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Graffiti, Games and Hip-Hop Culture: Finding Art on the Street

By David Gonzalez

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If you see a petite, silver-haired woman of a certain age lugging her camera gear and standing in a crowded subway car, do not offer her your seat. “I don’t like that,” Martha Cooper said. “I’m like, ‘Really? You think I look like a person who needs your seat?’ It’s kind, but it’s a bit of an insult.”

Ms. Cooper, 74, knows exactly what she is doing in the subway, and then some. Back in the 1980s she ventured into dark tunnels and train yards to document young artists — writers, as they prefer to be called — as they worked feverishly at night. She got to be so good at it that they would alert her when they finished a new piece, prompting her to dash up to the Bronx and wait until the freshly painted subway car rolled into view.

Today, the revolution she documented in its golden years has gone global, as has she. Her documentation of graffiti and street art have made her arguably the best-known photographer of the genre, along with Henry Chalfant, who collaborated with her on the seminal book “Subway Art.” But her work goes beyond that, ranging from street games and yard shrines to young women in hip-hop culture and life in SoWeBo, a Baltimore neighborhood. Some of those images will be in an exhibit opening Thursday at the Steven Kasher Gallery in New York.

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Her photographic subjects may seem varied, but there is a thread running through them that harkens to a period in the 1960s when she studied ethnology at Oxford. Call her an “anthropographer,” someone who uses the camera to get at subcultures others may miss or dismiss. Consider even how she approached her graffiti images: Rather than show close-ups of the artistic process, she opted to show a bigger picture.

“I want to put things in context,” she said. “That holds true of all my work. I want to show whatever it is I am photographing in a way the viewer gets a sense of where that picture was taken.”

That journey started in Japan, where she took pictures of elaborate tattoos.

“That was my first dipping into an underground culture,” she said. “It kind of represents my pictures of everyday art, people’s art. It’s broader than art on walls — I mean, art on museum walls. It’s about quirky art that people like.”

She got entree into the world of graffiti in the 1970s when she photographed children playing on the garbage-filled lots of the pre-gentrified Lower East Side. She was working for The New York Post and would stop and take pictures of children playing, using up the last few frames of a film roll before heading to the newspaper’s darkroom. One day, a boy offered to introduce her to a graffiti master. He was not exaggerating: The boy introduced her to Dondi, a famous graffiti artist who educated Ms. Cooper on the graffiti scene and let her accompany him on runs into the subway yards.

That meeting resulted in what Ms. Cooper calls her “shot of a lifetime,” a powerful image of Dondi straddling two subway cars, spray can in hand, as he finished a piece.

“That was the shot that made graffiti cool,” she said. “It definitely helped make graffiti into something other kids wanted to do. It looked cool, energetic and athletic. That image, as much as the actual work on trains, turned kids in countries like Sweden on to graffiti.”

Granted, a lot of commuters did not share her passion for the art form, dismissing all of it as the work of vandals intent on scrawling their names on every available surface. But some of the more talented young artists she photographed — like Crash, Lady Pink and Mare — have gone on to distinguished careers, traveling and exhibiting around the world. So has she, with a travel schedule that is full. A lot of her recent work is posted on Instagram, which she has come to love as a way to show her work immediately, without having to wait for a publisher or editor to decide when and how.

While the Kasher show will feature a range of her work, her archives are so deep that there is a lot more waiting to be shown. Over the last decade she made some 200 trips to Baltimore — her birthplace — where she bought a house and started documenting the SoWeBo neighborhood.

“I wanted to get away from the idea of being the ‘graffiti photographer,’” she said. “I tried not to let anyone in SoWeBo know that I photographed anything else. But the graffiti guys found me anyway. It’s hard to stay incognito.”