Kenny Scharf: Emotional

Exhibition Essay by Shai Baitel, Curator

June 2025

Since the beginning of figurative art history, emotional relationships have been the basis of some of the most significant artworks ever created. While there has been a considerable history of pictographic language serving as emotional shorthand, works from the early Renaissance like the Madonna and Child (c. 1300) suggest a more intricate and complex relational depiction of emotion transpiring between subject and viewer. These visual, affective relationships can be understood and expressed through emotional classification—a process which suggests that emotions are discrete constructs that can be understood as a collective whole. Most notably, the American psychologist Paul Ekman studied and classified emotions and their relation to facial expressions, initially identifying six discrete universal classifications: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise. For the purposes of this exhibition, however, we focus on awe—a rich and historically resonant emotion in Western painting—interpreting it as an expanded form of surprise that better reflects the emotional and spiritual dynamics depicted in visual art.

Duccio's work represents a pivotal moment in Western art when Byzantine methods of representation began giving way to a more naturalistic approach. The Madonna's gently tilted head and subtle downward gaze create an emotional intimacy previously unseen in religious iconography. Here emotion begins to play a pivotal role in the narrative construction of images. However, these emotions remain restrained and require sensitivity to decode.

Early religious art like Duccio's operated on what Ekman would term "display rules"—culturally specific guidelines governing emotional expression. The Madonna's constrained sorrow follows medieval conventions of appropriate emotional display for sacred figures. Kenny Scharf, also working with subject matter explicitly concerning emotions, by contrast, creates faces that are more rudimentary, that bypass cultural display rules entirely. These faces operate directly through what Ekman calls "facial action units"—the specific muscle movements that signal basic emotions universally.

When Scharf's circular, vibrant faces are compared alongside Duccio's restrained Madonna, we're witnessing not just different stylistic approaches but fundamentally different theories of emotional communication. Duccio's figures communicate through a medieval cultural system while Scharf's are through immediate physiological components and contortions. Despite their contextual differences, what lies underneath is still recognisable as having a shared source.

Ekman was groundbreaking in his innovation as he was rejecting the cultural relativism of many anthropologists of the middle of the twentieth century who believed facial expressions held different meanings for different cultures. In the 1960s, he traveled to New Guinea to photographically document the faces of the then-isolated South Fore people. This endeavor–inspired by earlier proposals of universal emotions by Charles Darwin–sought to prove that facial expressions do not mirror social convention but rather are globally shared displays of human emotions with a common root.

Ekman’s hypothesis was confirmed after extensive studies of the South Fore people, and has become a reliable standard for the field of psychology and beyond. Ekman’s study has demonstrated the ability (over 50 years after its initial publication) to stand the test of time.

Other psychologists and anthropologists have since suggested systems for classifying emotional and affective states, but Ekman's innovative gesture of linking facial expression with emotional state is without comparison in its comprehensive, illustrated simplicity. Since his initial study, Ekman has identified only one additional universal emotion: contempt. Some other emotional states, such as guilt, shame and interest, are not included to the list of universals because they are expressed in different ways even in the same culture, and are thus considered to be affective states, meaning they encompass a swath of emotions to produce a *feeling*.

Since this groundbreaking study, the relationship between emotion and visual expression has become somewhat blurred with the rise of new technologies. Indeed, as technology increasingly mediates our lived experience, emotional connections and interactions are taking place with rising frequency in the virtual world. The isolating nature of technology–from excessive screen time to the proliferation of social media to the enveloping environment of the *metaverse*–has created a widespread sense of social isolation, despite a near-constant sense of connectivity.

Many recent studies have suggested that when technology takes the place of in-person relationships, it has been found to increase loneliness and disconnection while reducing general well-being. It is of course beneficial for online connectivity to supplement in-person relationships, but if relationships are maintained primarily online, as was the case for many people during the COVID-19 pandemic, they ultimately do not satisfy an instinctual human need for connection.

Within the challenging arena of virtual connections, human emotion is often reduced, simplified, and circumscribed. Emotion in these realms operates often independently from felt affect, meaning, identity or thought, which begets many treacherous experiences in virtual environments devoid of interpersonal interaction.

Conversational subtleties and human multiplicity are so often impossible to convey with the technologies we currently have access to. To both simplify and best represent the intricate affective experience, these virtual, emotional connections are often expressed through visual designs.

One particular visual form that emotional expression has taken are emojis. Emojis often serve as emotional shorthand — think smiley blowing a heart kiss to soften a message or send love, or a side-eyes to signal curiosity— filling an expressive void that text messages may fail to convey. More often than not, emojis have their foundation in the emotional categorization proposed by Paul Ekman. Emojis are a uniquely visually affective expression, and are an inescapable reference point for exploring the work of Kenny Scharf.

Scharf's illustrated creations often transcend the world of canvases and gallery spaces and find homes on surfaces ranging from household appliances to automobiles. Many of Scharf's illustrations display cartoonish faces depicting a range of exaggerated emotions. Viewed through the long history of visual art, Scharf's facial iconography is part of a lexicon of emotional pictographs. Importantly, Scharf is meticulous in articulating the individual emotions in his work which resonates with the ancient tradition of pictographic language.

Preempting the rise of emojis and working in the vein of Elkman, Scharf developed a distilled yet sophisticated visual glossary of humanity's wide range of affective states. In this way Scharf was in tune with a prenatal cultural phenomenon, prescient in his creation of an entire visual language of emotional illustrations decades before technology necessitated the rise of emojis to fill the disconnect opened by constant, vacant electronic communication.

His wide range of imagery offers a universal yet idiosyncratic visual language for understanding humanity's complex relationship with expression and feeling.

Like Ekman's system of emotional classification, Scharf's widely-varied iconography asserts that emotions rarely exist as a single affective or psychological state. Human emotion is as complicated as it is intricate, and contrasting emotions can be experienced concurrently or in quick succession.

Art allows viewers to experience the often elusive feeling of empathy—the profoundly human emotional response that allows one to experience something of what others are feeling. Scharf's meticulously constructed world of emotive illustrations bring physicality to digitality, and offer a point of incursion for experiencing shared empathy in our new technologically mediated age. They also provide the service of mirroring, in that, a viewer can find and identify with an expression they find some identification with.

While the capacity to express emotion visually is global, the artworks referenced in this exhibition are drawn from a specifically European tradition. This reflects the sources most directly in dialogue with Scharf's own influences, which include Renaissance, Baroque, and modern Western painting. This exhibition focuses on a particular historical trajectory. It considers how emotion has been rendered through faces across time, and how Scharf's work reactivates and reimagines that lineage within the visual language of the present.