

Tuesday, March 28, 2000

Want to drive your 10-year-old crazy? Shut off the video games and replace them with a set of watercolors.

And while you're at it, toss aside the new 'N Sync CD that's been occupying the boom box and throw in a copy of Felix Mendelssohn's opera "Midsummer Night's Dream."

Popular wisdom suggests this is a sure-fire recipe for an outbreak of severe tantrums. Then again, with the right teacher, 15 hours of

high-impact exposure to culture can result in kids who not only appreciate art but also willingly come back for more.

Last week, two dozen such students were aligned along a 30-foot table in

a sunny room at Wood Street Galleries, Downtown, engrossed in a collective art exercise shepherded by New York conceptual artist Tim Rollins.

A raconteur with a black Stetson and the unpretentious manner of a Yankees fan, Rollins has spent the last 20 years teaching inner-city kids to admire and create art.

Since 1981, Rollins' Kids Of Survival program has taken about 200 pre-teens from New York's toughest neighborhoods and made them understand why names such as Monet and Kafka are just as important as Ice Cube and Howard Stern.

The kids at last week's crash course in watercolor painting, Shakespeare and opera were culled from Liberty International Elementary in Shadyside, one of the city's magnet schools. The intense, studied expression on the face of each student showed that they liked painting — and not just because the exercise got them out of class for three hours each day.

Their particularly rapt attention was due mostly to Rollins, who patrolled the room with his tough-love combination of instruction, encouragement and discipline.

"We don't need the chatter," he'd bark one moment, while quick-quizzing students on art technique ("What does opaque mean?") the next.

Regardless of what city neighborhood the students hailed from, for most, this was their first introduction to the fine arts. Rollins said it is not uncommon to work with children who grow up blocks from museums and galleries but never venture inside.

To ensure these local students attend at least one art exhibit in their lives, Rollins will mount their watercolors on a massive canvas covered in Shakespearian text. The work will be part of a multimedia show running from Friday to May 13 at Wood Street Galleries.

The gallery's curator, Murray Horn, said younger students are more accepting of art, as they have few concerns about whether the other kids will think it's cool to like painting or opera.

Jordan Benton of Highland Park was among the fifth-graders anxiously awaiting his first art opening.

Benton seemed amazed that his excursion into painting could have reaped fulfilling rewards, even with that "weird opera music playing."

Lydiya Barbaric, 10, a Bosnian immigrant living in Shadyside, said the class provided her with a chance to learn enough about painting that she plans to pursue art at home. There's a chance she'll become an artist after graduating high school, too, she said.

For Rollins, this kind of permanently piqued interest makes untold hours of repetitious instruction and paint-splattered clothes worthwhile.

"Sometimes I get calls from kids five or six years later, after they've moved on through high school and decided they want to be artists. That's the best feeling of all," he said.

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