

# Dispelled Illusions: Kenny Scharf takes on Color Field

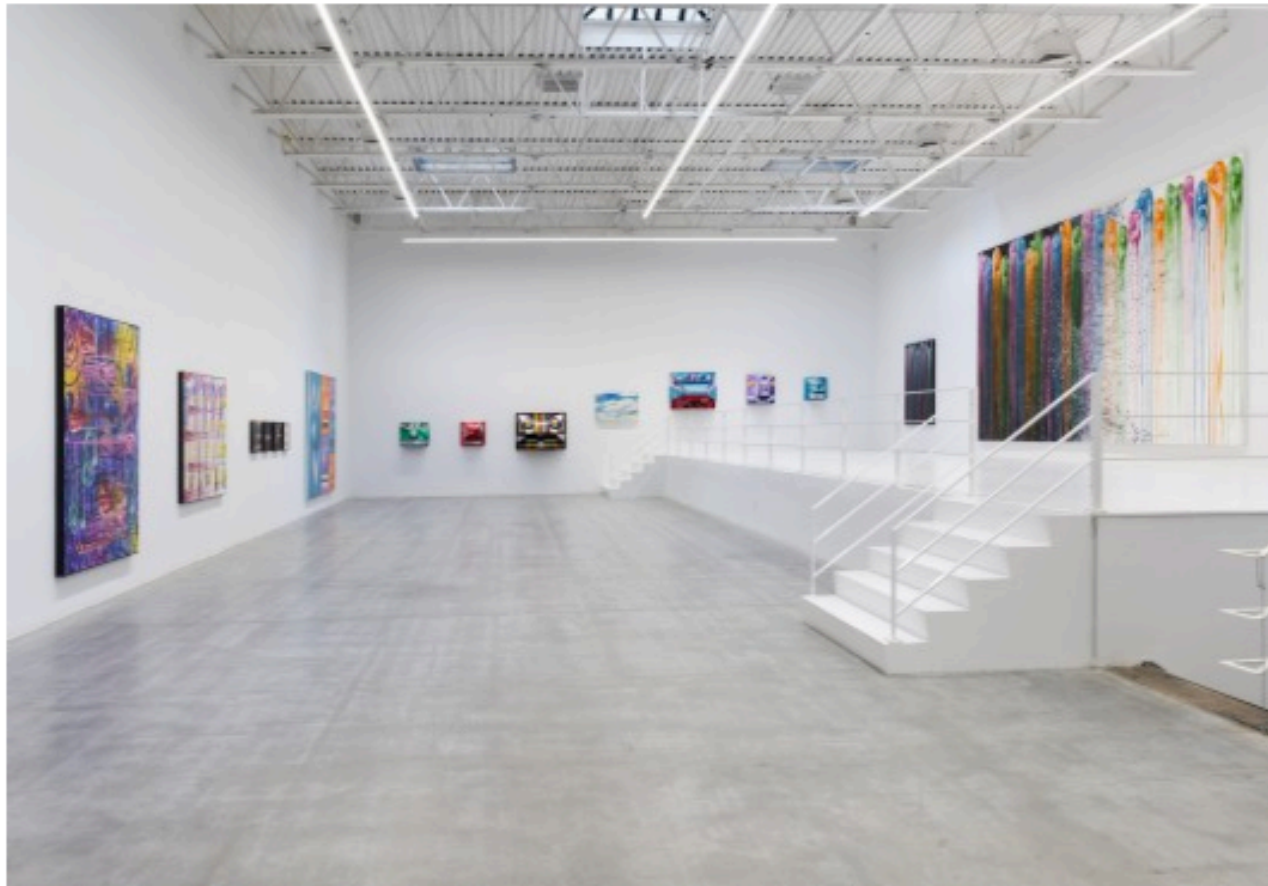
by David Carrier

Kenny Scharf: Inner and Outer Space at Jeffrey Deitch, New York

October 21 to December 22, 2017

18 Wooster Street, between Grand and Canal streets

New York City, [deitch.com](http://deitch.com)



Installation shot of the exhibition under review, courtesy of Jeffrey Deitch

The cartoonist, so E. H. Gombrich observes, “can mythologize the world or try to dispel illusions.” Gombrich is particularly interested in the ways that political cartoonists critique wrong-headed thinking, revealing the “reality behind the empty clichés.” In this exhibition, Kenny Scharf shows some cartoon-paintings whose target is modernist painting. In Color Field painting, so we have been told, the paint stains appear formed in a radically impersonal way, as if without human intervention. But in *Sloppy Melt* (2017) and some of Scharf’s other paintings, at the top of the descending lines of paint one sees faces of figures like those found in comic strips, as if each stain were the extended body of one of those figures. Like Warhol, Scharf uses diamond dust to brighten his paintings. Imagine Donald Duck and Minnie Mouse depicted as spectators within a Poussin Annunciation. The result would playfully undercut the seriousness of that scene. Here, similarly, we see a comic reworking of a very solemn style of painting.



Kenny Scharf, *Sloppy Melt*, 2017. Oil & diamond dust on linen, 60 x 84 Inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jeffrey Deitch

Six of the paintings on display, four of them large, are faux Color Field. A number of additional paintings, most of them small like *Sloppy Star* (2017), develop another motif: the lines of paint ending in a face presented in crossing lines. These, I think, are Scharf's versions of Kenneth Noland's plaid abstractions. And two paintings with words are his versions of Ed Ruscha word paintings. *Trump Tower of Evil* (2017), in which the word "TRUMP" is spelt out in capitals, in towering pink letters, is marvelous. Scharf has spoken of his interest in connecting with modernist art movements by making new hybrids, as if these earlier forms of art had been placed in a blender. His take on Color Field recalls Philip Taaffe's notorious *We Are Not Afraid* (1985) with its witty

deconstruction of Barnett Newman's zips. Scharf seems to be saying, let's show that the stripes in these abstractions really need to be animated by the figures whose heads he depicts. The attitude taken by a cartoonist to his materials, Gombrich argues, can be complex. Sometimes a cartoon is a visual critique, but it also can be an homage. As I see it, Scharf's ironical attitude to the art he caricatures is ultimately respectful. Acknowledging the power of Color Field painting, he offers a radically revisionist visual interpretation of these works.

In a recent book, Joachim Pissarro and I surveyed the enormous range of what we call 'wild art', art that is outside the contemporary gallery world. What defines the present art world, we argue, is the felt need to exclude a great variety of visual art- including, of course, almost all of the cartoons like those analyzed by Gombrich. What's so remarkable, then, about "Inner and Outer Space" is the way that Scharf successfully incorporates the concerns of an habitually excluded art form, comic caricature. Very little gallery art is intentionally humorous in the way of these works. This is a great show because it changes, permanently, how you will see some important modernist art. Morris Louis' paintings will never look the same after you see *Sloppy Melt* (2017). There also are on display two kinds of relief sculptures: TV tubes decorated with oil painting and rhinestones; and small assemblages of found objects, what Joseph Cornell might have done had he responded to our contemporary pop culture. They seem finicky, but perhaps I'm just missing the joke.

