

Kenny Scharf

Vaxi Nation

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Due to the pandemic, Kenny Scharf will not be present for his second solo show at Almine Rech. However, as he continued to produce art in his Los Angeles studio in the middle of December, he said he was happy with the freshness of his new paintings. “It’s always very exciting for me to show work that’s so recent, and even though I can’t be there, the viewers will see how new it is,” he said. Since the early 1980s, Kenny Scharf has been extremely productive and loves working on his art. Without thinking of subject matter ahead of time or restricted narrations, he develops a vocabulary that combines the influence of 1960s cartoons — particularly the Flintstones and the Jetsons — and psychedelic shapes resembling cells, bacteria, or even viruses (an interpretation that seems especially apt at the current time). During his first show at Almine Rech, which took place in September and October 2020 in New York, art critic Linda Yablonsky drew a parallel between the Covid years and the AIDS era. Back then, Kenny Scharf lived with Keith Haring, where Jean-Michel Basquiat often joined them to spend time together. He remembers it as a place of convening energies and a ping-pong game of ideas before the loss of his friends. Faced with tragedy, he decided that he would primarily show the whirlwind aspect of life, filled with bright colors. Whether they are cathartic, extending moments of ecstasy, or expressing gloom, his paintings take on his moods.

This shows why he has such a pressing need to fill them, in an endlessly repeating all-over effect. This term clearly calls to mind Jackson Pollock, of whom Kenny Scharf is a big fan. “He marked the beginning of the expansion of another space. All-over painting confirms the extension of a world. It’s a background I can use, and sometimes I even throw paint on the canvas. I also like the way every detail reveals itself as a little window onto a huge universe, which could escape outside the painting. I perceive my paintings as fragments of unlimited bewilderment.” From the idea of the rhizome, a very visual concept of roots leading to others, we are thrust back into the history of American abstract expressionism, which still inspires artists today. In fact, Kenny Scharf digs even deeper for his inspiration, with reminiscences of Arshile Gorky or Jean Dubuffet, who represented their psychological state in very dense paintings. Since the exhibition is in Paris, potential connections to the French scene come to mind. This suggestion led Kenny Scharf to recall that his work was shown in the 1980s alongside that of François Boisrond, Robert Combas, Hervé Di Rosa, and the Frères Ripoulin, who were connected with the Figuration Libre movement and graffiti. Scharf remembers this as a pop-rock scene with which he had stylistic affinities, even if he hasn’t seen them in three decades.

Ultimately, the important thing is always to work and create. Today, for example, Scharf paints a mushroom in a wild forest filled with naked people. He is perhaps in a less playful mood. He feels more inclined to expand a somewhat surrealistic world where images connected to galaxies are combined with depictions that evoke viruses or are simply formal, verging on abstraction. There are fewer clearly established connections with identified or recognized characters. In this way, he pursues a joyful dystopia or a disillusioned utopia, fluctuating between various emotions. Often, in fact, strength flirts with brutality, the warm colors become acid, and the vanishing lines jostle us or carry us off to an unknown universe, led by figures with sardonic smiles. Kenny Scharf describes himself as a politically committed artist, especially in this year of the American election and popular uprisings. Thoughtfully, he concludes that “real life is always more intense” (a subtle tribute to Robert Filliou?). He remains deeply filled with the energy of the West Coast, where he has lived for twenty years and where he was born. While Los Angeles seems to be inhabited by individuals who circulate in isolation in their cars, moments of rebellion show a population rising up as it finds a shared destiny. Kenny Scharf feels the vitality of the collective and the elation of being in the right place, which he will interpret, one way or another, in his art.

- Marie Maertens
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