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A Celebration Of Soul: Kool Koor at Shin Gallery by Donald Kuspit



Kool Koor and Jean-Michel Basquiat at the Fun Gallery in 1982. Photo by Lina Betrucci

Kool Koor: Timeless

Shin Gallery (<http://shin-gallery.com/>)

May 13 through June 25, 2023

By **DONALD KUSPIT**, June 2023

...that Over-soul, within which each man's particular being is contained and made one with all others; that common heart.

--Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul," 1841

Let's first look at the WASP sculptor Donald Judd's banal "rows of identical boxes," as the Gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim called them—art historically they're a triumph of minimalist art but Arnheim compared them to "the rows of identical human dwellings in so-called subdivisions," arguing that they have the same "emptiness of homogeneity," the same soulless appearance, the same sterile unimaginative form. Then let's look at the ex-graffiti African-American artist Kool Koor's imaginative, intricately, extravagantly colorful boomboxes—art historically they're a triumph of maximalist art, taken together they convey the "fullness of heterogeneity," for each and every one is different, a non-conformist,

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charismatic, autonomous, fantastic personage--the boomboxes have been surrealized, their four knobs turned into eyes, the two largest seem to look outward, the two smallest seem to look inward, reminding us of the central place of the eye in Surrealist art. The comparison reminds us that Baudelaire's distinction between the romantic artist—Koor—and the positivist artist—Judd--is valid and convincing. Alluding to Comte's theory of positivism, the positivist artist is interested only in facts and indifferent to feelings. In contrast, the romantic artist is interested in feelings often at the expense of facts. "Romanticism is all for color," Baudelaire writes, and with that "intimacy, spirituality...aspiration towards the infinite."

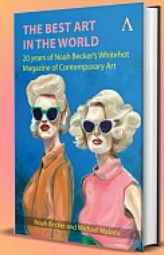


Installation View of Kool Koor: Timeless at Shin Gallery, New York, 2023.

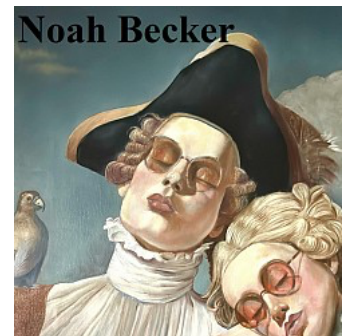
It is worth noting that Judd's static, sterile, impersonal, mute boxes are symptomatic of what Ortega y Gasset called the dehumanization of art in modernity. The minimal amount of art—and craft (skill)--that it took to make them suggests as much. In sharp contrast, Koor's dynamic, fertile, febrile, personalized boomboxes, soundboxes playing soul music—including classical soul music, such as Bach's compositions—turn the dial and you'll get whatever music you want, loud and clear--are a passionate attempt to rehumanize art. More personally, through music we make common emotional cause—which is why it is used in every known religious ceremony. We realize that we all have the same feelings, a heart in common, that our small soul is a part of a greater soul, an Over-soul, which is one way mystics describe God. All music is implicitly mystical--soulful and unites souls. In every society, and throughout history, music has been an indispensable part of religious ceremonies—it is what gospel music, symphonic music, jazz have in common--for it seems to lift one out of oneself while making one aware of one's deepest feelings—and other people's deepest feelings, shared in the common cause of transcendence of everyday experience. It is another paradoxical transcendental quality of music, for as Walter Pater said all art aspires to the paradoxical condition of music: form and content are one—indistinguishable--in it as they are in transcendental or mystical experience. Judd's minimalism, with its illusion that less is more, is the death rattle of modernist abstraction; Koor's maximalism shows that more is



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always better than less because excess is vitalizing, an indication of fertility, while less is indicative of sterility.



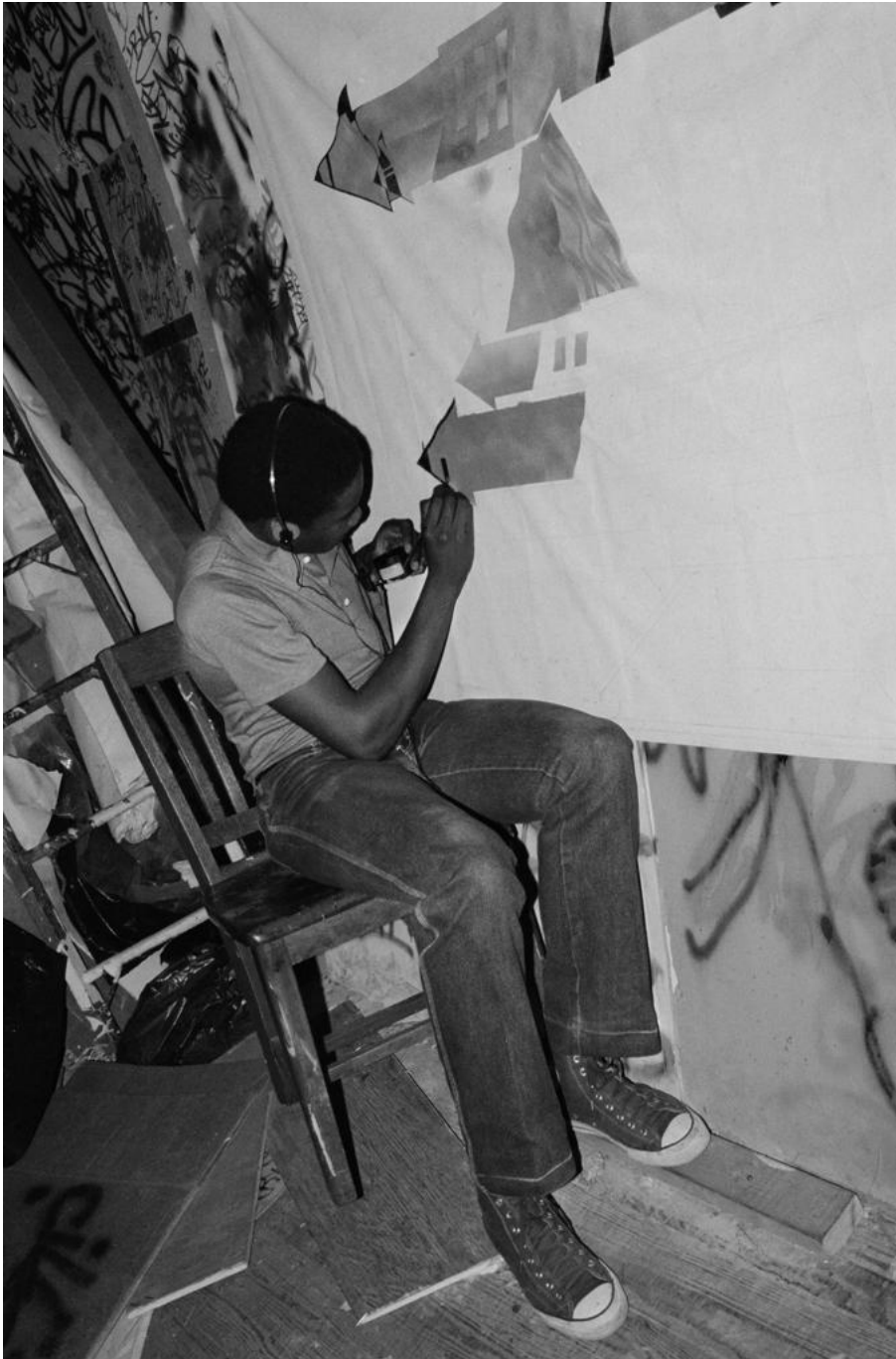
Rammellzee, Koolhaas, Fab 5 Freddy, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Toxic at the Fun Gallery, 1982, Photo by Lina Betrucci

Koor's boomboxes are clearly romanticized objects, but nowhere is Koor's romanticism—"spirituality, aspiration towards the infinite"—more evident than in his large abstract paintings. They are "soul music"—"music characterized by intensity of feeling" and "spiritual aspiration"—given visual form. Like soul music, Koor's soulful abstractions are uplifting, passionate, and a "tool to connect to God," the Over-soul. They are a "means of quickening the spirit"—the visual equivalent of musical spirituals. They are musical paintings, in Kandinsky's sense—even more musically intricate and radical than Kandinsky's legendary musical paintings, the ancestor of abstract expressionist paintings, said by the critic Clement Greenberg to be polyphonic music in visual form. Koor's abstract expressionist paintings are even more wildly polyphonic, verging on chaos as they generate energy. They are Koor's most soulful works, not only because they evoke the Over-soul, but because they are alive with spontaneous gestures, a sign of authenticity for the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. Koor's gestures transcend the space they arise and appear in, sometimes like explosive meteors or cosmic dust, generated as though to fill the vacuum nature abhors, sometimes taking geometrical form, sometimes sprinkling like dots of cosmic light.



Kool Koor, REVELATIONS, 1992, Enamel and acrylic on linen, 77 x 93 in. (195 x 238 cm.)

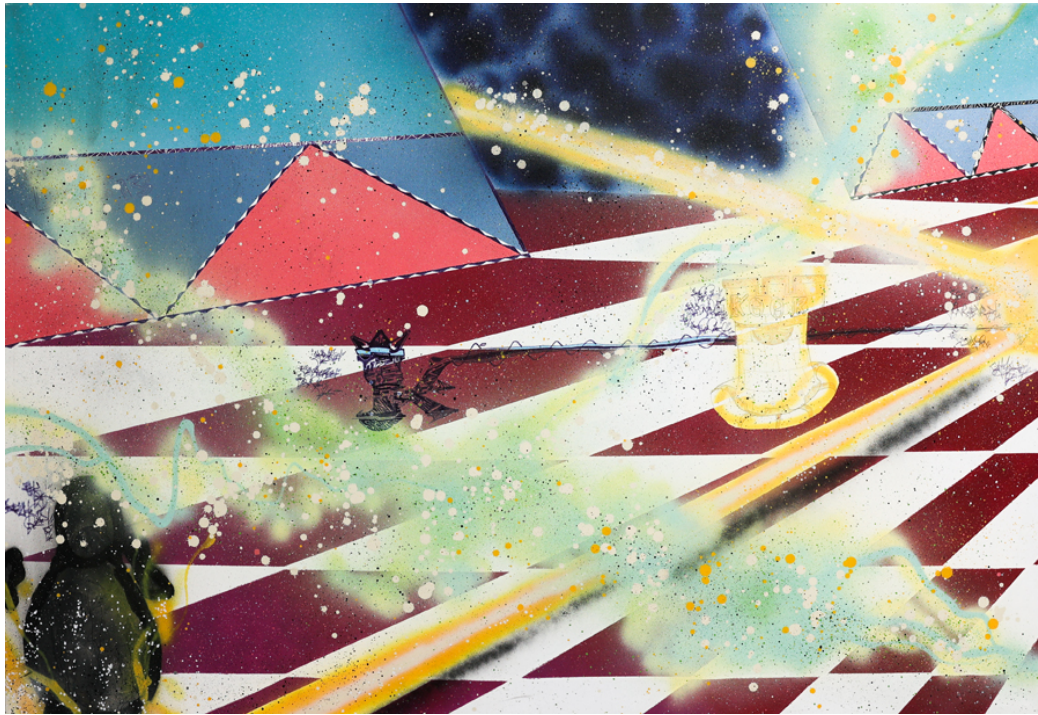
I am arguing that Koor is an idiosyncratic abstract expressionist, more radically explorative of the possibilities of abstract expression of emotion than any of the traditional gestural or geometrical abstractionists, and with that more unique. His paintings are not aesthetically narrow-minded and theoretically classifiable as those of the New York School are. He is a true “originale,” a visionary able to make fresh art out of old ideas. Emersonian Transcendentalism—spiritualism—lingers in the American cultural unconscious, informs 19th century American landscape paintings—the divine spirit materialized in nature—and is epitomized in Barnett Newman’s 20th century abstract sublime paintings, and now in the 21st century is dramatized in Koor’s cosmic paintings, fraught with spiritual conviction. I am arguing that Koor’s paintings are a new kind of transcendental abstraction, suited for a technological society, a society that trusts machines with its life, invests its spirit in miraculous machines—a transcendental abstraction that fuses science fiction realized in rocket ships and intergalactic space travel and traditional religious myth about genesis. It is the implicit subject of Koor’s *Stylus*, 1992, where the serpent that polluted paradise makes a grand appearance. All of Koor’s cosmic abstractions are radically idiosyncratic visionary paintings: insightful *Revelations*, 1992, conveying a sense of genesis—the birth of the cosmos—and apocalypse—its collapse, and with that return to elemental form. *BRK-13*, 1986 is gestural and atmospheric, *Certain Doom*, 1987 is ingeniously geometrical, a bizarre chessboard. *B-4*, 1990 seems to show the gloved hand of God—a witty reprise of the hand of God ready to breathe life into Adam in the Sistine Chapel mural?—but it’s the “black hand” of death. Genesis and Apocalypse—alpha and omega—seamlessly fuse in Koor’s art, giving a new meaning and emotional depth to transcendental abstraction.



Kool Koor at Fashion Moda in 1982, New York

The Parting Of A Pyrolith, 1990 shows that Koor is not without irony, for “pyrolithic stone refers to the manufactured 100% natural stone material that is made by Geoluxe.” It is nonporous, etch resistant, high strength, heat resistant, UV resistant, and has manufactured surface finish. It is superior to natural stone. Artificiality and technology are everywhere in the modern world, mimicking and bettering—improving—nature, and Koor makes the aesthetic best of artificiality, investing it with transcendental meaning: the artificial has become spiritual in our technological society, manufacturing spaceships that can soar into space, confirming that gods no longer live in it, but it can still give one a transcendental experience. Koor’s cosmicscapes remind me of Kant’s remark: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe...the starry skies above me and the moral law within me.” I don’t know if the moral law—conscience—in Koor fills his mind with admiration and awe, but his dramatization of cosmic space is aesthetically awesome, all the

more so because it seems to emanate from him, suggesting it is a spiritual space in which new worlds are born. Koor is an abstract fantasist, for his self-dramatizing space is his Oversoul.



Kool Koor, Certain Doom, 1987, Enamel and acrylic on linen, 74 5/16 x 51 3/8 in. (187 x 130 cm.)

The third body of works in the exhibition makes it clear that Koor is a master of *invenzione*, a proof of genius for Vasari, and in technological society. His inventiveness is evident in his design for *The Triangulum Museum of Black Contemporary Art*, 1989. It has a certain resemblance to a pyramid, a resting place for pharaohs, all of whom were African, and probably black, as been argued by black thinkers. It has been said that Cleopatra was black despite being Greek, but Odysseus was supposedly “dark skinned,” and so was Neferiti, in the famous bust of her by Thutmose. Perhaps more to the point of Koor’s museum—a kind of temple—is that God is traditionally represented by a triangle, symbolizing the Trinity, suggesting that Koor thinks of artists as gods, being creators—of whole cosmoses, as Koor is, in fantasy. It is not an unusual idea; the ancients thought that creative inspiration was a kind of “divine madness.” Koor’s cosmic abstractions seem peculiarly mad—inspired--creations. But perhaps his most ingenious invention is the *Symbolian Robot*, 1982. *The Symbolians*, 1982 are the unhuman race of the future; they will clearly take over the world, if AI, the New Omnipotent Machine Creative God, has its way. A robot is a symbol of human being, but it functions better than a human being, for it has artificial rather than natural intelligence. It may breakdown, but it can be easily repaired, its malfunctioning parts replaced. Its mechanical body makes it impervious to the ills of the human body. *The Pyrolian Robot R-13*, 1983 is unlikely to ever breakdown, pyrolian being harder than stone. In the future—and Koor is a futurist worthy of H. G. Wells, an earlier master of predictive science fiction—there will even be robot insects, as *Kooroc Robot*, 1982 suggests.



Kool Koor, KK MEGABOOM, 2023. Enamel and acrylic on wood, 10 x 20 x 8 in.

All of Koor's robots are meticulously drawn, with exquisite precision, as though by an obsessive mechanical engineer—a futurist visionary. The first simple robots appeared in Karl Capek's 1927 science fiction play R.U.R.—Rossum's Universal Robots—but they have come a long, sophisticated way since then: Koor's robots make it clear that they have become all too human, particularly in their propensity for aggression, as the guns many carry make clear. They are killing machines, but also fucking machines, as the Symbolian couple is. Koor's drawings are miniature tours de force—the smallest is 6 by 6 inches, the largest 10.5 by 8.5 inches. Each is an exquisitely detailed, meticulously executed masterpiece—visionary art in an aesthetic nutshell. *Koor*, 1979, an abstract symbolic self-portrait, shows the delicacy of his touch—his sensitivity to the white paper, nuanced shading of it rather than dominating it with darkness, and his constructivist ingenuity. But his visionary and technological genius are on special display in *Timeless One*, 2023, two chairs from a series of 12, all plexiglass resin and wood. They are beautifully colored with cosmic abstractions and triangular—like the Triangulum Museum—and remarkably comfortable, however planar their construction. They are fit for a king of art, such as Koor, but they are healing machines, meticulously constructed to therapeutic specifications. If art can heal the wounds caused by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune—particularly black fortune—then Koor's ingenious art, timeless yet timely, can do so. **WM**



Installation View of Kool Koor: Timeless at Shin Gallery, New York, 2023.



DONALD KUSPIT

Donald Kuspit is one of America's most distinguished art critics. In 1983 he received the prestigious Frank Jewett Mather Award for Distinction in Art Criticism, given by the College Art Association. In 1993 he received an honorary doctorate in fine arts from Davidson College, in 1996 from the San Francisco Art Institute, and in 2007 from the New York Academy of Art. In 1997 the National Association of the Schools of Art and Design presented him with a Citation for Distinguished Service to the Visual Arts. In 1998 he received an honorary doctorate of humane letters from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In 2000 he delivered the Getty Lectures at the University of Southern California. In 2005 he was the Robertson Fellow at the University of Glasgow. In 2008 he received the Tenth Annual Award for Excellence in the Arts from the Newington-Cropsey Foundation. In 2013 he received the First Annual Award for

Excellence in Art Criticism from the Gabarron Foundation. He has received fellowships from the Ford Foundation, Fulbright Commission, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, Guggenheim Foundation, and Asian Cultural Council, among other organizations.

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