

# ARTPULSE

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# LIFE IS A RIVER

## A Conversation with Angel Abreu from Tim Rollins and K.O.S.

BY SCOTT THORP

Heraclitus claimed “no man steps in the same river twice.” His insight points to the universe as being in a constant state of flux. Change is an inevitable part of existence. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) know this all too well. Over the last 30 years, their unlikely collaboration has defied all odds, beginning when a young Rollins became a special education art teacher met a group of at-risk teenagers in the Bronx, in one of the worst school districts in America. K.O.S.’s improbable relationship has evolved into one of the longest-lasting artistic studios in history, and their career has epitomized Heraclitean flux, a roller coaster ride from abject poverty to international stardom, a fall from grace and now back to the top. While many of its original members remain, the function of the ensemble has evolved. So it’s fitting that they’ve chosen a river as the metaphor for their latest works.

In 1981, when Rollins began his first day as the special education art teacher at Intermediate School 52, stepping cautiously from the safety of a New York subway onto a platform in the heart of the Bronx, he had no idea what was to come. To his surprise, when he met the principal, the principal yelled, “I won, I won; pay up!” and began collecting his winnings. The teachers had bet against Rollins making it the short distance from subway station to school.

The building—in total disrepair—was situated in an area Rollins refers to as “hell on earth.” The art room that Rollins called the “Hip Hop Sistine Chapel” was floor to ceiling graffiti. The sink didn’t work and there were no supplies. But he stayed. Over time, he and the students began building a unique artistic relationship. Within a few years, the collaboration between Rollins and the kids became recognized for its large-scale works related to classical literature. Their momentum increased until they received international acclaim. Then, in the 1990s, the art market’s collapse, combined with the tragic murder of a K.O.S. member, threw the group into a period of despair.

More than 30 years after that first day in the Bronx, Rollins and K.O.S. are back with large-scale exhibitions, reviews and collaborations worldwide. The kids of K.O.S. are now all grown up, and they and Rollins are now colleagues and friends. Recently, I spoke with Rollins and one of K.O.S.’s longest-standing members, Angel Abreu. Afterward, Abreu and I had the following conversation via email. It is fitting that Abreu, an artist bearing little resemblance to his teenaged self in early days of K.O.S. and now with a degree in philosophy and an appointment as senior professor at the School of Visual Arts in New York, chose to quote Heraclitus in his closing response for our exchange.

*Scott Thorp – Since we met the other day at the SCAD Museum, I keep thinking about your unusual experiences as an artist. From age 11, you essentially grew up as a member of a professional studio. Unlike traditional artist studios, however, where apprentices learn under an established artist, K.O.S.’s relationship with Tim has always been more collaborative. Also, in your case, the artist*

*came to the students—not the other way around. Maybe there is another example like this in art history, but I can’t think of one.*

*Starting at the beginning, can you describe that day when you first met Tim Rollins?*

**Angel Abreu** – As I might have mentioned in Savannah, my experience with K.O.S. has always felt organic and natural. As if it was the way it was supposed to happen. From the onset I knew that we were doing something special, but I didn’t realize the magnitude until I was older.

I first met Tim on my first day of school at Intermediate School 52 in South Bronx. After I finished the fourth grade, I.S. 52 was my assigned junior high school and I was supposed to attend it from fifth through eighth grades, but I avoided going there for two years, instead opting to attend one of the first charter schools in the Bronx, the Evergreen School. I did this because of 52’s extremely bad reputation, and the four-block walk to 52 from my apartment building was a minefield of potential danger, littered with drug dealers and gangs. It was worth it for me to take the two public buses to attend Evergreen, but that school only went through sixth grade. Once I got to seventh grade I had no choice but to go to 52.

I give some background on how I got to 52 to show the lengths I went through to avoid being there. I felt very anxious my first day. I remember walking into Tim’s classroom, room 318. For most of the day, everyone in my class had been pretty rambunctious, but as we walked into Tim’s classroom there was a collective hush. The level of respect for Tim was palpable. He insisted that we sit down quickly because we had work to do. He proceeded to hand out what looked like a test. The collective hush quickly turned into collective groans. Tim just told us to do our best to get through it. I was always into art so I was looking forward to the class, but I didn’t know what to think about this—a multiple choice test with about 50 questions that asked things like, “Which one of these artists is not a Cubist?” and “What year was first Surrealist Manifesto written?” I remember feeling frustrated, but also intrigued, because I was accustomed to doing well. After we finished, Tim collected the tests and acknowledged that we most likely didn’t do well, but assured us that this would be the exact mid-term test. Based on what we were about to learn, he guaranteed that we would all get A’s.

It was Tim’s class that put me at ease at 52. It gave me something to look forward to. Two months later, Tim met my parents at a parent/teacher conference where he told them about K.O.S. I was invited to go to the studio the next day. At that point, I was part of my own type of gang. It was in the studio, every day after school, that the real learning began.

*S.T. – A long time ago as a high school art teacher, I would sometimes hear students talk about the art room being an escape—a place where they could be themselves. Art to them represented a certain freedom to be different. But for you, a child who had just*



TIM ROLLINS and K.O.S. *Asleep on the Raft (after Mark Twain)*, 2013-14, indigo watercolor, matte acrylic, book pages on canvas, 72" x 96." Courtesy the artists and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.

*found a haven from violence and drugs in an art studio, art must have meant much more than freedom of expression. Looking back, how do you think your definition of art, or appreciation of it, differed from kids growing up in safe, suburban neighborhoods?*

A.A. – I'll be honest: growing up in that environment, the studio was indeed an escape from the violence and danger waiting for us outside. It was a means of survival, which is why we came up with the name "Kids of Survival." But survival came from so much more than just the act of making art. Art making afforded us a way to experience things that others may take for granted, such as exposure to nice restaurants, museums and travel to places I couldn't have imagined. This exposure is reminiscent of the great John Dewey's premise in *Art as Experience*.

Exposure to new things is a powerful tool. It builds confidence, promotes transcendence and helps materialize potentiality, no matter one's socio-economic condition. Through the workshops we've conducted, and through my academic career as a student privileged to attend some pretty great schools with cross-cultural student bodies, I learned that rich or well-to-do folk can be poor and in need as well. Certainly their circumstances are different, but art ultimately is about possibility and bringing folks together. That's the way I see it.

S.T. – *Dewey's philosophy—the concepts of learning by doing and art as experience—seem deeply ingrained in the mindset of K.O.S. Plus, the authors from whom K.O.S.'s art was derived,*

*like Kafka, Melville and Orwell, were all heavy thinkers. At the time, did Tim talk much about philosophy or aesthetics? If so, how was it received by the students?*

A.A. – During those early years in the studio, we didn't necessarily discuss theory or philosophy. The learning occurred more through practice, observation and our interpretation of the authors' texts. As I matured, the lectures and interviews in which Tim discussed the influences on our collective practice became my point of interest. Stemming from this interest, I went on to study philosophy with a concentration on American pragmatism.

S.T. – *When you joined K.O.S. in 1986, it was gaining attention from New York's art scene. By the late 1980s and the culmination of the Amerika series, Tim Rollins and K.O.S. had become genuine art world sensations. The pinnacle of all this seems to have been the Amerika exhibition at the Dia Art Foundation in 1989. It must have been euphoric. But only a few years later, the wheels came off and everything changed. The art world collapsed and shortly thereafter, K.O.S. suffered an incredible loss when longstanding member Christopher Hernandez was murdered. Can you discuss what that time was like?*

A.A. – Chris' senseless murder was a tremendous blow to all of us. All I'm going to say is Chris' intuitive sense of humor and gentle



**TIM ROLLINS and K.O.S. *Amerika - A Refuge*, 1990-1991**, acrylic on printed paper, mounted on linen, 66.25" x 158." Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 1991. Courtesy the artists and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.



The making of *Amerika IX* in 1989 at Mint Museum in Charlotte, NC in collaboration with local high school students. Courtesy of the artist.

way of being was infectious. We still very much miss him, but to this day he inspires us to continue.

The few years leading up to Chris' death were a roller coaster ride. The Venice Biennale in 1988, The Dia show in 1989, along with our second inclusion at the Whitney Biennial in 1991 led to us work with Mary Boone. These were pretty amazing years. We had a fantastic 9,000-square-foot studio in the Hunt Points section of the Bronx. In the summers of 1989 and 1990, San Francisco's prestigious Crown Point Press invited us to make prints. There, we had the honor of meeting the great John Cage while he was working on a suite of prints in the studio next door.

It was euphoric indeed, but vitriolic press feeding off of the skepticism of the group's makeup, along with the art market crash, brought us back to reality. We weren't used to these things anyway, so we didn't let it bother us too much, but once the novelty of our collaboration wore off, we couldn't believe the number of skeptics that came out of the woodwork. I think people assumed, or hoped, we would be some sort of one-hit wonder.

*S.T. – I'm sure that was hurtful. Along with all the emotions associated with being adolescents, the complexities of that time must have been difficult for anyone in the group. In time, however, you proved the group was more than lucky. And now, 20 years later, the work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S is still highly sought after. This year alone, you've been all over the United States and Paris exhibiting and conducting workshops.*

*I'm continually inspired by how K.O.S. involves students from middle schools and high schools. It's so natural now that it is difficult to determine where the collaboration starts and stops. Plus, the work these students create is museum quality. From your talk at SCAD, some of your comments made it obvious you are passionate about education. But why have you chosen to involve young artists to such a degree? In the exhibition I saw, a whole wall was dedicated to the students from Garrison School of Visual and Performing Arts in Savannah, Ga.*

*A.A. – I have to say that my favorite part of any collaboration with young artists is seeing the look on these young folks' faces when*

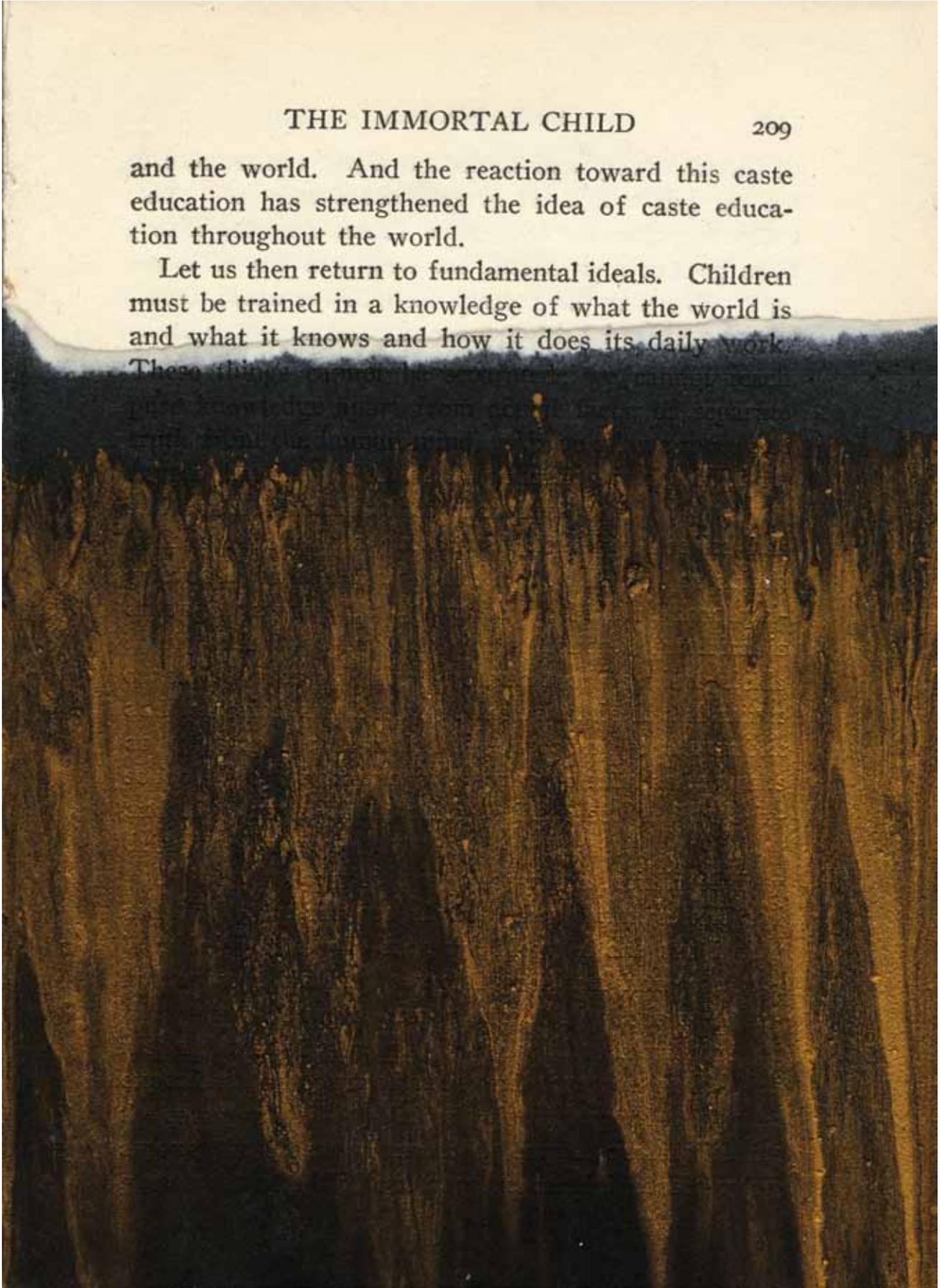
THE IMMORTAL CHILD

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and the world. And the reaction toward this caste education has strengthened the idea of caste education throughout the world.

Let us then return to fundamental ideals. Children must be trained in a knowledge of what the world is and what it knows and how it does its daily work.

These things are fundamental.



TIM ROLLINS and K.O.S. *Darkwater III* (after W.E.B. Du Bois) (detail), 2013, furnace black watercolor, gold acrylic on vintage book page on panel, 12 panels, each 7" x 5." Courtesy the artists and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.

they walk into the gallery or museum and see their finished work up on the wall. I love being a party to and witnessing a world of opportunity and possibility unfold in their eyes. You can see a switch go on and it confirms for me why I love doing this.

We create a system where there is no failure, but the only way to get there is by demanding the participants' very best and their highest concentration. The key is respect. Respect for materials. Respect for the subject matter and, most importantly, respect for the young artists themselves. A true collaboration is reached when every voice is made to feel valid, important. It's this egalitarian and didactic ethos that promotes success within our studio and the workshops. As a result, the work tends to take care of itself.

*S.T. – The level of dedication from both the students and K.O.S. shows in conceptually and aesthetically rich works. I am interested in one such 2013 collaboration—the Darkwater series. Students painted on pages from a 1920 W. E.B. Du Bois novel, Darkwater, Voices from within the Veil. The dark paint rises up from the pages, swallowing most of the text in a fluidity that refers to the book's title.*

*What were the concept and methodology behind the series?*

A.A. – Loretta Yarlow and Eva Fierst from The University of Massachusetts Amherst Museum of Contemporary Art invited us to be a part of the 2013 exhibition “Du Bois In Our Time,” which coincided with the 50th anniversary of Du Bois' death as well as the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. This project was particularly important to me because Du Bois' work and life have always been extremely influential, but we never had the opportunity to engage directly with his work. We thought it absolutely necessary to collaborate with young students on this one.

Initially we figured we'd do something with the seminal *Souls of Black Folk* but we reconsidered and thought we should do something different, perhaps unexpected. Although we had both read Du Bois extensively, neither of us had read *Darkwater*. When we did, we were blown away. One chapter, “The Immortal Child,” sealed the deal. In it, Du Bois describes the plight of children and our societal obligations to promote their development for the common good. I was struck by how the issues he brought up a century ago are still relevant. So, at this point, we had the text, but then ensued the months of “mining” it for clues about how the work and workshop would manifest. After several months of research, we tested what we came up with at a three-day workshop with sixth, seventh and eighth graders at the Renaissance School in Springfield, MA. Fortunately, the workshop was a great success and the *Darkwater* series was born. We decided it was appropriate to donate that work to the UMass collection.

*S.T. – It seems that many of K.O.S.'s newer works share the common theme of rivers. The group has produced a series of works related to Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. More recently though, the river appears to be growing into a dominant metaphor for the group. There is a series actually called The River that's based on a composition by Duke Ellington, plus the Darkwater series you just described. Can you speak to the significance of the river metaphor and K.O.S.?*

A.A. – The philosopher Heraclitus said, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.” Tim uses this quote often to explain the significance of the river in our work. It represents a journey, a mode of self-reflection and a measure of growth. We have not necessar-

ily consciously thought about using the river motif in the newer work, but we have always chosen pieces of literature or music that speak to us. We gravitate towards works in which we can add to the conversation, not illustrate in any way, so I suppose it's more coincidence than anything that the river has been central to us. But we do say this all of the time: the bottom line is that *we flow*. With all the ups and downs through the years, we wouldn't still be doing this if we didn't flow.

Along a similar coincidental vein, though, I've been personally working on a series of paintings after Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*, which has the flooding of the Mississippi River as a central theme. Again, not a conscious choice, but one cannot deny the common threads and tendencies that develop throughout an artist's career.

*Angel was 11 when I first met him in a very hostile public school environment on Kelly Street at Junior High School 52. He was in a gifted and talented afterschool program that I was assigned to for the kids who loved art and art making. I recall his very young sincerity and ... his eyes. These large warm visionary eyes - duende - that he retains to this day.*

*When I began the afterschool program called Art and Knowledge Workshop in a community center nearby, Angel was one of the most consistent and faithful members and attended almost daily. You have to know that the neighborhood was incredibly dangerous back then, we're talking 1983, and the workshop was a safe haven for a lot of kids who just wanted to be creative and not destructive. I will never forget the train trip we took to the Philadelphia Museum of Art to look around and he encountered the work of Marcel Duchamp and got it immediately—especially Etant Donnes. When Angel was 14 he was offered a scholarship to Deerfield Academy and after long conversations with his mom and dad, we agreed that we had to let him go. Nevertheless, we remained in constant contact and he worked with us on breaks and in the summertime in South Bronx. For his 16th birthday I gave him a print by Marcel Duchamp.*

*Always engaged with the work of K.O.S., even if he wasn't physically present, Angel moved to the University of Pennsylvania, then NYU, then the University of Washington, having constant conversations about American pragmatist philosophy and the artists that inspired him. When he moved to Seattle for about 10 years there still was never an absence. What is most exciting is that Angel and his beautiful family moved back to the area a few years ago and he committed to painting. I'm not a stage dad, but just yesterday I saw his new body of work inspired by *The Wild Palms* by Faulkner and I was blown away.*

*That sincerity. Those eyes. - Tim Rollins ■*