

Art



JEENAH MOON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Young Collective, Now Middle Age, Keeps Growing

A Kids of Survival show continues a 1980s legacy.

By TED LOOS

HOBOKEN, N.J. — As their name suggests, the Kids of Survival have been through plenty before there was ever a pandemic. Surmounting obstacles is what they do. Except now they are not kids anymore.

What began in the 1980s as a program for South Bronx teenagers with learning disabilities grew quickly into a successful art collective called Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival), whose works are in the collections of major museums. Now it's composed of four middle-aged men: the brothers Angel Abreu and Jorge Abreu, Rick Savinon and Robert Branch.

Mr. Rollins, the artist and educator who founded the group, died in 2017 at age 62.

The current members started with the group between ages 12 and 16, and all had their lives transformed by the experience, overcoming tough circumstances and achieving success not only with the collective but in their own separate careers, too.

"Our survival is art," said Mr. Savinon, who met with Angel Abreu and Mr. Branch in their small studio-cum-clubhouse here to talk about their improbable life in art. "That's what gets us through."

On the walls were several works to which they contributed, including "The War of the Worlds (After H. G. Wells)," from 2004, depicting parts of national flags. Everyone wore masks, but the chairs were in a tight circle — it had the air of a family holiday gathering. (Jorge Abreu had also planned to attend, but he tested positive for the coronavirus at the last minute and stayed home.)

At a crossroads without Mr. Rollins at the helm, they have rebooted themselves as Studio K.O.S.

A new show at two locations of the Wexler Gallery — by appointment both in its main Philadelphia space and its satellite space in the New York Design Center on Lexington Avenue — will be on view through March 20.

"Studio K.O.S.: The Continuing Legacy of Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival" features 16 works by both iterations of the collective going back to the early 1990s, including "A Midsummer Night's Dream (After Shakespeare and Mendelssohn)" from 2016-17, a watercolor and acrylic collage incorporating offset pages of music score.

The show's most recent piece is the video "Invisible Man (After Ellison)" (2020), with the letters "I M" overlaid on text from Ralph Ellison's novel "The Invisible Man," part of a series dating back more than 20 years.

The squared-off "I M" font comes from the last two letters of "victim" in a Daily News headline from the late 1990s about urban violence; the collective lost one of its members, Christopher Hernandez, in 1993 when he was killed in his South Bronx apartment building after he witnessed other murders. He was 15.

Studio K.O.S. developed the latest iterations of the Ellison works as part of a series of interactive video sessions including ones with current students in Philadelphia who are around the same age that the collective's members were when they began making art. The workshops, Collaborative Workshops for Transcendence Through Art and Knowledge, are a form of paying it forward that also helps the group point itself in a new direction.

Shown in a continuous loop on a monitor, "Invisible Man (After Ellison)" (2020) cycles through different versions of the image, many of which were done by the students using Google Slides in the workshops. The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis held one in September, and more are planned for 2021.

"These kids are ready to explode creatively," said the Brooklyn-based Mr. Savinon, 49, who works as a designer in several fields.

One of the students who participated in the Walker workshop, Tylia Kennedy, a 17-year-old high school junior who lives in Minneapolis, made a slide with "contrasting colors and lots of yellow," she said, adding that the event "really opened my mind."

The surge of the Black Lives Matter movement last year sparked Studio K.O.S.'s current direction. All four of the current

members have Dominican heritage, and the collective was always largely made up of Black and Latino students.

"We wanted to revisit works by Black authors," said Mr. Branch, 43, who directs a team of videographers at Columbia University and teaches at the School of Visual Arts. The connection between Black Lives Matter and Ellison's book, he added, was that they both addressed "the struggle to be seen."

The video sessions came out of not being able to meet regularly to make art during the pandemic, an example of the resourcefulness Studio K.O.S. has become known for — after all, the collective started in a partly boarded-up classroom using public school art supplies and made its way to the Venice Biennale and the cover of Artforum.

"We've expanded in ways that maybe we wouldn't have been able to do otherwise," said Angel Abreu, 46, who is based in Montclair, N.J., but has been lately teaching at the prep school Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts.

His younger brother agreed. "That's part of being in K.O.S. — being able to go through

the fire," Jorge Abreu, 41, a Brooklyn-based writer and poet, said in a phone conversation.

What ties the recent work to the earliest phase of K.O.S. is that it is based on literature and the empowering act of reading. Much of the collective's output during its almost 40-year existence has incorporated pages from books. Many of the kids who joined Mr. Rollins's program were dyslexic, and the transformative power of words fuels their mission still.

"I was a dyslexic student," Mr. Branch said. "It's why the pages are important to us symbolically."

One prominent example is on view now at the Museum of Modern Art: "Amerika VIII" (1986-87), among the best-known works by Tim Rollins and K.O.S. The nearly 14-foot-long piece, a watercolor and charcoal on pages from Franz Kafka's 1927 novel, "Amerika," has the quality of an illuminated manuscript writ large, with riffs on the book's motifs, including trumpets, rendered in a golden color. Roberta Smith, in a 1989 review in *The New York Times*, called out "radiant grillwork, a golden gate of



STUDIO K.O.S. AND WEXLER GALLERY



DANIEL WEISS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



TIM ROLLINS & STUDIO K.O.S. AND WEXLER GALLERY

Above, clockwise from top left: "Amerika VIII," from 1986-87, by Tim Rollins and Studio K.O.S., on view at the Museum of Modern Art; a watercolor collage; "Invisible Man (After Ralph Ellison)," 2020. Below, the collective in 1993 included Jorge Abreu, seated; center row from left, Rick Savinon, Tim Rollins, Carlos Rivera and Victor Llanos; and back row from left, Robert Branch and Angel Abreu. Bottom, today it includes, from left, Mr. Savinon, Mr. Branch and Angel Abreu.

overlapping, intertwining trumpets, each one more eccentric, more wildly mutated and suggestive than its neighbor."

Like many of their larger works, the picture plane is replete with forms, reflecting the many hands of a collective. But the composition is orderly, even serene.

"That's why K.O.S. works — it's like an orchestra," said Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, the MoMA curator who chose the work for a gallery, "The Sum of All Parts," which draws from the permanent collection. "They were first brothers before they became artists."

MoMA's education department is organizing a Zoom session with Studio K.O.S. as part of its Art & Practice series, scheduled to take place Feb. 25.

The particular strangeness of making art as a group activity — divvying up exactly who does what — is something that the four artists don't think too much about, having started as children.

"Checking your ego at the door," Mr. Savinon said. "That's what we've always done."

As the membership of K.O.S. waxed and waned over the years, they simply adjusted the tasks to suit everyone's strengths, in addition to moving the studio from the Bronx to Chelsea and then to Hoboken.

"Robert cannot paint, and we make fun of him for that," Mr. Savinon said — in this group, teasing comes with membership.

Some skills were in evidence from the start. "I could draw like a dream," said Angel Abreu about his 12-year-old self, when he was a student at Intermediate School 52, which was only three blocks from his home. But he added that the blocks were "littered with stereotypical things from the mid-80s in the Bronx — prostitutes, drug dealing, all kinds of crazy stuff." The abbreviation K.O.S. was chosen by the group partly because it sounded like "chaos."

Mr. Rollins was teaching at the school, and quickly recruited Mr. Abreu.

"I showed up at the studio with my Crayola watercolor set," he recalled. "At the time they were working on a major painting for P.S. 1. The studio erupted in laughter, and I was so embarrassed. But I was like, 'This is home.'"

Later, as a student at Deerfield, Mr. Abreu would fax drawings to Mr. Rollins to stay involved in the collective's work.

A few girls joined over the years, but mostly it was a boys' club.

"Once everyone became sexualized there was a different energy in the studio," Mr. Abreu said. "The idea of having three or four girls among 15 boys in this studio, it was a weird thing. But the few girls that were there really made a difference."

All the members have stories about their awe-struck reactions when they were thrust into the center of the art world as teenagers. For Mr. Abreu, the aha moment came when he saw "Amerika VII" on the walls of the Philadelphia Museum of Art when he was 15.

"I walked up to it and said, 'Did we really make this?'" he recalled.

In the years since, they have reflected on Mr. Rollins's influence; Mr. Abreu noted that most of the kids in the program had never even been to a museum before they joined K.O.S.

The tricky politics of race — Mr. Rollins was a white guy from Maine recruiting Black and Latino kids, with only his name front and center, like the lead singer in a band — has been noted over the years by outside commentators, but the current members expressed only solidarity and gratitude.

"He was on a mission, but he wasn't a missionary," Mr. Branch said of Mr. Rollins.

Jorge Abreu called him "a father figure, mentor and friend," but that has also meant huge difficulties in his absence.

"He was the nucleus," Mr. Abreu added. "It's been tough to go on without him. But at the same time, there's always a point where the master teacher passes the baton."

As they move forward on their own, Studio K.O.S. gets back to its roots by communing with art, not just making it.

"One of the corny things we do is go to MoMA and sit in front of a Pollock or Rothko and just lose ourselves in the painting space," Mr. Branch said.

And the fact that their own piece hangs not too far away gives them pride.

"Our work stands in museums next to great works of art," Mr. Branch said. "We have something to say."

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WHAT WE OWE THE ARTS

How might the incoming Biden administration stage a cultural rescue? A critic offers a plan. BY JASON FARAGO | PAGE 6

PLUS Around the world, the level of government support has made all the difference. PAGES 8-9

INVISIBLE CREATURE



10 POP
Kidd G, who built an audience as a rapper, tests the limits of the country music industry. BY JON CARAMANICA



11 DANCE
Watching a television series about a ballet school and finding it full of clichés. BY GIA KOURLAS



13 ART
The Kids of Survival aren't children anymore, but they are still transforming. BY TED LOOS