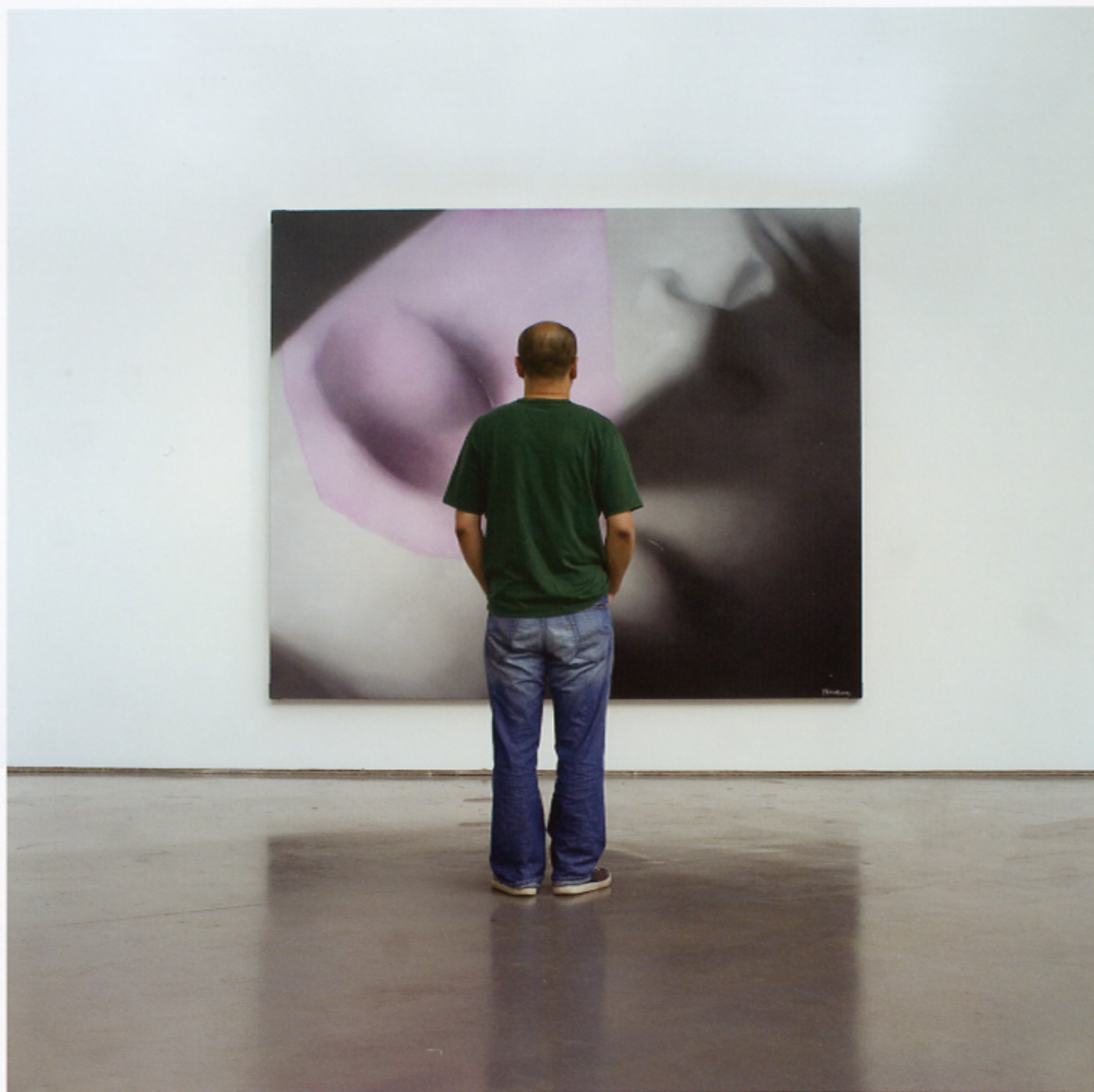


whitewall

CONTEMPORARY ART AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

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THE LUXURY ISSUE

KENNY SCHARF – JOHN PAWSON – ZHANG XIAOGANG – ANDRES SERRANO

KENNY SCHARF

PORTRAIT BY THOMAS BRODIN

I arrived at Kenny Scharf's studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and realized that I had been there a few weeks earlier for a scandalously sexy party. I kept that to myself for the time being as we discussed the upcoming presidential election and his place in the art world. Scharf, who originally arrived on the art scene with other downtown stars like Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Andy Warhol, has recently seen a new outpouring of interest in his frenetically happy work. While I asked him about that resurgence, he tried on wigs and posed for photographs on the trapeze hanging in the center of his studio. The art, the parties, the persona, and, oh yeah, the jewelry – it's all about a happy politics.

WHITEWALL: How do you feel about the upcoming election?

KENNY SCHARF: I'm freaked out. After Bush won the second, I was in such a state of shock, and I couldn't believe he would be elected after the obvious lies of the war! I was devastated and kind of gave up. Then Obama gave a speech in Illinois, and I happened to be watching TV, and I was so blown away. I started crying. The word "hope," and at this point it's clichéd, but that's really what I felt, a kind of hope I had completely given up on. And that's why I am really freaked out, because I feel in the back of my mind – and you might never see me again after this – if they do win, our rights are really going down the drain. People like me just talking about what we think...

And what's going on with the bailout? As usual, the big guys are walking away with \$700

billion in their pocket. Nobody suffers – the only people who suffer are the public.

WW: Do you feel a disconnect between you and the people in power, or a cognitive disconnect between you and the American public?

KS: I think that the public – and this has to do with my art – has been brainwashed by the media and advertising and just stupid entertainment. Most people don't ever question what they see on TV or read, so they hear it once and believe it. And there is a disconnect... I feel now, and I felt before – especially after the last election – that I'm in a civil war between the red and blue states. I think the stakes are so incredibly high, and people are being brainwashed for a few people to have a lot of money.

WW: You have this fun, playful aesthetic on the surface of your work, and then underneath, if the viewer lingers, there's a darker side involving commercialism and greed. So is there really hope at the heart of your work?

KS: I guess I look at it more like this: On the surface I use the advertising, which is alluring – and I love that even though I know it's dangerous. It's the same thing: Let's all celebrate and party and have a great time, but we can't ignore what's going on. That doesn't mean we have to stop enjoying ourselves. It's as deep as you want to go. Someone could only see the fun surface and not want anything more, and that's fine.

WW: I was reading a previous interview where



Kenny Scharf
Snakey Kisselock (Brooch)
2007
18k gold, rubies, sapphires, and enamel
Edition of 50
Courtesy of Abzug

you said that you didn't like the careerism going on at the major art schools now and that only some students are making art for "the right reasons." What are the right reasons?

KS: Just what you need to do to be alive. Just to sustain yourself – art for art's sake. Certain artists revel in how well they know how to make money. Damien Hirst, for instance. There's an amazing businessman, and the business side is also part of the art. I am not like that, and if I was I guess I'd be a lot richer. I'm not complaining; I'm fine.

WW: A lot of the recent interest around your work seems to be part of some eighties nostalgia, and you're presented as a kind of comeback kid. How do you feel about taking on that role, because you've been working the whole time?

KS: I always tell people, "You don't understand. The eighties were the most horrific time imaginable," and they say "What? They were so much fun." The late seventies up until '82, that's what people have a nostalgia for when they think about the eighties, because after that it was just death, death, death. But the late seventies, before AIDS, that was probably the most fun time... ever! I mean, I still have fun today.

WW: Okay, so I have a confession: I've actually been here before, for a party...

KS: No way! Did you get [body] painted? Did you see me painting people?

WW: That was you!? The party room was just covered in stuff and lights and neon paint. It must have taken a lot to do that whole installation.

KS: That was in the show that I had with Paul Kasmin gallery. I finally got it here and put more stuff up, so it really didn't take more than a week. But a lot of the stuff has been used and re-used for over 20 years.

WW: Are the parties like a performance piece?

KS: It's a way of living with the art and actually making the art be part of a life, a party. I got my start in nightclubs, performing at Club 57. Then we were doing art shows at Mudd Club. I did the thing at Palladium. Nightclubs, parties, me and New York – they're all together. It's just a life.

WW: Speaking of lifestyle, we haven't talked about the jewelry you designed yet.

KS: So I design this jewelry, and they're showing it in Marc Benda's gallery in Chelsea.

I've always been into customizing. I think about what I like and what I want to see as jewelry. When I started customizing in the late seventies, I was like, "I'm not into the beige, olive-green world," and I started customizing my radio, phone, and blender. Why do we have to take what we're given?

I've wanted to do a lot of design work for over 20 years. I did a Swatch watch in the early nineties and an Absolut ad in the eighties but I've been trying to do it a lot more than I've actually done. It just seems like when I was starting to do that there was a big resistance, as in "You're being

commercial and selling out." And that's changed, so it's easier. I just designed a Movado watch.

WW: Before every artist started designing T-shirts and handbags, how did you respond to accusations of selling out?

KS: If I'm behind it, it's fine. When something gets away from you, that's when it's selling out. I've had to deal with that a couple times, when I had something that I was working on and they put it out and it wasn't good, so then you have to fight with this company, buy it back. It's a pain in the ass.



Kenny Scharf
Speedy (Pendant)
2007
18k gold, diamonds, sapphires,
pearl, and enamel
Edition of 50
Courtesy of Aborn

“NIGHTCLUBS, PARTIES, ME AND
NEW YORK – THEY’RE ALL TOGETHER.
IT’S JUST A LIFE”



