



# **The Embodiment of Protection and Resilience: Coby Kennedy's Shielded at C24**

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I first learned of Coby Kennedy's industrial afrofuturism practice when I interviewed him in 2021 on his solo exhibition *Jimmy Crow and the Imaginary Thug* (February 25 – March 21, 2021, Superchief Gallery, NY,NY). His works created a unique universe full of steampunk vibes, sci-fi diasporic futures, and materials pulled from dystopian reality.

In his first solo exhibition with C24 Gallery *SHIELDED* (April 17 – May 30, 2025), Coby goes even further, where the myths of the past and present have started to decay into dust. Where elements and shapes are weathered and beaten, the kevlar material discarded revitalized through his repurposing into

abstract shapes and forms. It felt like the next step forward in the reality Coby plays with. A distant future where all that is left is beiges, browns, forgotten protection discarded.



Coby Kennedy, Untitled 1, 2025, Ballistic grade Kevlar®, steel, rust, resin, fiberglass, 50 x 48 x 5 in, 127 x 121.9 x 12.7 cm Images courtesy of the artist and C24 Gallery

In his 2021 solo show, his works had more of a narrative function, more clearly defined with fantasy creatures and characters that were the subject of many of his works. His newest works are more intimate and personal, with his daughters as direct reference for two of his newest pieces on view. His new role as father is seen fully embraced and is clearly on the forefront of his

mind. This new journey is abstracted and not clearly defined, he is wiser and lived through much in his life, but his experience gives him strength that he can impart on them. His works display the realization that he must now not only protect himself and his ideas from the world we live in, but his daughters and the future reality he will not be able to ‘shield’ them from. He must not only protect his daughters, but prepare them for whatever dangers they may encounter. Protect them. SHIELD them for as long as he can.

The term shield as defined by Webster’s dictionary is: “ a broad piece of defensive armor carried on the arm...something or someone that protects or defends.....[and] a device or part that serves as a protective cover or barrier.” The definition encompasses Kennedy’s new priorities and focus of being a father of young girls. *Shielded*, it’s beyond protection it is resilience, he now sees the idea of defense as an offense making yourself untouchable so you can be able to confront any of the realities that one faces. His works have become even more abstracted; they are now embodying the concepts and feelings and letting yourself project onto them this feeling of resilience and protection.



Coby Kennedy and Alexandria Deters in front of his work during his opening, April 17, 2025

Living today in America is a scary undertaking being a young girl can be terrifying. Looking at the materials of it is environmentalism and activism rolled into one it is looking at materials that Beyond natural man-made, but it's purpose and usefulness has not expired. Often we look at man-made materials and objects is having a timestamp functionality. Once it has been used, their worthiness has been diminished and we discard without a second

thought. It becomes a relic that slowly decays and withers, forgotten. But unlike shields from past history, his shields and works are made with Kevlar, a material that does not biodegrade. It can fade and look deteriorated, but in reality it can be recycled and used often in different functions, such as in modern day defensive material (shields, helmets, armor).

When I asked him about his larger than life shields he discussed how one of his favorite areas to visit in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is the Arms and Armory area, in particular the shields that are on display from around the world. When looking at these objects now admired for their beauty, and less for their functionality, it is easy to see the parallels. Shields from ancient times are intricately crafted and used, scarred and deteriorating and crumbling, but their original purpose of protection can still be felt even thousands of years later.

These thoughts whirl in my mind when I look at his geometric works created with Kevlar, rust, resin, steel, and plastic. Man made materials that are showing their age, he does not shy away from showing the cracks of the detroitian, and finds the beauty in them. These materials known for their strength and used in armory and protection, shaped into objects that would be used in ancient times, but on closer inspection could only have been in made in the present or recent past.



Coby Kennedy in front of his work during his opening, April 17, 2025 | Photo by Alexandria Deters

One of the largest and most striking works is a giant gold portrait of his daughter with horns coming out of her head and hands reaching out, holding on she is floating and she is strong and she is embodying the material she's been created on (*Stigmat a-proof Onesie*, 2025). It's the perfect piece to explain the purpose of this show, wanting to guard and preserve his daughter, yet also knowing she is exposed to the world almost glowing with his love and care. Rather than being on a cloth canvas she is depicted on woven Kevlar. She is strong, stronger than she even realizes and she doesn't even understand yet the tools that her father and mother have given her.

We no longer battle with swords and on horses and need shields to protect us, but even today this object of protection is still used often by police the metropolitan his favorite area of the museum is The Shield an Armory area and he was inspired by the way artery of the shields and how often their is a personal biographical element on them, a portrait of image. With *An Assertion for the Ibex*, 2025, he takes his personal inspirations and puts it to the forefront, a young girl looking directly but calmly at the viewer, her hair protectly shielding her as she shields whoever uses this shield as protection, her face and image part of that feeling of safety. Kennedy caringly presents the face of one his loved daughters front, making one think how it is the strength of her face, her presence that is protecting *him*, a talisman of security.





Coby Kennedy, Stigmat a-proof Onesie, 2025, Oil paint, pressed Kevlar®, steel, Wood, 59 x 107 in, 149.9 x 271.8 cm  
Images courtesy of the artist and C24 Gallery.



Leaving the exhibit, the colors and abstract shapes, I feel I have honoring relics of a hard won war. But in reality this works represent present and future battles, the ones Kennedy is currently confronted with in this political climate, and the ones that once he is gone that his daughters, picking up his worn, used, but still resilient shields and weapons of intelligence and creativity that he has made and forged for them, will continue to fight.

When the past collides with the present, and when a stable prosperous future is uncertain, we must make sure to use all the tools, defenses and offenses that have been given and shown to use. He is making them contemporary with the scars of battles yet to be fought through his rustings and cracked kevlar pieces. Kennedy does this reflection eloquently, playing with ancient shapes and symbols and combining it with the love of his family and need to protect them.



Coby Kennedy, *An Assertion for the Ibex*, 2025, Oil paint, ballistic grade Kevlar®, steel, rust, resin, plastic, 46 x 46 x 7  
in Images courtesy of the artist and C24 Gallery.

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