

WEXLER GALLERY



**WEXLER GALLERY PRESENTS
FORMS OF IDENTIFICATION:
MALCOLM MOBUTU SMITH AND STUDIO K.O.S.**

**EXPO CHICAGO / BOOTH 365
APRIL 7-10, 2022**

Wexler Gallery presents *Forms of Identification*, an exhibition including ceramic sculptures and process sketches by Malcolm Mobutu Smith, historic paintings and archival material by Tim Rollins and K.O.S., and the debut of Studio K.O.S.'s evocative NFT project, at Expo Chicago, April 7-10, 2022. Placing these artists in dialogue highlights their common background in using primary sources and cultural references as a springboard for their own work: to comment on contemporary themes of identity and race as persons of color asserting agency in today's America. Heavily influenced by a previous generation, both personally and philosophically, they investigate historical antecedents from literature, cartoons and comics and incorporate their own interests such as graffiti, jazz, and hip hop. The title *Forms of Identification* speaks to what these artworks are for these artists and the audience, as well as to the larger cultural issues of representation and belonging. What signifies an artist, who defines art, how is it expressed, where is it found. Malcolm Mobutu Smith will be on hand to discuss his work during the Expo Chicago VIP Preview, Thursday, April 7, 12-6pm.

As young men in the 1980s and 90s, the artists of Studio K.O.S. — Angel Abreu, Jorge Abreu, Robert Branch, and Rick Savinon — were introduced to classic literature by their mentor, Tim Rollins, in collaborative workshops that combined lessons in reading and writing with the production of impactful works of art. In a process they called “jamming,” Rollins or a member of the collective would read selected texts aloud while other members drew, cut, ripped, painted onto pages of the books, activating

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the stories into artworks that related to and expressed their own experiences. Over time their cultural explorations evolved to incorporate non-fiction, classical music, and comic books. Studio K.O.S. continues to readdress and recontextualize Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* — a novel about the struggle to define one's identity that is still as powerful and poignant as when it was written in 1952. By excavating the book's themes with students today, IM ("I am") evolves into a symbol of personal strength through the examination of perception.

Just as they were influenced by Rollins connecting their lived experience with Ellison's words, Studio K.O.S. is carrying on that tradition with the next generation. Says Angel Abreu of the students they collaborated with, "We empowered them, and showed them, you can have a voice, you can make a difference. It's that light bulb that you literally see, over the students' heads, that keeps me coming back. When you come together as a community, to make something to share, it just has so much more meaning."

Examples from these collaborative workshops will debut at Expo Chicago as an *Invisible Man* NFT and as limited-edition digital prints. Each work examines the students' various interpretations of personal identity through their individual "IM". Multiple unique iterations of IM are included in this first NFT, while 10 IMs have been selected for the set of digital prints in a limited edition of five. Archival material from the history of K.O.S. will also be on display.

When Malcolm Mobutu Smith was a child in the 1970s, his artist mother created and published children's books featuring Li'l Tuffy — a cartoon character that was an amalgam of Mobutu Smith and his younger brother — to make up for the absence of kids like them in the literature of the time. As he developed his own artistic practice, Mobutu Smith recognized the disparity between Li'l Tuffy and many other cartoon and comic representations and stereotypes so casually depicted in earlier 20th century media.

According to Mobutu Smith, "I, like the Trojan Horse, redeploy these images and conventions of image to reflect, lay bare, and perhaps undo. Embracing irony as a truth, as a black man, mapping hate and fear — I dig into to the ugly and sweet codes of cartoons to load them with sharp cutting wit like a razor blade in an apple — loaded images in loaded forms." For Mobutu Smith, his sculpture's shapes reflect another tension: "They are call backs to Modernist sculpture from an era of and value system built on colonial mindsets mining *the Other*, and yet these works also operate and are born of my own honest exploration of jazzy improvisations of material, line and form." The inherent beauty of his expert craftsmanship stands in stark contrast to the incorporated themes and source imagery.

Several of Mobutu Smith's process sketches and idea-generating images will be presented alongside his ceramic vessels.

Detailed descriptions of the artwork to be shown can be found in the included exhibition PDF.

For images and more information on these artists and their work, contact Cate Andrews at 646-293-6603 or Samantha Goldberg at 215-923-7030.

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Challenging traditional labels, Wexler Gallery exhibits artwork that coexists in multiple disciplines and traditions. Questioning and testing the boundaries of craft, design, and fine art, Wexler Gallery aims to present work that consistently celebrates formal innovation and conceptual content as much as aesthetic beauty. Wexler Gallery opened in 2000 in the historic district of Old City in Philadelphia and expanded its presence to New York City in 2018. Since its inception, the gallery has proudly showcased extraordinary work by both established artists and the emerging talent of today.

MALCOLM MOBUTU SMITH

Malcolm Mobutu Smith's works are guided by improvisations that fluctuate between volumetric forms with graphic flatness. The vessels are inspired by the intersections of graffiti art, comic books, and playful organic abstraction. In this making practice, Mobutu Smith merges these forms with his passion for Hip Hop and Jazz as locations for invention and the unexpected. His own multi-faceted/multi-cultural background blends identity politics, CAD/CAM, printmaking, and drawing into a complex web of influences and passions. Currently Associate Professor of Ceramic Art at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, Mobutu Smith earned his MFA from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University and studied at the Kansas City Art Institute and Penn State University where he completed a BFA in ceramics. Mobutu Smith's works have been presented at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, FuLed International Ceramic Art Museum, Beijing, China, the Haan Museum, the Indiana State Museum, and the New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum in Taiwan. Mobutu Smith has participated in numerous residencies, including Haystack Mountain School of Craft, Watershed Center for Ceramic Arts, and the Robert McNamara Foundation.

STUDIO K.O.S.

In 1982, artist and teacher Tim Rollins created an after-school program in the South Bronx for his most dedicated students. The Art and Knowledge workshop soon morphed into Tim Rollins and the Kids of Survival (K.O.S.). Together, Rollins and K.O.S. developed a collaborative strategy that combined lessons in reading and writing with the production of impactful works of art. What was manifested from their collaborations became a powerful body of work that can be seen today in over 120 museums and public collections worldwide including MoMA, The Tate Modern and The Art Institute of Chicago. Continuing the legacy of Tim Rollins, Studio K.O.S. continues making work and providing arts education and youth mentorship led by a quartet of longtime K.O.S. members: Angel Abreu, Jorge Abreu, Robert Branch, and Rick Savinon.