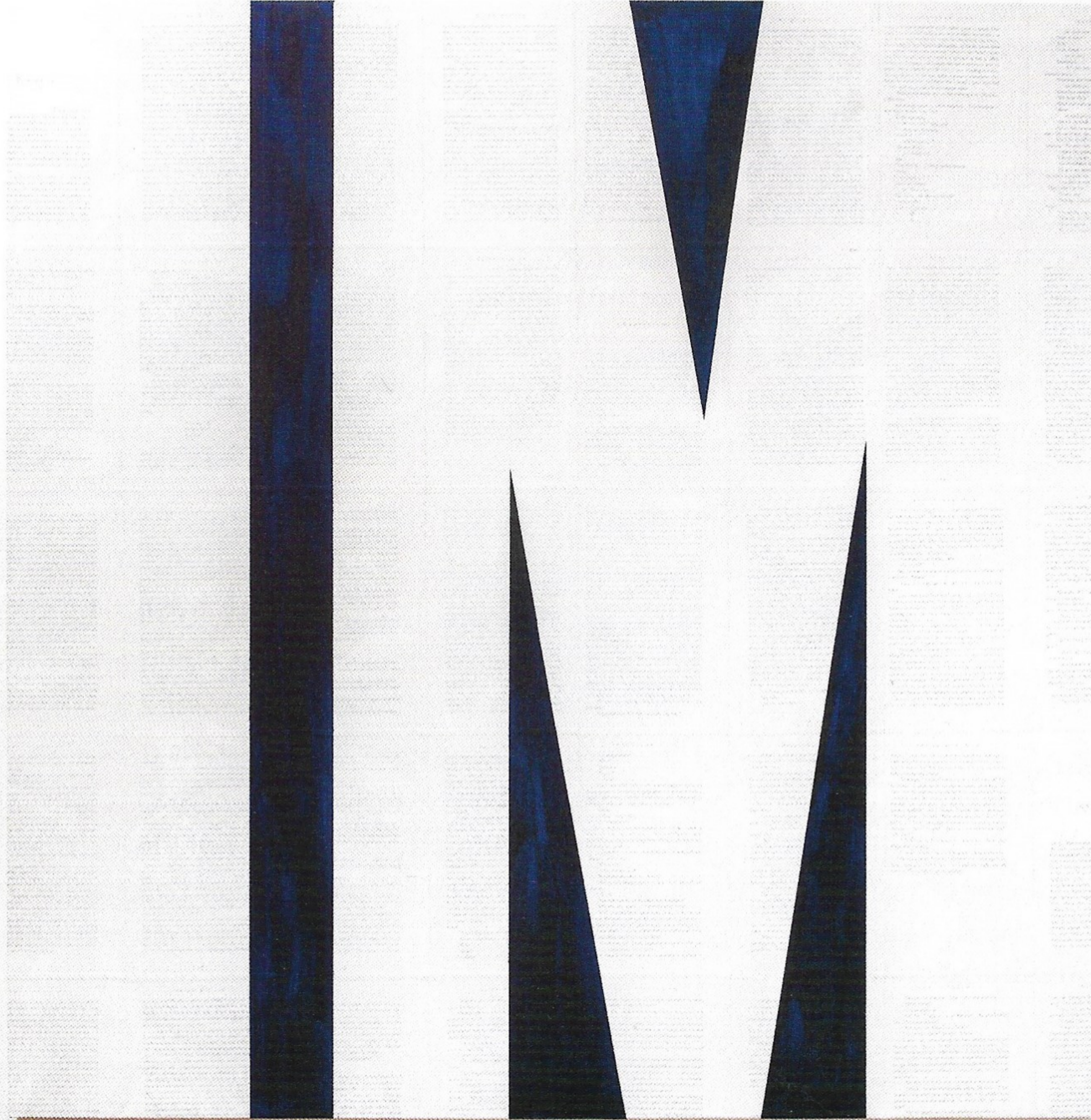


FORUM



TIM ROLLINS & K.O.S. *Invisible Man (after Ralph Ellison)*, 2014
Matte acrylic and pencil on book pages on wood panel; 36 x 36 inches

ISSUES regularly receives numerous letters from readers responding to our articles. We print some of them here. A fuller collection can be found in our online Forum: <https://issues.org/section/forum/>

NURSING INNOVATION

Nursing has long been a poorly respected, poorly paid, but high-risk profession. Historically in Europe and North America, nurses were volunteers from religious denominations; in other societies, nurses typically were family or community caregivers. Even as nursing professionalized and added

requirements for classroom education and clinical training, it remained lower status than other medical disciplines. Numerous studies have tracked detrimental impacts of this dynamic on patient outcomes; in extreme but strikingly frequent cases, intimidation by surgeons has prevented nurses from speaking out to prevent avoidable medical errors.

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As Lisa De Bode describes in “Innovating ‘In the Here and Now’” (*Issues*, Winter 2021), nurses nevertheless have played a central role as innovators throughout history. She cites Florence Nightingale’s new guidelines on patient care and the efficacy of nursing during the 1918 flu pandemic before noting that nursing generally is considered a field of “soft” care that enables physicians and surgeons to invent “hard” tools, therapeutics, and other biomedical machinery. Yet as Jose Gomez-Marquez, Anna Young, and others in the Maker Nurse and broader nurse innovation communities have identified in recent years, nurses have been “stealth innovators” throughout history. Interestingly, this work has been recognized within the profession at times. From 1900 to 1947 the *American Journal of Nursing* ran an “improvising” column of nurse innovations that met criteria of efficacy, practicality, and not creating new risks to patients or attendants. After 1947, the journal ran a regular series to share innovations, called “The Trading Post,” which included sketches, lists of materials, and recipes. Ironically, as nursing professionalized, recognition of the tinkering mindset and peer-to-peer sharing of ideas declined.

De Bode’s article provides diverse examples of rapid response, nurse-originated innovations during the ongoing COVID pandemic. She also observes and subtly pushes against definitions of innovation that are based solely on “things,” such as pharmaceuticals and medical devices. Innovations—and inventions—that originate from nurses typically fall into vaguely classified categories of “services” and “care.” They aren’t patentable, reducible to products that can be licensed to other clinics, or the basis for making a pitch deck to present to venture capitalists. Like the invention of hip-hop, the creation of new clothing styles by individuals in the Black community, and the work of thousands of inventors

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The Evolution of Studio K.O.S.

In the 1980s, a group of students in the South Bronx formed an after-school art collaborative under the direction of the late artist/special education instructor Tim Rollins. The students were mostly of Puerto Rican and Dominican ancestry and had been diagnosed with severe learning disabilities—some were labeled unteachable. Rollins, recognizing their creativity, developed a way of teaching through art. Each project they embarked on was based on a literary classic and they often made their work directly on the pages of the books themselves. The pedagogy involved a fairly simple notion: engage the hands and the mind will follow.

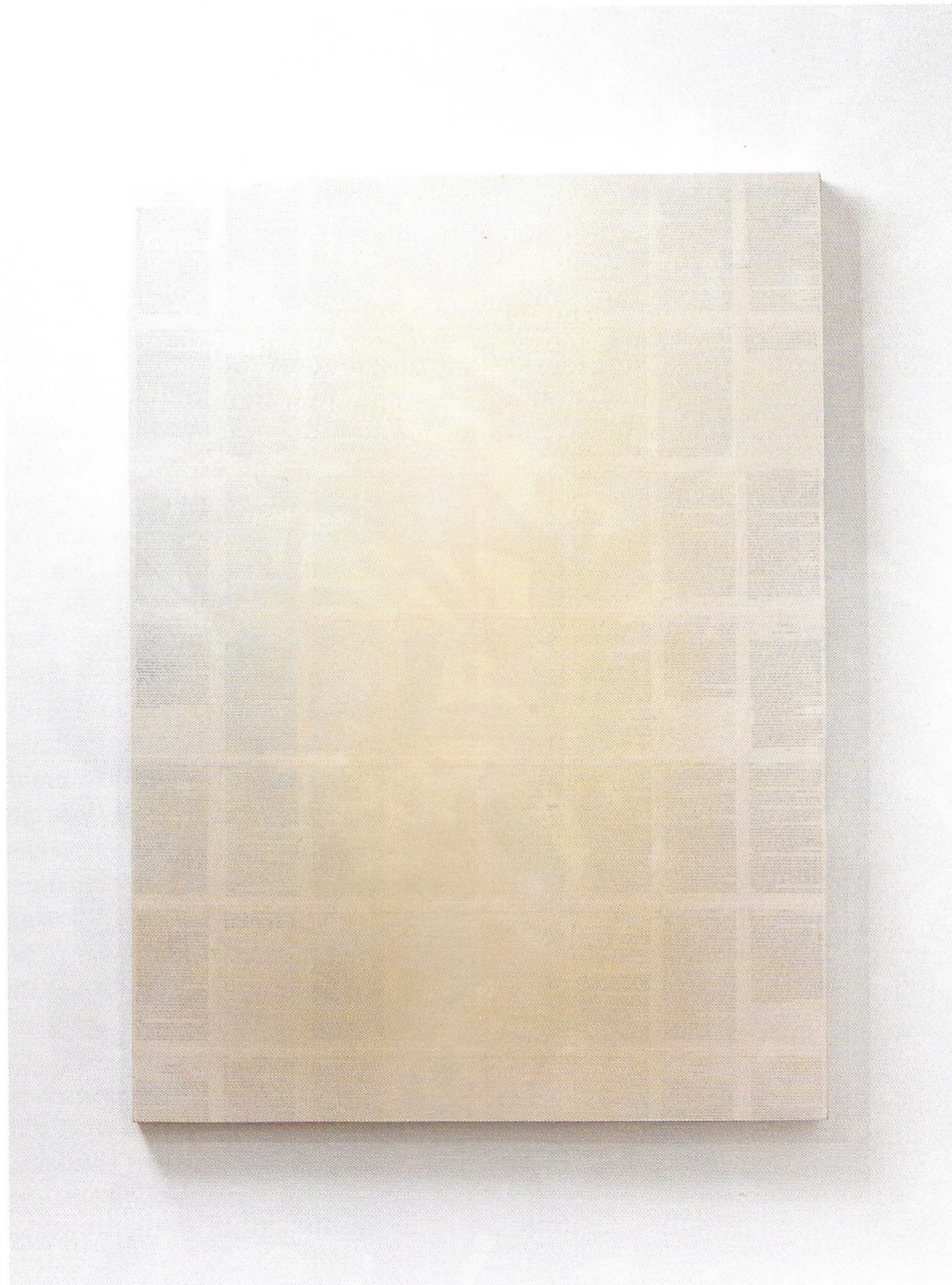
Through the act of cutting up classic books to make artwork, Rollins encouraged students to reimagine the text and find their own voices within the literature. Issues of race and identity surfaced as the group explored a range of books, such as Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Kafka’s *Amerika*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, among others. The group named itself K.O.S., for Kids of Survival. Over time, Rollins and K.O.S. became an art world phenomenon, with work in major museum collections around the world. Many of those “unteachable” students went on to receive college scholarships and pursue successful careers.

In 2009, Tim Rollins & K.O.S. engaged with Cultural Programs of the National Academy of Sciences to create an exhibition honoring the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of the publication of his *On the Origin of Species*. This marked the first book of science literature that the group had worked with. Since 2009, the collaborative has workshopped the book by Darwin with other students in the United States and abroad. Their original painting that initiated the series is in the collection of the National Academy of Sciences.

Rollins died in 2017, and today a core group of K.O.S. members (brothers Angel and Jorge Abreu, Rick Savinon, and Robert Branch) are transforming their practice. Calling themselves Studio K.O.S., their current direction has been informed by the Black Lives Matter movement and shaped by the pandemic. These influences are reflected in a recent exhibition at the Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia, titled *Studio K.O.S.: The Continuing Legacy of Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival*. The exhibit features work based on Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* and was created by Philadelphia and Minneapolis students in online workshops. The resulting work includes pages from Ellison’s book overlaid with the block letters “I M,” referencing the last two letters in the word “victim” taken from a New York *Daily News* headline from the late 1990s about urban violence. The block letters also allude to the phrase “I Am,” expressing the struggle for identity and to be seen. In a similar vein, the title of Studio K.O.S.’s recent



TIM ROLLINS & K.O.S. *Amerika, The Hotel Occidental*, 2006
Acrylic and graphite on book pages on canvas; 75 x 59 inches



TIM ROLLINS & K.O.S. *The Whiteness of the Whale (after Melville)*, 2006
Matte acrylic, spray paint, and book pages on panel; 48 x 36 inches

workshops, “Collaborative Workshops for Transcendence through Art and Knowledge,” is both descriptive and a call to action. After three decades, the collaborative’s commitment to the transformative power of artistic process is an experience its members want to pass on to another generation.

Cultural Programs of the National Academy of Sciences will be hosting a series of DASER talks (DC Art Science Evening Rendezvous) with Studio K.O.S. Find details at www.cpnas.org. Recordings of past DASERs are available at www.youtube.com/cpnas.

The exhibit, *Studio K.O.S.: The Continuing Legacy of Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival*, was on display at Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia (www.wexlergallery.com) from January 15 through March 20, 2021.

Images courtesy of the artists and the Wexler Gallery.

who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color in low-status professions, these advances are not treated as property of the inventor and often are not archived and celebrated as breakthroughs.

Just as 80% of the mass of the universe is made up of unobserved dark matter, we ignore the majority of the innovations that ensure that hospitals function or that myriad other aspects of our daily lives actually improve year on year. Ironically, even as the United States celebrates itself as an innovation-based economy and advocates for stronger intellectual property systems worldwide, it ignores the majority of its domestic innovations. A reset in how we define “inventor” and which innovators we resource with funding and recognition is overdue.

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COVID’S NEW TEMPORALITY

In her article, “Time,” part of the postpandemic special section (*Issues*, Winter 2021), Elizabeth Freeman observes that the COVID-19 pandemic has drawn us all into the alternate temporality that the disability community names as “crip time.” Perhaps the most relevant framework is that of chronic illness whose very nomenclature encodes temporality, as in the Twitter hashtag coined by the activist Brienne Benness, #NEISvoid (No End In Sight Void), an apt motif for this pandemic year.

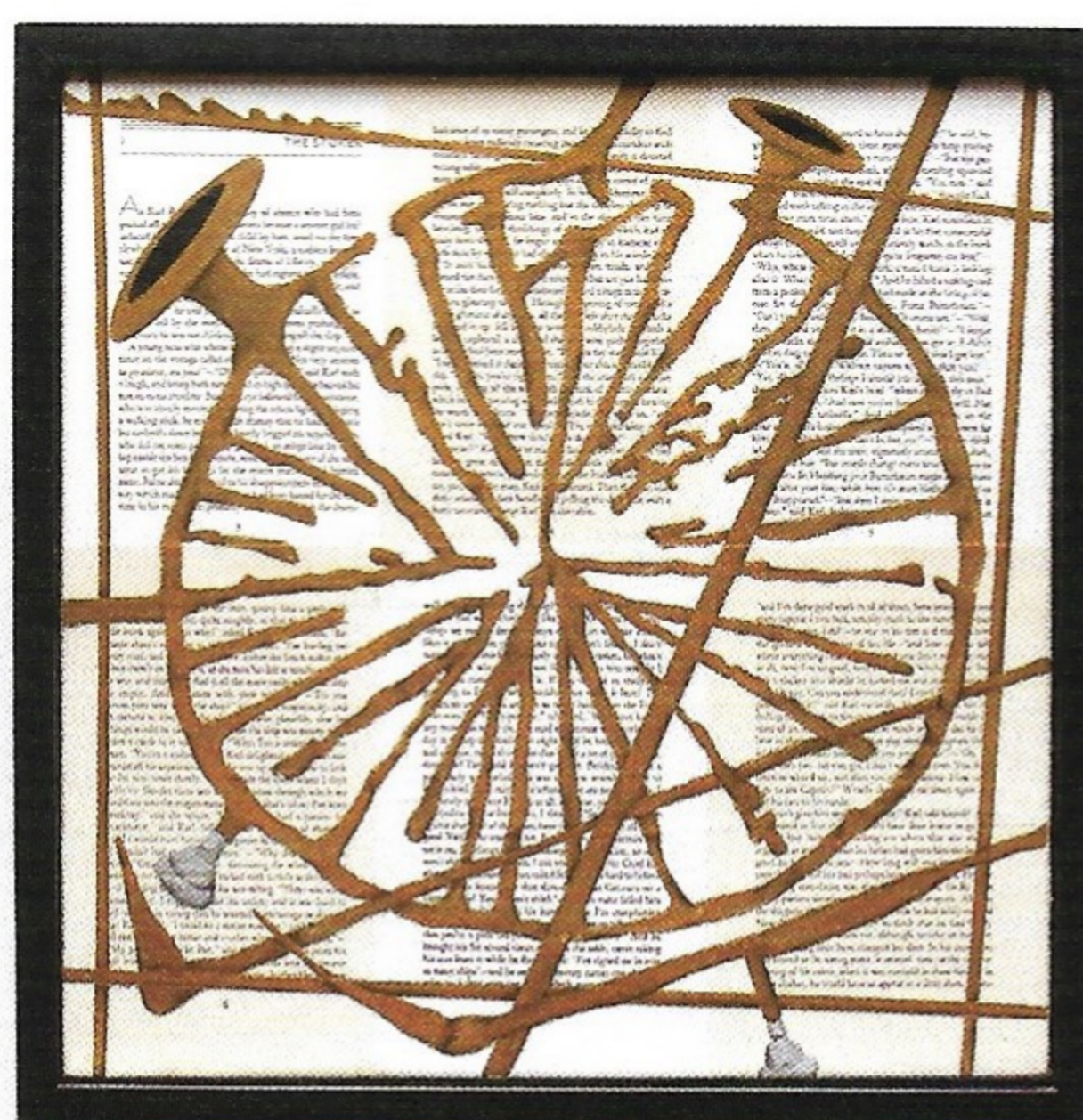
Yet some return, if not to normal, then to a world beyond the crisis stage of the pandemic will arrive. What will this new world look like? It will be profoundly shaped by disability alongside other social categories such as race, gender, and class. Disability is not a mere matter of medical defect or rehabilitative target, but a

complex of cultural, economic, and biopsychosocial factors in which “disability” materializes at the point of interaction between individuals and environments. Thus, for example, a wheelchair user is perfectly able so long as the built environment includes ramps and elevators and the social environment is inclusive. This crucial truth, so often overlooked in narrowly medical understandings of disablement, must inform us moving forward.

We must at last reckon with the full range of disability’s social and cultural meanings. COVID-19 has been devastating to disabled people. In early 2021, the United Kingdom’s Office for National Statistics reported that 60% of its COVID-19 deaths thus far were of people with disabilities. Yet their disabled population has not been prioritized for vaccination, and disabled people were long excluded from vaccine priorities in the United States. Clearly forces are at work beyond the logics of science, as the weight of the cultural stigma of disability means that our lives are quite literally seen as less valuable.

Meanwhile, we are on the cusp of a vast explosion in the disabled population in the United States. “Long COVID,” as is it termed, is already producing a range of disabling chronic illnesses, causing such diverse disorders as cardiac damage, neurological dysfunction, chronic pain, and brain fog, often affecting previously healthy young people. As reported by *JAMA Cardiology*, a stunning 30% of Ohio State University football players who had mild or asymptomatic cases of COVID-19 were found to have significant heart damage afterward. And already people with long COVID in the United States are contending with the medical doubt and struggle for basic survival that typifies the chronically ill experience.

As after each of the nation’s major wars, a rapid expansion in the disabled population offers both challenge



TIM ROLLINS & K.O.S. *The Nature Theater of Oklahoma: For Thoreau*, 1987-88, Watercolor and pencil drawing on book pages mounted on linen; 15 x 15 inches each

and opportunity to forward new technologies, reimagined infrastructure, and cultural recognition of the range of human abilities. Such innovations benefit disabled and nondisabled people alike. Will we allow our deeply inadequate disability support structures to totally collapse under the weight of long COVID? Or will we seize this opportunity to remake those structures to benefit disabled and nondisabled people alike? Disabled people must be at the table making these decisions about our lives, but it is crucial that all who seek a more equitable and sustainable society join us there.

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MISSING MILLIONS

Reflecting on William E. Spriggs’s article, “Economics,” part of the postpandemic special section (*Issues*, Winter 2021), led me to focus on his main point that “modern economics

... greatly rests on a host of assumptions.” In the context of novel coronavirus pandemic, Spriggs argues that there are several revealed shortcomings in the assumptions and models that economists traditionally use for decisionmaking—assumptions that led to missed opportunities and perhaps negative impacts on the health and well-being of the nation’s workforce.

Yet, there are many extensions to traditional models that include the interdisciplinary work between economists and psychologists (neuroeconomics), economists and political scientists (political economy of digital media), economists and computer scientists (data science), and economists and medical practitioners (health economics and analytics). Research in these areas has led to breakthroughs that get us closer to solutions to the problems related to the human condition. However, even with these tools there is one major shortcoming beyond assumptions and models: the paucity of data representing all residents in America.