

Kids learning large with art-biz project



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Renowned artist Thom Sokoloski feels like a kid again. That's probably because he recently had fun working with high school students as they put the finishing touches on his large-scale exhibit for Art Toronto 2013 (tiafair.com).

The art fair opens today at the Metro Convention Centre and highlights Sokoloski's new piece *ALL THE ARTISTS ARE HERE* - which features a photo of every artist at the fair in a massive, suspended, larger-than-life optical work.

What makes the piece special is the fact that Sokoloski created an education program, entitled *HANDS ON WITH THE ARTISTS*, to help put the exhibit together. He invited high school students

from at-risk communities to participate in developing the installation at Art Toronto.

"Working with young people has always been part of my mandate, even when I was directing opera and theatre and now even more in my installation art. In many ways, it keeps me humble," explains Sokoloski.

"Young people are the beacons for what is really going on and, more often than not, what may be coming in the future. And it is in these prescient moments of creative engagement with young people, when their imagination is unfettered, that some wonderful discoveries are made about the nature of my practice."

Educator Jenny McCowan reached out to community organizations and high schools across the GTA to participate in the project. Some kids were already interested in art, but a few experiencing the artistic world for the first time.

"For the most part, the youth had some experience with art but there were a few

who were simply interested in how to make such a large project come to fruition," says McCowan.

"When I made the decision to focus on "at risk" youth, it was less about the label and more about ensuring that we open up the opportunity to those who may not have the chance to go to the art fair or, who are not usually included in programs such as the one we have created due to distance, cost, support or awareness."

At a time when youth employment initiatives have been painted as urgent by the provincial government, McCowan felt there was value in showing how art skills can blend into work skills.

"Youths who may be thinking about their futures, would find the exposure to a new kind of work environment, the production aspects of how to make a large-scale artwork, and art business in general, most beneficial."

If anything, the program erased the stereotype of the starving artist.



Thom Sokoloski addresses his young art students. COURTESY