

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

KENNY SCHARF

INNER AND OUTER SPACE

MARCH 19 – AUGUST 31, 2018



Melly Slop, 2017, Oil, acrylic and diamond dust on canvas, 30 x 30 in

Leila Heller Gallery is pleased to present the first solo exhibition in the UAE by Kenny Scharf (b. 1958), muralist, painter, sculptor, and installation artist, best known for his fantastical, large-scale paintings of anthropomorphic animals and imagined creatures. The exhibition features a selection of large-scale works on canvas as well as relief sculptures comprised of oil painted televisions and small assemblages of found objects.

His new body of work is a reaction to what he perceives as our 'increasingly out-of-control situation', depicted by the melting faces in his paintings. Scharf's work continues to reflect his inexhaustible optimism and his sense of fun but has always been engaged with profound issues beneath the facade. Ecology, the environment, and capitalist excess have long been central themes. More recently, his paintings reflect his environmental concerns over the petroleum industry.

Large-scale, bright, colorful paintings, murals, drawings, sculptures, prints and installations define Kenny Scharf's oeuvre, often depicting animated cartoons or imagined creatures. With a child-like appeal, his work is often described as playful, optimistic, bubbly and full of joy. Beneath the colorful and idyllic surface of his paintings and collages, Scharf references the darker issues of the modern world. He categorizes his art as 'pop surrealism', drawing inspiration from the realm of the unconscious, explaining that his own unconscious is full of pop imagery. He cites surrealism and abstract expressionism as his major influences.

In *We're Melting Together Night and Day* (2017), *Melly Slop* (2017) and consequent paintings in this series, animated faces of comical creatures crown the descending lines of paint, as though each downward melting blotch were the extended body of one of those figures. Alluding to Color Field, a style characterized by large, highly simplified compositions in which the use of color is independent of line and figuration, Scharf connects with modernist art movements by creating new hybrids, almost as if these earlier forms of art had been placed in a blender. Rows of faces disintegrate into colorful drips reminiscent of both New York School painting and the imagery of minimal art. In these new works, Scharf strives to create clear and simple forms that resonate with meaning, a process that he finds to be "so much fun".

The use of cartoon faces allows Scharf to express emotion with abstract power. The expression of emotion in art is an element he considers essential to his practice; art that is cold leaves him cold. Scharf studied cartoons as a way to intensify figurative expression, like his artistic counterparts from his early years in New York, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring.

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Earlier in his career, Scharf sourced materials for his artworks in the garbage, and to this day, he still stops his car when he finds plastic toys and TV sets thrown out on the street. These discarded plastic objects have inspired the two other bodies of work featured in the show: his *Assemblage Vivant Tableaux Plastiques*, and his *TV Bax*. Inspired by the *Nouveau Realistes*, the assemblage works are constructed from his stock of recycled plastic toys, an expression of our perpetual consumerism. The *TV Bax* are painted on the plastic backs of discarded television sets. Like the toys, the *TV Bax* have a disconcerting anthropomorphic quality. The artist questions if their anonymous designers created these plastic covers, which are different for every model, to resemble a face.

These discarded toys and television backs are considered poignant objects, resonant with emotion. "Each of these objects carries a story," Scharf explains. He considers how people may have struggled and sacrificed to buy these toys and TVs, and the intense relationships that children and families have with them. Scharf brings to life these inanimate objects in his work.

Since his childhood, Scharf has been fascinated by outer space. Space travel and the portrayal of infinite space have long been central themes. In his life and in his work, he tries to eliminate boundaries and borders. He is increasingly preoccupied with the inner space of painting, his exploration of which creates a dynamic tension with his passion for outer space. With his characteristic exuberance and moral voice, Scharf reformulates his unique combination of Pollock and Pop to create a vibrant new body of work.

The use of oil and acrylic paint in an airbrush-like manner imbues the presence of street culture within contemporary art. Pulsating with energy and overflowing with visual information, Kenny Scharf's art infuses sinuous biomorphic forms with a symbolism reflecting electronic media's insistent grip on our most primal fantasies. Fusing high art and cartoon, technological aspiration and ecological devastation, he creates playful works of art that evoke a state of whimsy.

About the Artist:

Born in Hollywood, California in 1958, Kenny Scharf lives and works in Los Angeles, California and New York, New York. Kenny Scharf rose to prominence alongside his friends and contemporaries Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring in the East Village art scene of the 1980s. One of the first artists to inject elements of street culture into the mainstream of contemporary art, Scharf has continued to pioneer projects like his *Cosmic Cavern*—a now legendary all-night *DayGlo* disco party held in the basement of a Brooklyn warehouse from 2009-2010. His paintings incorporate imagery from advertisements, cartoons and classic Americana into exuberant compositions with an underlying subversive edge.

His work has been included in numerous group exhibitions and he has had solo exhibitions at Pasadena Museum of California Art (2004); Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles (2001); Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (1999); The Dali Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida (1997); University Galleries of Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois (1997); Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Monterrey, Monterrey, Mexico (1996); and Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, Florida (1995) among other locations around the world.

About the Gallery:

Since its establishment over three decades ago in New York, Leila Heller Gallery has gained worldwide recognition as a pioneer in promoting creative dialogue and exchange between Western artists and Middle Eastern, Central and Southeast Asian artists. It has garnered a reputation for identifying and cultivating the careers of artists leaving a lasting impact on contemporary art and culture. Currently representing a diverse roster of Western and Middle Eastern artists, the gallery is also active in the American, European and Middle Eastern secondary art markets. In November 2015, Leila Heller Gallery opened its first international location in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue. At 14,000 square feet, the state of the art gallery features three exhibition spaces, making it the largest gallery in the UAE. Showcasing leading regional and international artists, many of whom will be presenting their work in the Middle East for the first time, the gallery is dedicated to supporting the evolving practice of established artists.

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