathed to the school by Andy Warhol. By 6 p.m., guests began exploring the students’ paint-splattered studios on the upper floors.

“It’s all about the artists,” said Eileen Guggenheim, the school’s chairwoman. “These are artists who may not have sold any work before and have all these collectors and gallerists and supporters of the school see the work.”



Performers during the studio tour. Rebecca Smeyne for The New York Times



Naomi Watts and John Alexander. Rebecca Smeyne for The New York Times



Helena Christensen and Bob Colacello. Rebecca Smeyne for The New York Times



Brooke Shields. Rebecca Smeyne for The New York Times



The crowd included prominent collectors like Ashley Abess and Beth Rudin DeWoody, as well as artists like Brian Donnelly (better known as Kaws), who spent some time in the studio of Telvin Wallace, whose work includes pastels reappropriating scenes from Wes Anderson films with young Black figures.

The model Helena Christensen examined the works of Hope Buzzelli, who used colored pencil to depict a rabbit being dissected; and Jed Smith, who paints watercolors of cowboys inspired by his home in the San Luis Valley in Colorado. Did Ms. Christensen acquire anything? “I need to buy a new wall to put them on,” she said.

How about Ms. Guggenheim? “I saw one painting I really wanted, and it had just been sold,” she said. “But it sold to friends of mine.”

At 8 p.m., the 250 guests, which also included the actresses Naomi Watts and Brooke Shields, assembled for dinner on the ground floor. “These go back at midnight,” said Ms. Shields, referring to her diamond-encrusted drop earrings on loan from Van Cleef & Arpels, a ball sponsor.



Leonard McGurr, the artist known as Futura. Rebecca Smeyne for The New York Times



Paola Lima in a Kenny Scharf custom shirt. Rebecca Smeyne for The New York Times



Another Kenny Scharf outfit. Rebecca Smeyne for The New York Times



Mr. Scharf in a zip jacket he designed with Dior. Rebecca Smeyne for The New York Times

After an asparagus risotto appetizer, guests mingled among the pink-and-orange-colored columns. The mood was chatty, even joyous. “Benefits tend to be kind of boring, frankly,” said Mr. Colacello, who was table hopping. “But this is actually fun, and it gets a turnout of lots of artists, which is great.”

Tony Shafrazi, a pioneer of downtown dealers, pinched Mr. Scharf’s cheek before planting an avuncular kiss. Next to him, Francesco Clemente tore apart artichokes with his hands, while Leonard McGurr, otherwise known as Futura, drew on his napkin with a Sharpie. (He later stuffed the masterpiece into his jacket pocket.)

After the main course of bass, Ms. Guggenheim toasted Mr. Scharf. “This is the artist who created his own scene,” she said. Mr. Scharf returned the favor and recounted how, before Ms. Guggenheim taught him at the University of California, Santa Barbara, he was interesting only in studying what he called the “three B’s: bongos, beers and babes.” Mr. Scharf was then awarded an honorary doctorate, to much applause.

Mr. Clemente offered one more compliment before the night ended. “Kenny is the best human being who ever lived,” he said. “He is the kindest and funniest person.” Popular, indeed.