

art



Survival Kit

Students use art to get through hard times

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Delmore Schwartz once wrote: "In the unpredictable and fearful future that awaits civilization, the poet must be prepared to be alienated and indestructible." Working with this kind of transcendent cool within the present-day random hell of the South Bronx's mean streets, the poetic artwork of teacher Tim Rollins and his collective of student art activists prove that "only beauty can change things." "Amidst trials, tribulations and sorrows" they create art as a means of survival, as a way to get through difficult times.

Rollins believes in the force of art-making which is "as futile or powerful as prayer." He feels: "If you want to survive ... as a voice, a culture, an affirmation of spirit, then you draw and paint, you write, you make poetry and song and dance. You make the invisible visible. You make an idea concrete in material." Under Rollins' guidance, his students devise works which stem from the study of literature and the influence of music and art. They are evidence of these at-risk

Tim Rollins and K.O.S.: Survey, 1981-2000 continues through May 13 at the Wood Street Galleries, Downtown. 471-5605.

teenagers' "vitality and endless capacity for joy." Receiving widespread recognition, the collaborative endeavors of Rollins and his artists' group, Kids of Survival (K.O.S.) have been exhibited in major museums worldwide, including Carnegie Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art and the Tate Gallery.

In addition to teaching for 18 years within his home-based Art and Knowledge Workshop in the South Bronx, Rollins has involved K.O.S. in projects in other communities across America and Europe.

Rollins introduces classical and contemporary writings, some of which have themes of struggle, as resources to stir up students' native gifts. All serve as starting points for the artists to conceive pieces relevant to their own lives and experiences.

This literature both metaphorically and physically becomes fertile ground upon which to overlay their creations as, initially, a canvas is covered with pages from the book chosen for interpretation. Its text bleeds through and mixes with the artists' new visualizations. Imagery is developed through discussing motifs and issues within the written material plus exposure to any related musical compositions. Museum visits and readings blend a familiarity with art history, contemporary art practice and popular culture to further inform their work.

The studio working environment is "electric ... with fantastic music blasting." Collective decisions determine every stage of the piece's process, from assigning roles in its production to how it will look, down to how it will be displayed. A variety of works from

1981-2000 are now on exhibit at the Wood Street Galleries.

Riffing on Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, each artist designed a personal brand with high style, taking what was to be a mark of shame and turning it into an emblem of pride. Burning brightly through the words of this story of repression and persecution, each unique variation on the symbol becomes a reminder to take any kind

of positive action rather than "be a victim of yourself or society or be buried under a stigma."

An update on Orwell's *Animal Farm* represents, among other political barnyard demons, Fidel Castro as a dog, Saddam Hussein as a hawk, Boris Yeltsin as a pig and what appears to be both George Bush the elder and the younger as one shady fox.

Sensitively rendered in pencil, the quietly thoughtful face of African-American athlete Jesse Owens, who triumphed at Berlin's 1936 Olympics, silences the shrieking lie of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

In a derivation from Kafka's *Amerika*, the text rolls out as expansively as the promise buried within this country's landscape of possibility and hope. A tangled multitude of golden horns celebrates the spirit

of a diverse population.

Rollins and K.O.S. demonstrate their dedication to creating structures "where there's no failure; all can participate fully and freely in a model for a democratic ideal," a conviction that shines through this strong, affecting show. **S**



Frankenstein, 1981-84