

the village
VOICE

By Elizabeth Hess

Kerri Scharlin

Jose Freire Fine Art
130 Prince Street
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Has Kerri Scharlin—who?—been interviewed to death? When I reach the famous, yet unknown, artist on the phone, she talks about herself for almost two hours. I am amazed. Not just at the length of time, but that all these minutes are adding up to a completely superficial portrait of the artist. I cannot tell if this is the real Kerri Scharlin, or a pose. Most artists, at least the ones I know, do not relish making their private lives public, but Scharlin shamelessly divulges intimate details about her family, her body, and her feelings about modeling, as if none of it means very much.

Scharlin has become a professional, albeit empty, subject. For the past several years, her art has been a series of twisted, and original, autobiographical creations—made by other people, not the artist. In the process, the art of autobiography has reached new highs and new lows.

"I'm interested in myself," explains the artist on the phone. "And I'm not." Don't get confused. That's a very Kerri statement.

Scharlin is known for asking the most surprising and unconventional artists to do her portrait. These works, in turn, become her art. In one series, she commissioned the illustrator of a Barbie coloring book to do an edition based on the artist's own life. We see a Kerri/Barbie working in her studio, meeting collectors, enjoying the life of the ideal girl-artist. Ha ha. In another, more recent work, Scharlin put together 12 of her friends with a dozen police-sketch artists and had them draw her portrait from the verbal descriptions. The result was, of course, 12 creepy versions of Kerri Scharlin. In her current exhibition, the artist commissioned a group of writers and photographers from mass-media publications to capture her profile; she then convinced the art directors from these magazines to design the package.



The real Kerri Scharlin

Very Kerri

The walls at Jose Freire are covered with large, glossy layouts, all faux spreads from vaguely identifiable publications (*GQ*, *Vanity Fair*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Premiere*, *Self*, *Psychology Today*, *Vibe*, *Vogue*), offering their versions of the Kerri Scharlin story. Of course, some of these magazines have recently been redesigned, so a few of these layouts look dated. Nevertheless, the sheets read and look like genuine color proofs. And, no surprise, the makeup junkie we meet in *Mademoiselle* is different from the neurotic artist we meet in *Interview*.

What is not apparent is how Scharlin managed to manipulate so many employed writers, including Julia Szabo, Christopher Bagley, Ron Rosenbaum, Jeffrey Hogrefe, Deborah Gimelson, Gene Stone, and Phillip Lopate, into participating in this cynical project. "It took me more than a year and a half," says the protagonist of these thin pages, "and some of the magazines, *Elle* and *The New Yorker*, refused to participate."

Scharlin functioned as editor and publisher, reserving all rights. Did she edit and change the articles? "The only piece I edited was Phillip Lopate's," she claims. Ac-

cording to *New York* magazine, Lopate turned in a 35-page manuscript, on a 300-word assignment. "He was flattered that he was considered hip enough to be included in a downtown project," explains Scharlin.

"Early on, I was told that the going rate for writers was a dollar a word," continues Scharlin. The average price she paid was \$300 per piece, but some authors didn't ask for money (!) and didn't get any. Who? "I can't say," says Scharlin. "There are too many egos involved"—not to mention the artist's. "Some people wanted to trade work," she adds. The photographers, including Annie

Leibovitz, Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, Torkil Gudnason, and Steven Klein, were reimbursed for their expenses. Scharlin scoffs at a recent squib in *New York* attacking her for not paying participants, while the work at the gallery is selling like hotcakes. "It's not like I'm getting rich," she says. But she is getting famous. If everyone gets his or her 15 minutes, Scharlin has made art out of hers. Perhaps her time will last longer. And then again, maybe it won't.

In the 14 texts, Scharlin is generally presented as a passive, neurotic female artist—the most naive stereotype. Scharlin is obviously aware of this, but she doesn't seem to mind. In *Mademoiselle*, she happily chats about her days wearing Mary Quant's Love's Fresh Lemon; in *Self*, she discusses the complexity of her relationship with her StairMaster. In the *Interview* clone, Scharlin allows Mark Marvel to glibly patronize her life: "I think you're a hugely neurotic person, you're hugely neurotic—which is not bad as long as you can direct it out..." "Right," says Scharlin. In one of the most entertaining works, Rosenbaum (*Vogue*) leapfrogs over Scharlin's dilemmas, writing his own hilarious parody of *The Larry King Show*.

The artist says she allowed the writers and photographers to direct the action. When photographer Christian Witkin wanted her

to take her clothes off, she obliged him. So we see a large portrait of the artist wearing only her bra and underpants, talking on the phone. Why did she do cheesecake?

"It wasn't my idea," says Scharlin. "Witkin thought the object was to reveal my real identity, to get to the real Kerri." Is this the real Kerri? "Well, he wanted it dirtier," explains Scharlin, "more provocative, more challenging." Scharlin was a submissive model, but she doesn't "feel abused by the image," she adds. "Yet I wouldn't say I feel that good about it, either."

In a subsequent conversation, I ask Scharlin if she's a feminist. "Of course," she answers, without hesitating. "Who isn't these days?" Phyllis Schlafly isn't. Regardless, I ask her what she means by feminist. "I have no interest in presenting myself as a feminist cliché," she tells me. "Feminism is changing. There's a new generation acknowledging traditional female things. The most important thing about feminism," she concludes, "is that it empowers women to speak. That's what this piece is all about," she says.

The next day, however, Scharlin calls me back. She's worried about how she sounded in the interview. She wants to talk more about feminist politics. She explains that one doesn't have to advocate *any* position to be a feminist. "I want my work to raise issues, not answer questions," she tells me. "I don't like preachy political art." I tell her she shouldn't worry. So-

called "political" art will be an extinct genre in no time at all. But I also tell her that when the feds come for the "political artists," they're going to come for her too.

She calls me again the following day. She's still worried. She wants to talk more about how the representation of Kerri Scharlin in the piece represents women artists. She says she simply tried to honestly answer every question (except the little one about her age) she was asked. I question her passivity. I am quietly wondering why Kerri Scharlin didn't tell some of

Art

these reporters to fuck off. Or why she didn't explain to *Mademoiselle* that beneath the skin, women have teeth. "Look, Kerri," I tell her. "Your work has a life of its own, you can't control how people interpret your work. And you can't control the shape of my article."

This is not one of Kerri's pieces. "But I *am* shaping your piece," she says, with a confidence I have not previously heard. "Look, if I had refused to let you interview me, you would have written a different piece."

"Would you like my byline?" I ask her. "Sure," says the artist. Why not? ■