

## A Shared Spiritual History

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It was in a small, unheated apartment that artist Tom Block discovered a new direction. He'd left his career as a journalist behind in the United States, hoping to find something more fulfilling. Amidst the silence that comes with living in a new country, far away from friends and family, he focused on his art.

Little did the Maryland-based artist know that he would find more than a new form of expression; he'd gain a new sense of being.

"Being away from everyone I knew, I found myself doing a lot of reading," said Block, 39. "I read everything -- from scientific theories to books on Buddhism, Jewish and Christian mysticism and Sufism. I was amazed at how much the religions had in common and I found myself searching out more."

Soon, his nighttime reading became his daytime passion.

Block would jot down his thoughts on note cards, tacking them up around his studio. He quickly came to the conclusion that Jewish, Islamic and Christian mystics drew on similar ideas to produce spiritual paths that share far more with each other than they do with the traditionalists of their own religion.

Those thoughts led to his drawings -- and, finally, to "Cousins," an exhibit of abstract paintings and an installation at the Swords into Plowshares Peace Center and Gallery in Detroit.

For this show, Block chose to metaphorically explore the connection between the Baal Shem Tov, an 18th-century Jewish mystic and founder of Hasidism; the Sufi masters of Islam; and Meister Eckhart, a 13th-century Christian mystic.

"The mysticism readings that I came across seemed to bring together the community of man so much more than anything that I had ever heard in traditional religious service," said Block, who worships at a Conservative synagogue at home.

"So often there are undertones of 'us and them,' especially in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. There are strong bonds between us that are outright denied, specific bonds between Jews and Muslims."

And it is those bonds that Block hopes to strengthen through the exhibit at Swords into Plowshares, which includes more than 300 pieces of art for sale.

Exhibit curator Suzanne Schreiber sees Block's work as a perfect fit for the gallery and these times. "Our hope is that visitors to the gallery will reflect on the fact that we are all one people in these three religions and we need to communicate and come to some understandings," she said.

This is the first time that he has shown his work in the metro Detroit area (Block had a small show at Michigan State University's Kresge Museum last year), but his hope is to touch our community in an ongoing way.

"Detroit is like a blank canvas," he said. "There's so much vast space where we could create storefront studios and create a thriving arts community, in the downtown area. I've actually sent a proposal to the Michigan State Arts Council, the City of Detroit and the Center for Art and Public Policy at Wayne State University."

It's all part of a greater mission for Block -- one that puts differences aside and brings communities together."

**Lori Weiss, Detroit, MI, October 4, 2002**