

FUTURA2000 (born Leonard Hilton McGurr in New York City) is a graffiti pioneer who began painting subways in the late 1970s. In 1980 he painted the iconic whole car titled “Break,” which was recognized for its abstraction, rather than a focus on lettering. This painting established some of the enduring aesthetic motifs and approaches FUTURA2000 would explore over the decades that followed.

FUTURA2000 was among the first graffiti artists to be shown in contemporary art galleries in the early 1980s. His paintings were shown at Patti Astor’s Fun Gallery and Tony Shafrazi, alongside those of his friends Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Rammellzee, DONDI, and Kenny Scharf. MoMA PS1 brought the artists together in their landmark 1981 exhibition, “New York / New Wave.”

In this period, FUTURA2000 illustrated the sleeve cover for The Clash’s ‘This is Radio Clash’ seven-inch single. He accompanied The Clash on their Combat Rock tour, spray painting in the background while the band played. He painted as an accompaniment to demonstrations of break dance by the Rock Steady Crew, and concerts by Grand Master Flash and Afrika Bombataa. With the Clash, he recorded the vinyl “The Escapades of Futura 2000,” a manifesto for graffiti.

By the 1990s, as the commercialization of global street culture in the 1990s inspired collaborations with fashion and lifestyle brands, FUTURA2000’s work moved toward a more refined expression of his abstract style. Commissions from brands such as Supreme, A Bathing Ape, Stüssy, and Mo’ Wax saw his artwork canonized as an elemental component of cross-genre street aesthetic. He has collaborated with Nike, BMW, Comme des Garçons, Louis Vuitton, and Off-White.

Simultaneously, he has developed his fine art practice. In recent years he created collaborative works with Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, and he has exhibited at Kaikai KiKi, Gallery in Tokyo. His work has been shown at The New Museum, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Groninger Museum, the Netherlands; and Yvon Lambert, Galerie De Noirmont, and the galerie du jour agnès b., all Paris. He was the subject of a 2019 exhibition at Urban Spree Gallery in Berlin; and a large site-specific installation in 2020 at the Palais de Tokyo. This November, Rizzoli International Publications will release FUTURA: The Artist’s Monograph, the most in-depth and comprehensive survey of the artist's life and career. His work is also included in the 2020 exhibition “Writing the Future: Basquiat and the Hip Hop Generation,” at the Museum of Fine Art, Boston.

The artist’s work bears his interest in a futuristic aesthetic. He has long been fascinated by science fiction and the space age. He enrolled in the US Navy in 1974, traveling across the world, and becoming intrigued by the computer and navigational systems. He was an early adopter to sophisticated computer technology and video gaming.

In his paintings we see certain motifs relating to these interests: the Pointman: an alien, robotic-like figure, and a form that has been called an atom-shape, but which is ultimately about perpetual movement.

Other recurrent forms are that of a crane, and a linear mark signifying a “break” or rupture. Perhaps most distinctive is the thin, refined line that FUTURA2000 achieves using spray paint. This is contrasted to the larger mists of color area, and to more gestural brush marks. Many of his paintings were made flat on the floor, and bear the energy of moving around the perimeter of the painting, yet approaching the work with a deliberate elegance.

By leaving large areas of his canvases open, and allowing the forms to float across the surface, FUTURA2000 suggests access to a cosmic space. The paintings become a membrane between the personal and the public, material and universal concerns; and it is this grace which has characterized FUTURA2000’s work throughout.