

Artforum : Best of 2009 December 2009

Tim Rollins and K.O.S. : Institute of Contemporary Art

By Monica Amor

This modest exhibition of approximately twenty woodcuts, sculptures, and paintings harks back to 1980s New York. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival), a collective that emerged at the beginning of the decade from Rollins's pedagogical activities with a group of "at risk" students in a South Bronx public school, have produced a rich oeuvre based on the discussion and analysis of literary works ranging from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, to Kafka's *Amerika*, to Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. The group's collaborative practice can be viewed as an urgent response to the political and cultural conservatism of the '80s-in which the art establishment endorsed a fierce return to traditional modes of production and circulation (i.e., neoexpressionist painting displayed in the white cube). Simultaneously, a cadre of collectives emerged (centered largely around the East Village) seeking ways to bridge art and political activism. One of the more significant was Group Material, of which Rollins was a founding member, and K.O.S. might be seen as an offshoot of his activities there.

The exhibition-curated by Ian Berry and traveling from the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery in Saratoga Springs, New York, where it debuted last February-emphasizes mostly the objects produced by this singular collective over the course of nearly two decades, with a particular focus on the years between 1984 and 1998. The rewarding result delivered not only formal diversity but a range of operations befitting what must have been a fascinating process of interaction between the artist and his largely Latino students.

So while the paintings *Dracula (After Bram Stoker)* and *Frankenstein (After Mary Shelley)*, both 1983, are notable for their pictorial materiality, rich imagery, and a clear cartoonlike style of thick outlines, crude forms, bold colors, and flat spaces that facilitates narrative, others, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream VI (After Shakespeare)*, 2000, tend toward abstraction, all-over compositionality, and delicate shapes. The show's eclecticism was indicative of the collective nature of Rollins's group as well as of its disinterest in such concerns as stylistic consistency. That said, a notion of "progress" creeps in when the works are seen together, as more conceptually minded entries appear to have developed from an initial interest in illustrative imagery. Also based on literary works, the later pieces employ visuality, erasure, and transparency to complicate issues of representation in ways that the early work does not. And many, of course, employ actual book pages as a visible support. So, for example, in *Invisible Man (After Ralph Ellison)*, 1999, the artists arranged pages from Ellison's novel in a grid and applied a light coat of white acrylic, upon which they rendered, using black paint, the letters IM. While clearly standing for the title, the letters sound like the words *I am* when spoken out loud-a textual ambiguity that addresses the African- American protagonist's explorations of identity. These later works, which depend on formal and textual associations to generate meaning, are redolent of techniques favored by many artists of the '80s keen on analyzing (self)

representation.

That high school students from the South Bronx could so rapidly rise to the highest echelons of the art world-they participated in the Whitney Biennial in 1985 and the Venice Biennale in 1988-is remarkable. A comprehensive catalogue is in the works, but further material documenting their successes-and articulating the fascinating pedagogical process that is the bedrock of this unique collaboration-should have been central to the exhibition.