

Frieze March 19, 2012

Tim Rollins and K.O.S

By Quinn Latimer

In an interview in the catalogue for 'On Transfiguration', the beautifully realized exhibition at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Basel, Tim Rollins explained his collective practice with K.O.S. (Kids of Survival): 'The studio is a place of séance, where ghosts such as Kafka and Melville, Malcolm X and the X-Men, Anna Sewell and Harriet Jacobs, Richard Strauss and Franz Joseph Haydn all come down to visit, to suggest and hopefully to watch what happens with delight.' In the literature-laden paintings made by Rollins + K.O.S., pages of text become both ground and subject. Theirs is an epistolary practice: the painting overlaid across Kafka, Melville, Martin Luther King Jr. and Mary Shelley is a visual letter in response to the original texts. Together, the paintings amount to a conversation about literature and art, sign and image, the past and the present, the canon and the street and – as Rollins + K.O.S.'s *oeuvre* has become increasingly celebrated – the canon again.

This exhibition elegantly traced the collective's development over the past three decades, beginning in the early 1980s, when Rollins was working as a public school teacher in the (still) severely disenfranchised South Bronx. There, he began the Art and Knowledge Workshop, in which he would read texts to his students while they sketched out drawings in response, later to be repurposed as paintings atop grid-like supports made of the writings that inspired them. Some of his earliest students continue to work with him today, and Rollins continues to hold workshops with kids around the world, often in confluence with exhibitions of K.O.S.'s work. Much has been made and written of the positive pedagogical root and edifying bloom of their practice, yet it is not just their conception and making that is political, but also their chosen form. The fabled whiteness of much of K.O.S.'s source material gleaned from the Western canon – from Homer and Strauss to Abstract-Expressionism and Post-Minimalism – is complicated and subverted by their very (virtuosic) handling of it.

In the identity politics-strewn art world of the 1980s from which Rollins + K.O.S.'s collective practice emerged, political figuration and representational painting was supposedly the packed pasture of any artist not white, male and straight; abstract painting was, like whiteness, for those whose 'only' task was to deal with art, not struggle. Thus, in their sleek and seamless conflation of high abstract formalism with issues of race and class, and their use of abject materials like paper and blood, Rollins + K.O.S. paved the way for painters like Mark Bradford and Ellen Gallagher, both of whom use potentially political materials to make their gorgeously minimal canvases and collages.

Accordingly, Rollins + K.O.S.'s immense influence, and their still-smarting singularity, was immediately apparent in Basel. The earliest works on view, such as the mural-like *Absalom! Absalom!* (1983), evoke 'outsider' art, naively illustrative of moments from the novel (a noose dangles, a hobo skulks). Quickly though, the paintings discard such pictorial language for a reduced visual vocabulary of decorous or geometric signs. With their appealing lattices of faintly corporeal, horn-like

shapes, *Amerika – Infinity (after Franz Kafka)* (1987–88) and its recent reprise, *Amerika – Everyone is Welcome! (after Franz Kafka)* (2002), conjure both William Blake and Sue Williams. At times the textual grounds function like Greek fragments, their omissions and erasures creating a weird poetry. In 'The Temptations of St. Antony (Other Voices)' (1989–90), a series of watercolours on individually framed pages, one page is blacked out but for a sloping figurative form of text left unpainted at its centre, which reads: 'elongated swimmer/olly conceal him/ANTONY/ed the shape of /perhaps I'm dead an/breathe! The s/! No more Sufferi/me the thunder/That blonde patch'. *Me the thunder* is right.

Later works make elegant use of musical scores as grounds, evoking Hanne Darboven's elegiac grids. This use of music underlines Rollins's interest in a language of signs, be they textual, musical or purely visual. Nevertheless, a series of paintings from the past few years left such rigid geometry behind and instead offered delicate pools and splotches of bright watercolour peppered across Mendelssohn and Shakespeare, conjuring the most delicate of Pollocks. The exhibition not only emphasized serious beauty but serious humour. / *See the Promised Land (After the Rev. Dr. M.L. King, Jr.)* (2008), with its enormous black triangle painted over pages reading 'Black Power Defined', hung next to *Black Beauty* (1987–89), in which vertical black stripes (conjuring prison, Daniel Buren, and Rainer Maria Rilke's 1902 poem *Panther*) cover a text about the infamous black horse and its 'Strike for Liberty'. Nearby, an enormous, pale-white, near-monochrome, was sourced from Melville's still-potent 'The Whiteness of the Whale' chapter in *Moby-Dick* (1851). Here, as elsewhere, a box of referents was adroitly opened: mid-century painting, race, literature, omission and negation. This plurality of approaches speaks to Rollins + K.O.S.'s practice, which eschews the singular virtuosity of the artists they conjure by the very collectivity of their making. Simultaneously, it affirms that old-time virtuosity and individual agency by the authorship of the canonical works they transform so singularly – and so brilliantly. That their work remains so relevant both artistically and politically underlines the power of the oeuvre itself, as well as the continued entrenchment of the bleak socio-political realities that gave rise to it.