

eric firestone gallery

The New York Times

Futura, a King of the Aerosol Can, Returns to His Roots

The artist has gone from painting subway cars to the runways of Comme des Garçons. After a hiatus, his two exhibitions are his first in his hometown in 30 years.

By Max Lakin

Dec. 9, 2020, 12:55 p.m. ET



The week before he turned 65, Futura was contemplating his legacy. Considered one of the progenitors of graffiti art, and one of its most recognizable figures, he was sitting in Eric Firestone Gallery in NoHo, where “Futura 2020,” his first solo exhibition in New York in 30 years, is on view. Across the river, in Queens, his installation at the Noguchi Museum, a suite of hand-painted Akari lanterns, had opened the day before. Futura, who is rangy and was wearing a wool knit cap pulled to just above his eyes and a jacket from his recent collection with Comme des Garçons, was discussing the long arc of his career, one that has taken him from painting in unlit subway tunnels to working for the United States Postal Service to being a frequent presence in the global luxury fashion market.

“My ambition to be successful in a monetary way never interested me,” he said. “I just wanted to support my family, take care of my children” — he has two. “As it turns out, I’m actually doing much better now, so I guess it’s a question of my patience. I stayed positive, even when things weren’t there for me, or I saw other people running past me on the track of life. But here I am.”



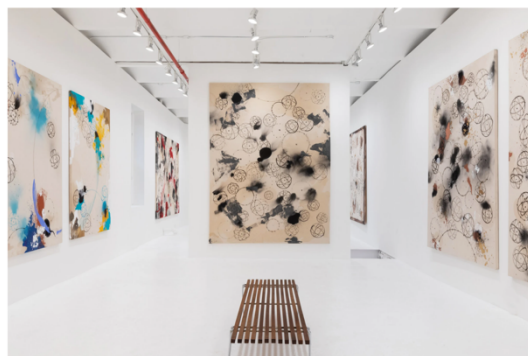
View of "Futura 2020" at Eric Firestone Gallery. From left, "Earth," "Pluto" and "Venus." Stylized atoms are one of Mr. McGurr's persistent motifs. Eric Firestone Gallery



"People are quite familiar with my stuff, but no one gets to actually see it," the artist says, "so I'm really happy people get to look at the work, without swiping, and zooming and enlarging with your two fingers." The show marks the first time the artist has used a more earthy palette on raw canvas. Eric Firestone Gallery

Futura is a New York lifer. Born Leonard McGurr in Manhattan, he grew up on 103rd Street and Broadway, and by his 20s was a propulsive force in the high period of aerosol art that emerged in the city's periphery in the 1970s on the exterior of subway cars — an exuberant collision of color and stylistic lettering that was as much about carving out space as it was the genesis of a completely American form of expressionism.

Fascinated with technology and science fiction, Mr. McGurr began tagging as Futura 2000, fulfilling the forward-looking promise of that nom de graf through his use of abstraction, expanding the form beyond lettermaking to include impressionistic fields of color, blooming nimbuses that seemed to be in motion even when holding still. His "Break" train mural, from 1980, an ecstatic explosion of cadmium and white, marked a stylistic rupture in the field, and is still referred to mythically. Soon he was exhibiting with Tony Shafrazi and [Patti Astor's Fun Gallery](#) alongside Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf, included in an era-defining 1981 exhibition of young artists at PS1 Contemporary Art Center (now MoMA PS1), "New York / New Wave," and collaborating with the Clash, designing their album art and painting onstage during their concerts. And then he effectively removed himself from the art world.



The show at Eric Firestone Gallery features 21 new paintings with aerosol, oil and ink. Eric Firestone Gallery



"Poll Watchers," an 18-foot-wide painting on canvas by the artist with the proportions of a subway car, incorporates his character drawings. Eric Firestone Gallery

In part he was disillusioned with the machine of the industry, and felt unmoored within it. "It's not like I was going rogue and trying to sell stuff out the back of my car, but at a certain point the numbers just get crazy," he said. "I didn't want to struggle with all that. I'm a pretty good hustler, I was getting [graphic design] consulting jobs, which felt like a good get-over move. Something like that just seemed more manageable, and more real."

By the late '80s, Mr. McGurr was working a string of jobs: bike messenger, gas station attendant, moonlighting for a gypsy cab service. He sorted mail at the post office across the street from PS1. His reintroduction into artmaking was assisted by Agnès B., the enigmatic fashion designer and art patron whose soft spot for street art has nurtured the careers of untold artists. She arranged a studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, paying two years of the \$500 monthly rent in advance (this was 1989).

In the intervening years he has applied his art to commercial products, from the now-defunct skatewear line Zoo York in the early 2000s to recurring collaborations with Supreme and Nike. He reprised his live artmaking during a Louis Vuitton runway show in 2019, and collaborated with Off-White earlier this year. He's created products for both the New York Yankees and the Mets.



Mr. McGurr was invited to hand-paint the Akari lanterns at the Noguchi Museum in Queens. The characters also appear in his paintings. ShiLei Wang



Futura's stencil signature was made with his 3-D printer. He created his new paintings in a temporary studio near Eric Firestone Gallery. ShiLei Wang



The artist spray-painting one of Noguchi's Akari lanterns. ShiLei Wang

Still, Mr. McGurr views the Firestone show as an inflection point. “People are quite familiar with my stuff, but no one gets to actually see it, so I’m really happy people get to look at the work, without swiping, and zooming and enlarging with your two fingers,” he said. “People’s perceptions immediately change. You’re actually in it.”

“Futura 2020” represents both a return to a period of Mr. McGurr’s practice and a push forward. The show comprises 21 new paintings with aerosol, oil and ink, many of which are on the largest studio scale he’s worked in to date. Celestial bursts of vaporous reds and cobalts float across an astral plane as stylized atoms — one of Mr. McGurr’s persistent motifs — dance and carom. The whole thing looks as though it’s passing through the canvas rather than settling within it, a small window onto an inexpressible cosmos. The skittering, hectic forms and negative space can recall Twombly, and there is a kind of placid spiritualism at work, too, a collision of the natural and the unknowable that seems to make the entire canvas hum.

That’s a quality even more pronounced in the Noguchi installation, for which Mr. McGurr was invited to hand-paint 10 Akari lanterns, the amorphous washi paper sculptures Noguchi developed in 1952 as a commercially accessible version of his ethos of industrialized naturalism. Akari were never critically well-received during Noguchi’s lifetime, but he was more interested in their ability to make porous the artificial demilitarized zone between art and commerce, a porousness that finds an echo in Mr. McGurr’s own practice.



Brian Donnelly, known as KAWS, lent a 1985 Futura painting, "El Diablo," center, to the Noguchi exhibition, which is on view through Feb. 28. The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS); Nicholas Knight

“What retailers always do is simplify, but Akari for Noguchi really was like the diversity of the rainforest,” Dakin Hart, the senior curator of the Noguchi Museum, said. “He wanted it to have this incredible variety. They’re space-transforming things, things you want to mess with. When I think of Akari I think about custom car culture. Noguchi himself was hot-rodding his own Akari.” Noguchi thought of Akari as miniature suns; Mr. McGurr reanimates them into softly dappled moons and ethereal planetary bodies.

Like Mr. McGurr, Noguchi operated as somewhat of an outsider to the institutional art world, and found a way to make the system work for him. Noguchi, born in Los Angeles to an American mother and Japanese father, lived with what he described as a sense of “belonging everywhere and nowhere.” Mr. McGurr, who was raised by adoptive, interracial parents, cites his attraction to art-making as a desire to define his identity for himself. Noguchi, Mr. Hart said, “spent his entire career trouncing those categories and trying to break the rules at every available opportunity.”



Noguchi thought of his Akari lanterns as miniature suns; Mr. McGurr reanimates them into softly dappled moons and ethereal planetary bodies. The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS); Nicholas Knight

When Noguchi was invited to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale in 1986, critics and curators warned him not to include Akari, worried that their commercial nature conflicted with the Biennale's artistic sanctity. In typical Noguchi fashion, he made an entire new line of lamps that he called VB lamps — Venice Biennale lamps. “Working with someone like Lenny, who spent the last couple of decades focused on big-name luxury brands, which in theory makes him anathema to the institutional side of the art world, is exactly what makes him attractive to us,” Mr. Hart said.

Mr. McGurr tends to work quickly, a holdover from his subway days. He painted the work in “Futura 2020” in the course of the last three months. (He actually completed 34 paintings, several of which Mr. Firestone elected to save for his Art Basel Miami presentation this month.) His line work is still impeccable. He paints on the floor, inverting the aerosol can to control line weight, “a game I play with the pressure of the can,” he said. “All of these are pretty damn good,” he said, sounding satisfied as he evaluated the installed paintings. “It’s all about finding an individuality inside this whole goulash. I think for me it’s my technique that really separates me from everyone else. It’s clear, ‘oh, this dude can make circles.’ This was a thing I wanted to do as a kind of return to my roots, when we were painting in the early ’80s.”



In 1999, Mr. McGurr (Futura) at the Recon, a clothing and collectibles store on the Lower East Side that he co-owned. Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Though considered a pioneer in graffiti and street art, institutional recognition has eluded him. But in recent years there's been a revived interest in what Mr. McGurr refers to as the "Subway School," seen across a spate of surveys attempting to correct the record. They include a show at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, ["Writing the Future: Basquiat and the Hip-Hop Generation,"](#) through May 16, and, in 2019, ["Beyond the Streets"](#) (both represented Mr. McGurr) and ["Henry Chalfant: Art vs. Transit, 1977-1987"](#) at the [Bronx Museum of the Arts](#). The word "graffiti" can be contentious; in a 2001 interview, Mr. McGurr expressed frustration with the label. Time has softened his view. "I just want people to be a bit more open-minded."

"Our contribution is important, not just to our own community, which we self-invented, but in the annals of what American art is. At some point, we have to be recognized," he said.

In the gallery, Mr. McGurr presented the hangtag to his CdG jacket, which features his swooping, propulsive signature, still attached to the zipper. "I enjoy seeing my name there because there was a time when I would have just scribbled this up somewhere in Columbus Circle," he said.

"He's been at it a long time, but he still seems like he could be 25," Mr. Hart said. "All great artists who survive long enough, all they want to do is be kids. He's just filled with this childlike love of exploring."

Mr. McGurr reminisced about seeing Basquiat walk the Comme des Garçons runway in 1987. The next year he was dead, found in his loft across the street from where Mr. McGurr's new paintings now hang. "Keith, Jean, Andy — those guys are gone 30 years. Rammellzee, Dondi, Stay High, Phase, A-One, they're gone. The fact that I'm still here — I'm a cat with way more than nine lives. I get to walk through the door again, and I'm very aware of that. My thing has come back around."

Futura 2020

Through Jan. 9, Eric Firestone Gallery, 40 Great Jones Street, Manhattan; ericfirestone.com; (646)-998-3727.

Futura Akari

Through Feb. 28. The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, 9-01 33rd Road, Queens; noguchi.org; (718)-204-7088.