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It Pops with Funk and Fun

By David Pagel

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If you've always thought of Kenny Scharf as a Pop artist, you're in for a big surprise when you visit his exhibition at Honor Fraser Gallery in Culver City. *Kenny Scharf: BLOX and BAX* makes it clear that Scharf is a folk artist.

The three-gallery exhibition's fun-loving array of painted assemblages (and a smattering of paintings) reminds visitors that Pop got its start as a kind of urban folk art, the scrappy street ethos of its screen printed posters, newspaper comics and tabloid pablum more DIY fugitive than is often remembered, much less acknowledged.



Scharf's recent works are eye grabbing and visually dynamic like a Pop painting, but they're also funky and funny, so salt-of-the-earth and extravagantly outlandish that they make you think twice – or three times – about what you have come to expect from Pop.

Like Warhol, Scharf is a customizer. Like Lichtenstein, he works in series. And like Ruscha, he creates art that makes heavy-duty discourse sound pretentious – and ridiculous.

Scharf's lusciously painted pieces pack loads of pleasure into seemingly simple things. To make the largest group of wall sculptures here, he junk-picked 22 old televisions, removed their plastic backs and used those oddly shaped covers as surrogate canvases on which to paint portraits of a wildly imaginative cast of characters.

Hung on the walls, like gigantic masks from some futuristic tribe or the ceremonial armor of a rogue's gallery of Transformer castoffs, Scharf's "Bax" are anthropomorphic. Each has its own personality and power, benevolent or otherwise, and reminds you what it was like to be a child, when everything around you was alive with possibility.

Scharf's "Blox" are oils on canvas and linen on which he has painted one or six cartoon faces. These images lack the whiplash magic and goofy generosity of his repurposed TVs.

Innocence and its discontents are Scharf's great subjects. That double-edged drama plays out in eight intimately scaled wall reliefs, each made from a hodgepodge of consumer products and packages Scharf has glued together and painted in a rainbow of colors.

These quirky assemblages recall the mobiles that parents often hang above cribs. But Scharf's brightly tinted constellations seem to suggest that each newborn might be better off on another planet. And the more time you spend in his exhibition, the more it seems that that might be true for all of us.