EXHIBITS  BY  LAURIE  APPLE

A,  PLUS

Hester Prynne's scarlet letter is just one literary element the students in K.O.S. have turned into museum-level art.

IT WAS A TYPICAL early-'80s afternoon in the Art & Knowledge Workshop, educator Tim Rollins' New York studio. To ensure that his young, inner-city students learned great works of the literary canon, Rollins read classics aloud as they painted or drew. But Carlos Rivera, a young hyacinth boy, was feeling pretty frustrated that day. He couldn't follow along with the story being read, so he began drawing on the pages of one of Rollins' cherished books.


Rollins, a strict disciplinarian who doesn't tolerate drugs, failing grades or criminal activity, was furious. But then, in a transcendent moment, he realized that Rivera's random scribbles were initiating a truly intriguing dialogue between form and text. Rollins calmed down quickly — and he never looked at books the same way again.

Since 1984, Rollins has taught Rivera's art-on-test technique to subsequent generations of what he calls K.O.S. — the Kids of Survival. Most come from the streets of the South Bronx, one of New York City's toughest neighborhoods, where they grew up amid broken families, drug dealers, teen parents and the constant temptation to drop out of school.

Some are like Rivera, who couldn't read the text he drew upon. Rollins shows K.O.S. how to confront unfamiliar language and integrate it with their own; the fruits of their work can be seen in Sonny: 1988-2009, an exhibition of 16 pieces on display now at the Wood Street Gallery.

Sonny is dominated by hidden canvases, which K.O.S. artists cover with pages ripped from classic novels and then glaze into orderly rows. Each work communicates several different languages: the translated texts of authors who lived centuries ago; the lines and colors enchanting the monotonous, black-and-white surfaces of individual pages; and the emotional and imaginative stories of the young K.O.S. artists. Consider it multicultural communication at its best and most natural.

"The Scarlet Letter," a broad texture based on pages cut out...
from Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic work, which involves several different conversations upon a single, rectangular surface. Painted over the tragic story of Hester Prynne, the 17th century adulteress ostracized from her New England community, are red, stylized letter "A"s — Hester's infamous insignia. One "A" resembles a jellyfish with long, loopy tentacles; another has two peaks, and looks more like the letter "M." Each "A" cleverly interrupts the celebrated narrative of Hawthorne's text, which struggles to unfold beneath them.

But there's more to "The Scarlet Letter" than this. It's as though the artists are trying to say that their own stories have been interrupted by figurative "red letters" — stereotypes about their marginalized ethnicities, perhaps, or limits imposed upon them by harsh socioeconomic conditions.

Another Survey standout is "Animal Farm," a series of five, nine-by-nine-foot linen panels covered with caricatured world leaders. Underneath former Russian despot Boris Yeltsin, whose head is attached to a boar's body, George Bush is depicted as a hyena. Together, they stand among apples and other fruits — Yugoslav dictator Slobodan Milosevic and former British Prime Minister John Major, for examples — and diminutive mice with Third World leaders' faces.

Throughout the exhibit, Rollins' own vision crops up subtly. Born in Pittsfield, Maine, to blue-collar workers, Rollins formed K.O.S. out of an after-school art program. Artists receive monthly stipends based upon the sale of their paintings; their works have hung in major museums throughout the world, from the Tate Gallery in London to the Whitney in New York.

K.O.S. doesn't fit the definition of "art therapy," per se — Rollins wants his students to consider themselves budding professionals, not mere scribblers. He expects them to strive for excellence, and as Survey demonstrates, they're finding it within reach. IP

SURVEY, 1981-2000
TIM ROLLINS & K.O.S.
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