

## Activism on Display

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Three exhibits at Artspace Gallery blend visual pleasure with food for thought in a compelling brew of eye-dazzling emotionalism. Michael A. Pierce's "Simple Equations" and Tom Block's "Human Rights Painting Project" confront power and hatred in vibrant works of art. Nancy Lea Strube provides comic relief with "Kisses" an exquisite series of colorful prints that celebrate the pleasures of lip-locking.

Text is used effectively in Block's "Human Rights Painting Project," a touring exhibit of the Washington, D.C., artist's portraits of activists, political prisoners and refugees, co-sponsored by civil rights advocacy group Amnesty International. Here, biographical placards augment the images, telling the story of each subject. Some, like Gandhi or Chinese dissident Wei JingSheng, are well known, but most depict unknown men and women victims of war, displacement and despotic regimes from Burma, Iran, Colombia and other global trouble spots. The United States, incidentally, is not spared: "Shaka Sankofa" portrays a black Texan executed for murder in 2000 despite widespread doubt about his guilt when his final appeal was denied by then-Gov. George W. Bush. The accompanying caption reminds us that the U.S. is the only NATO nation that still practices capital punishment.

The paintings themselves are executed in an expressionistic style that evokes nearly every modern figurative painter of significance from de Kooning to Kokoschka. This backward-looking, hodgepodge style identifies Block a liberal Jew interested in spirituality as well as politics as an unreconstructed modernist, committed to beauty, humanist values and changing the world with art. He describes himself in interviews as a fierce anti-elitist who hopes his work will reach a mass audience.

Block's mission is noble, and one that has garnered attention from a broad sector of the public. With room to breathe the results can be spectacular. "Rivera Kalenzo" portrays a woman who fled civil-war-torn Burundi for a refugee camp in Tanzania after four of her children were killed. She stands in a tall, asymmetrical composition hands folded, face tilted, grim eyes meeting ours. But a dazzling red, gold and green palette and riotous Matisse-like patterning on her garment are more joyful than tragic.

**Steve Jones, Richmond, VA, July 14, 2004**