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Hip Hop x Graffiti x Technology: The World of Artist Kool Koor



Mariko Nishimura | Official Columnist
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Kool Koor and Jean-Michel Basquiat at the Fun Gallery in 1982. Photo by Lina Betrucci



When asked what kind of art I like, I answer without hesitation, "Street art in the city." The first street art that shocked me was the work of Richard Hambleton. His works, which sometimes look like corpses and sometimes like shadows in the city night, are truly genius in their concept and the momentum of his single stroke.

The generation influenced by Richard Hambleton includes Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. And along with Basquiat and Keith, the main character of this article, Kool Koor, was active in the graffiti world. Kool is a symbol of my favorite New York artists of the 1970s and 1980s. He started drawing graffiti for the first time in 1976 at the age of 13, and was one of the pioneers who formed the early New York graffiti art scene. His work is a symbol of hip-hop and graffiti culture, but when I talked to him this time, I was intrigued to learn that he has also been interested in technology since he was a child. Wanting to know more about the artist who combines hip-hop, graffiti, and technology, I consulted with Shin, owner of SHIN GALLERY, which led me to an interview with Kool.

We talked to him about the New York scene in the 1970s and 1980s, his production style, and technology.



--Kool Koor, can you tell us about your experiences and activities in the 1970s and 1980s?

Reflecting back on the 1970's-1980's the first thing that comes to mind is the curiosity that I had for history, symbolism and technology.

But one day in 1976 when I was 13 years old I had my curious world turned upside down when I discovered the graffiti art scene that was existing right in front of my eyes but somehow not registering on my radar. Waking up one morning I looked out the window of my second floor apartment and saw a big bright spray painting on the wall and a girl from my building writing her name GLORIA and MAMA on the wall. I yelled out to her “ I’m gonna tell your mother!”. She yelled back “every profane word you could imagine”. At that moment I said to myself if she could do it so could I. From that day forward I started writing graffiti.

My new found obsession of writing graffiti blended seamlessly with my obsession for history, science electronic devices. So, I would open devices up, take a look, take them apart and rewire things. I built a lot of crazy contraptions and used whatever I found around the house to make my playtime real. I would also draw almost every day. It was as if drawing took me to a place where I was familiar and comfortable. I was depicting visions from another dimension . I would curiously draw the interiors of cars. The interiors of space craft. Everything around me disappeared and sound itself faded away. I was in a zone. In that quiet place I was travelling through the multiverse. Depicting strange places filled with abstract architecture, futuristic space craft and figures that looked like a combination of robots and astronauts at the same time.



When I was engrossed in painting the interior of a car or a spaceship, everything around me seemed to disappear, even sound seemed to disappear, and I was in the zone. In that zone, I drew abstract architecture, futuristic spaceships, and beings that were a combination of robots and astronauts, and it felt like I was traveling through the multiverse.



Kool Koor and Shin at Shin Gallery 2023



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--What was the graffiti scene like at that time that fascinated you?

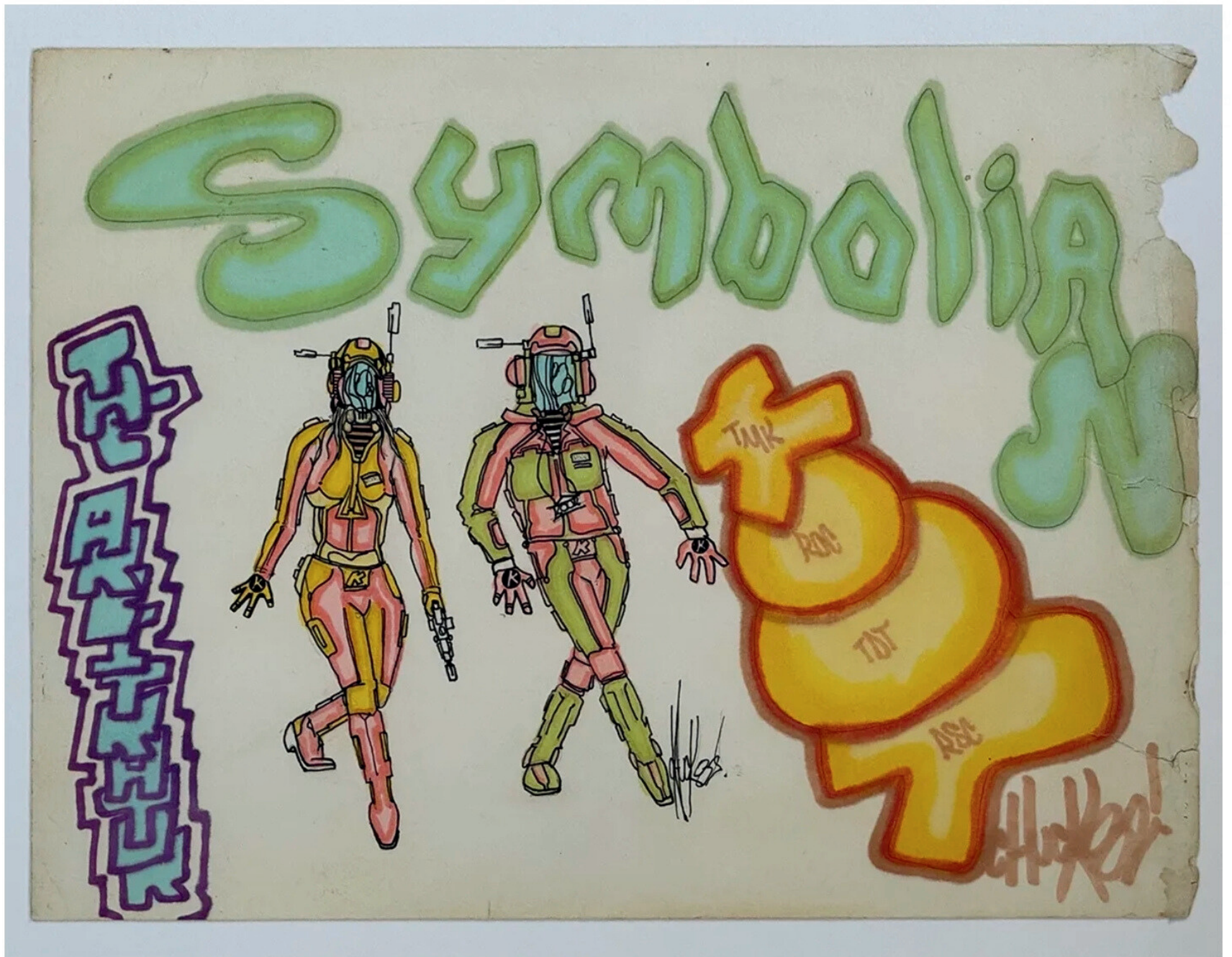
Back then Hip Hop was all around me. DJ's would come and play music outside in the public parks in front of my building and in many neighbourhoods close by. Graffiti was everywhere. Break dancing was picking up. Almost everyone was an MC, Graffiti Writer, DJ or Break Dancer. We did it all! . I was more driven to perfecting my calligraphic style of writing and painting. I knew this was my calling. It was really vibrant for me to see the whole thing develop and be an active part of the Hip Hop Movement.

--Who were your biggest influences in the 1970s and 1980s?

I would say scientific minds like Carl Sagan and Isaac Asimov for opening my eyes to the wonders of the cosmos, The architect Buckminster Fuller for expanding my way of thinking about megastructures and futuristic habitats, the visual artists like Frank Stella for letting me see that Large format artwork has it's place in everyday locations not only in museums, and Jackson Pollock for reminding me that we should be free when creating art.

*Carl Sagan: Astronomer who popularized science with his "Cosmos" series

*Isaac Asimov: Science fiction author known for the "Foundation" and "Robot" series *Buckminster.



Part of the Hiroshi Shimakake Collection

Fuller: Inventor of the geodesic dome and architect who contributed to sustainable architecture and design

*Frank Stella: A representative American artist of Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism.

*Jackson Pollock: An abstract expressionist painter known for his action paintings



How do you approach developing a new piece?

I take the time to think about how I want to occupy an exhibition space. I see movements, shapes, colours etc. Then after putting all of that information together, I can visualise the entire show before the work is created. I know the dimensions of everything that will go on the walls in advance. The next step is to prepare my work space. It must have the right light, the right size to logistically allow me to create comfortably. It's like meditation for me. I need a calm place with good energy for my art to become materialised. In this zen state I am like a sponge, releasing all that I have been accumulating mentally and spiritually.

I TECHNOLOGY

How has technology influenced your work, past and present?

In the past I was a child building in a child's mind, from a curious perspective not knowing how things worked. I was free to create my own reality artistically. As I got older I began to better understand how things worked and found myself have increased references to science and tech in my art.

When we spoke on the phone the other day, I was intrigued by your constant interest in robots and technology, and how you are fusing hip-hop with technology.

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The SYMBOLIAN robot as I call them are major figures in my artwork. They represent us “human kind” in the future. I would draw them in every day situations walking, dancing to flying through the cosmos. The direct connection is that Hip `hop culture was and is the sign of the times through the eyes ears and mouths of the youth.

Technology took the DJ from simply playing songs to scratching and juggling the sound thanks to advancements in electronic devices. Visual artists have computers the tech that allow then to create immersive installations. Whats interesting today is that the concept of mixing man and machine is here. Robotics and AI are used in daily life all over the world. Even a simple item like markers have come a long way. The quality that we can find now is light years ahead of what was available not even 50 years ago.

I ART

How has your outlook on art creation evolved over the years?

Nowadays, I often paint in situ to exhibit new artworks. I feel that drawing on the energy from the exhibition space directly influences what comes out.

What principle or philosophy do you hold most dear when creating art?

For me, it is not to paint every day. Every day I absorb what is happening around me like a sponge, and record in my subconscious the perspectives, colors, sounds, smells, everything around me. It is important for me to always create spontaneously and give myself the time and space to let myself go with the flow of the process.

How do you see the role of technology in the future of art?

Technology is the key. It is up to us to decide what comes next. Every day we see new innovations. This will increase exponentially. I feel the same way as I did as a child. As I said before, what I depict in my art exists in "another dimension". Soon, we will be able to travel across dimensions and see these exciting scenes for ourselves.



Kool Koor and Shin at Shin Gallery 2023

I Creative Process

-What do you pay attention to when you translate your multidimensional thoughts into the two-dimensional medium of paper or canvas?

I pay attention to removing thought from the process. It flows like water flowing through a mountain. There are no straight lines. Each curve leads to the next, and little by little the story unfolds and reveals itself. The more you let go of thought, the faster it flows. In this state of mind of creation, you can paint multidimensional landscapes for hours without rest.

-What future projects are you looking forward to?

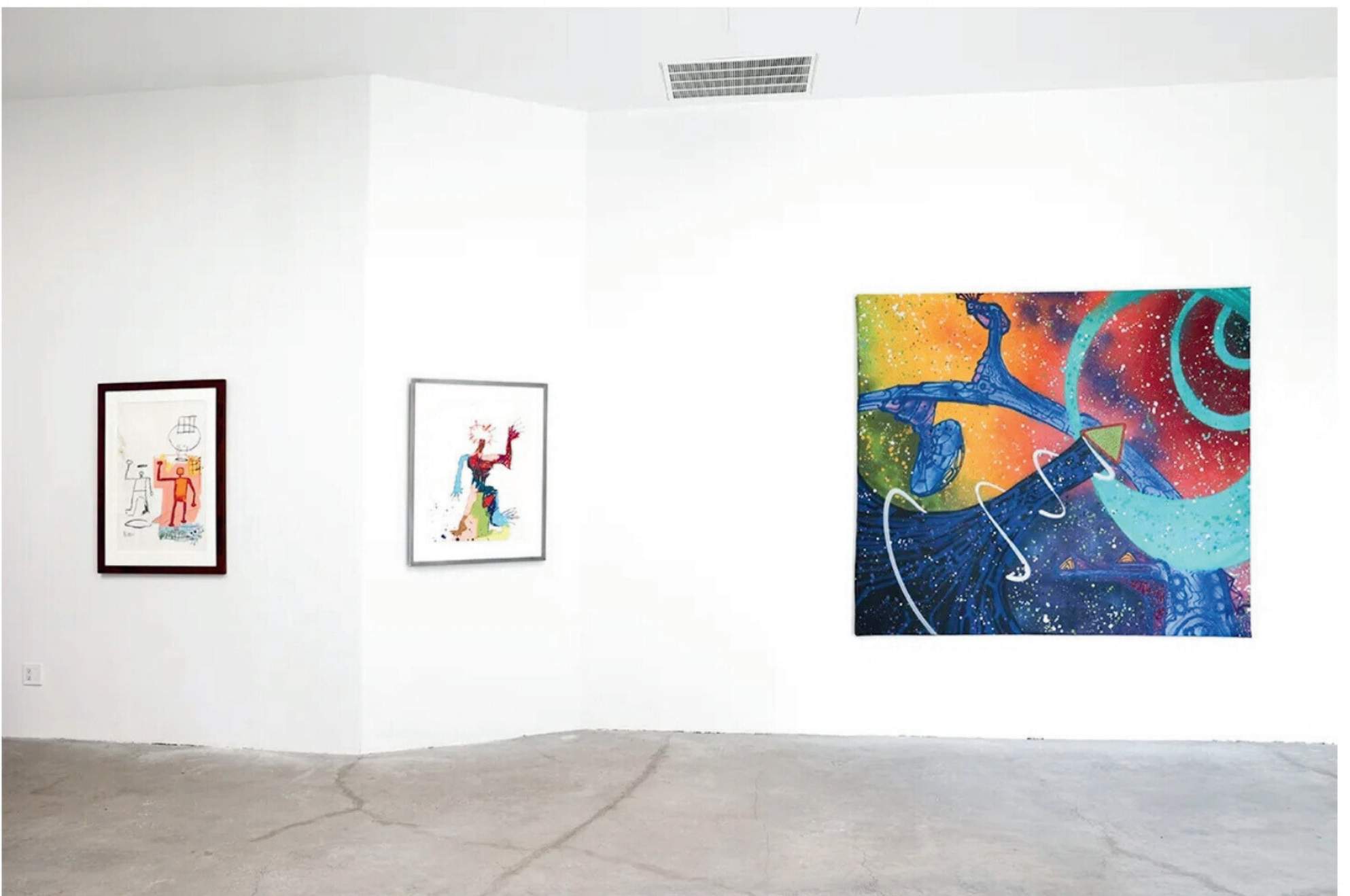
I am always excited to continue my creative journey. I have some big projects in the works in China and I am especially looking forward to my first trip to Japan. Somehow, I feel a beautiful creative adventure is waiting for me. I expect not only artistic and spiritual aspects, but also historical connections and connections with nature. I know that having this expectation as a "thought" will lead to its manifestation. At the same time, the universe has a master plan for all of us. I will continue to stay open to the future and be grateful for each day. With the above in mind, I will be here now and let things come to me naturally.

How do you see the evolution of graffiti and hip hop art in the coming decades?

Graffiti and hip hop cannot and will not stop. The sky is only the beginning.

The fact that the sky is just the beginning is the core of the message Kool wants to convey. In the world of graffiti and hip-hop, the creativity and freedom of expression are limitless. His words are filled with the infinite possibilities for the future and the will to continue challenging. The art he creates also reflects the symbols of the era in which we live with technology, giving us new perspectives and inspiration. Kool's journey will continue, and his art will continue to inspire many people around the world.

As we watch the path Kool Koor has walked and the future he will paint, we will surely be able to gain new perspectives and inspiration through his art. In his words, "the sky is just he beginning." The future of his art continues to expand.



Installation View of Kool Koor- Timeless at Shin Gallery, New York, 2023. (Left- Jean-Michel Basquiat, Untitled, 1980-81, Middle- Jean-Michel Basquiat, Untitled, 1982, Right- Kool Koor, THE PARTING OF A PYROLITH, 1990)