

JAMMIN' CLASSICS

BY MEISHA ROSENBERG

TIM ROLLINS AND K.O.S.: A HISTORY

TANG TEACHING MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY, THROUGH AUG. 30

TIM ROLLINS AND THE SELF-NAMED Kids of Survival (K.O.S.) have been creating extraordinary art since the 1980s, when Rollins became a teacher in the South Bronx for kids classified as "at risk." His method—the group calls it jammin'—involves reading aloud classic literary texts such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Franz Kafka's *Amerika* to provoke intense discussion and art. It led to an after-school group, the Art and Knowl-

edge Workshop, and in 1994, they were successful enough to move to a Chelsea studio. Rollins and K.O.S. have conducted workshops from Boston to Ireland (and recently, they began using the Web for art). Their artworks, which are owned by institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and the Hirshhorn, tend to be graphically bold images painted over appropriated book pages laid out in a grid, although the group has also done sculptures such as a tower of Bibles; logs with eyes, inspired by Pinocchio; and bricks painted with images of buildings on fire; all currently on view at the Tang.

This remarkable exhibition is the first major look at the group's history and displays about 20 early works from the '80s through the '90s that burn with passion and intelligence. The first two

large-scale paintings—the absolutely wonderful, graffiti-esque, *Frankenstein* (after *Mary Shelley*), which shows the monster's fist punching through city concrete while a cartoon cat figure howls in the foreground, and *Dracula* (after *Bram Stoker*) (both 1983)—were actually made in Rollins' Bronx classroom. Ian Berry, Tang curator and editor of a forthcoming catalog, first encountered Rollins at a lecture. Berry told me, "I liked the works first, and then was really turned on by Tim's presentation. Tim's project was unique in that they transcended an educational project; it's not just kids' art." The show is next slated to visit the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia and the Frye Museum in Seattle.

A glass-topped table showcases memorabilia about the collective, and a 1996 documentary film by Dayna Goldfine and Dan Geller plays in the gallery (on a too-small TV). It narrates the shooting death of one of the kids—the victim of a robbery—and portrays

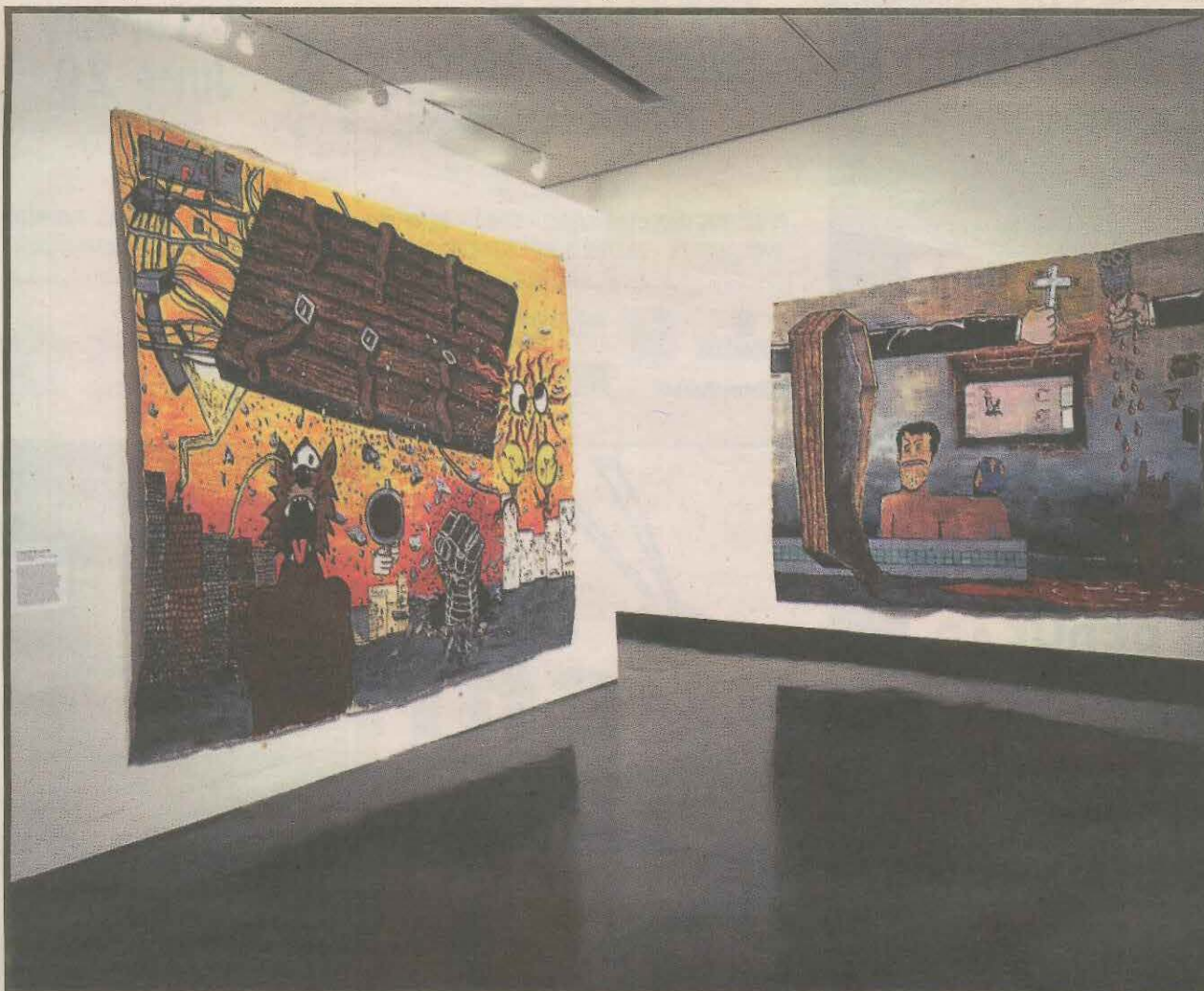
Rollins as a force to be reckoned with: He gets angry when kids don't show up and motivates them to relate their lives to the themes of great literature. For the *Red Badge of Courage* painting, Rollins asked them to imagine "everything your people have survived and everything you have survived as a wound."

The group's collaborative process challenges notions of the lone genius artist, and as such, it has not been without controversy. Some have complained that Rollins is too heavy-handedly pedagogical, saying that he co-opts disadvantaged kids into his own rigid formula. However, it is clear that the kids have a lot of say in the process—in fact, it was one of the kids who first drew directly on a book—and there is nothing rigid about the gorgeous, graffiti-influenced letter "As" in red and gold in *The Scarlet Letter—The Prison Door* (After Hawthorne) (1992-93).

Regardless of its socially redemptive aspects, this is vital art that at once adheres to classic, even minimalist principles and cuts to the heart of human journeys, addressing themes both political and personal. Beautiful and colorful wounds gape from book pages in *Red Badge of Courage IV* (after *Stephen Crane*) (1986). Other times text is whited out, as in *Whiteness of the Whale II* (after *Herman Melville*) (1991) and *Winterreise (songs XX-XXIV)* (after *Franz Schubert*) (1988); several works, such as *Invisible Man* (after *Ralph Ellison*) (1999), in which the blocky title letters, IM, appear superimposed in white on the book pages against a black background, speak to racial themes by harnessing the light and dark interplay of paper and text.

While collaging book pages is the group's default aesthetic move, a range of materials and styles shows their mastery of varied design and stylistic principles. *Amerika I* (after *Franz Kafka*) (1984-85) is a bold, large-scale painting of a riotous but elegant labyrinth of golden horns. *From the Animal Farm: Jesse Helms* (after *George Orwell*) (1987) is an in-your-face caricature of the senator as a spotted dog in a pen, while *Incidents in Life of a Slave Girl* (after *Harriet Jacobs*) (1998) adorns text with a rainbow of satiny ribbons that pool on the ground.

Many of the kids—no longer kids—have gone on to study at top schools like Bard and Stanford and have become artists and educators in their own right. As this exhibition makes evident, we can't have too many success stories like theirs. ■



Not kid stuff: Tim Rollins and K.O.S. at the Tang.