At first glance, Southern Exposure art studio at the corner of Alabama and 20th streets is an understated and serene setting, the bright track lighting shining down on artwork from a variety of mediums in relative quiet. But the mood is entirely different on Thursday evenings when the “Young Queens on the Rise” arrive; the studio comes alive with youthful squeals of excitement and curiosity.

Each week Southern Exposure, or “SoEx” for short, collaborates with the Young Queens on the Rise, a program of Mission Girls, developed to teach young women how to express their views through art. Under the tutelage of local artist Sofia Cordova, the fruits of their labor will soon be on display at Southern Exposure in an exhibition called “They Love Our Culture. They Hate Our People,” which runs Dec. 9-17.

“This program is here to guide these girls by thinking of art and activism in ways that are less traditional,” said Cordova, an interdisciplinary artist who moved from Puerto Rico to California in 2008. “I want them to think about community action through the arts in ways that aren’t what we are used to seeing.”

Young Queens on the Rise work on their upcoming art exhibit “They Love Our Culture. They Hate Our People,” on Nov. 30. The exhibition will display at the Southern Exposure Gallery, in the Mission District, Dec. 9-17. Photos: Jessica Webb.

Young Queens on the Rise is operated as a Community Arts Internship Program through SoEx. It serves as a vehicle for young artists to create art inspired by their personal experiences with issues like racism, state-sanctioned violence and violence against women.
“The Young Queens are part of an internship program where we actually pay our youth …to be artists,” said Maya Gomez, who runs SoEx’s Artists in Education program. “We wanted to partner with Mission Girls because they are really cool. The opportunity to collaborate with the Young Queens specifically on a project that is so visually and artistically driven, has allowed us to create space for them to think about their ideas and activism.”

Lessons vary each week, but often begin with a closed-door writing exercise to focus the Young Queens’ minds. From there, the girls branch out into smaller groups to work on colorful projects in assorted mediums and themes.

“This program aims to empower young Latina women with leadership skills,” Cordova said. “I want to expand their thinking about art and activism beyond the traditional forms, particularly in terms of accessibility. They can make documentaries with their phones, they can write, they can be weirder than the norm.”

For the girls themselves, being a Young Queen on the Rise is a point of pride.

“I really like this program because we do a lot of community work,” said Jazmine Alcaraz, 16. “But it’s not just what they want us to do—we have our own voice here. They give us a lot of opportunities to speak up.”

Finding a voice and sharing insights are common themes throughout the Young Queens.

“Everything we’ve been doing is based on events happening around us,” said Rocio Navarro, 15, who loves poetry but enjoys learning new ways to express herself. “I’m really excited for this exhibit because I want to make people aware of what is impacting us.”