

Artillery
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Kenny Scharf
Optimistically Melting!
September 7 - November 16, 2019
Honor Fraser

by Jody Zellen



It is hard to imagine living in Los Angeles and not being acquainted with the work of Kenny Scharf. His comic style, painted murals of interlocking faces, often derived from television and pop culture icons have adorned numerous buildings as well as individual's cars and are instantly recognizable. While "fun" and "uplifting" are words that come to mind when visualizing his work, Scharf's pieces are rooted in cultural critique and commentary. In his current exhibition, "Optimistically Melting!" he uses his iconic cartoon aesthetic to talk about the state of the world, specifically addressing themes of recycling plastics and climate change.

The show begins outside the gallery. A giant tangle of discarded plastic objects spills over the rooftop. Roped together, this colorful array includes children's toys, grocery containers and bottles of all shapes and sizes. This wave of plastic shapes is simultaneously playful and threatening and serves as a reminder of the evils of plastic as a ubiquitous pollutant calling attention to the fact that there is no place for abandoned plastic to go. Scharf continues this duality within the exhibition. A new series of floor-based, glazed ceramic works *Monstiki*, *Plantiki* and *Earth Flint Stone* (all 2019), are in essence, living sculptures, containing plants

grown by the artist. Each planter resembles a head with a large sculpted face sporting a wide ironic smile. It is satisfying to imagine the smiles come from the power of nature and the wonderful arrangements of greenery sprouting from their tops.

Scharf works in many different media and is a prolific artist who often creates installations covering the walls in his exhibitions from floor-to-ceiling. This presentation is pared down, focusing on large-scale paintings and sculptures. Many of the works feel familiar, populated by cartoony shapes and figures with long tongues and bulging eyes darting across fantastic undersea or celestial worlds. While Scharf's paintings share recurring elements, he also explores new subjects and in this exhibition adds still lifes to his repertoire. In *Fleurs et Vase sur la Table*, for example, expressive smiley-face flowers protrude from a curvy blue vase perched on a purple table. An oversized snail inches its way up the leg of the table, its long curled tongue partially extended and ready to unfurl. The happy flowers are positioned in front of a background awash with yellow, green and black drips creating a sense of anxiety within the image.

This state of unease is further explored in *Optimistical Meltdown*, a large scale painting layered with screen-printed English and Korean headlines about climate change. These texts are overlaid with blurred cartoon heads that appear to be dashing across the composition trying to obscure the direness of the communication. "Optimistically Melting!" presents a wide range of works. Scharf continues to state: why can't art be fun and engaging to look at and also address serious themes? He is pushing his cartoony iconography to a place beyond its usual surface appeal. In these resonant, compelling and *optimistic* works, Scharf references the state of the world today, asking his audience to think about ways— like making art from trash— to chart a better path for the future.

<https://artillerymag.com/kenny-scharf-3/>