

An Artist's Enigmatic "Friends"

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Even if printed in black and white, Tom Block's oils brightly convey a mixture of jarring emotions.

"These are images culled from everyday life and then taken out of context," the Gaithersburg resident says. "They become sort of mysterious and hopefully illogical moments all of us have had happen to us every day, in a bar or at a family dinner." Taken out of context, with these mysterious kinds of images, one might discern something slightly disturbing as well," he says.

Witness "Pop and Doll," an oil on canvas showing a mustachioed man with a nondescript expression, a jumble of color that runs together effectively -- but not too neatly.

At age 33 ("still young in the art world," he notes wryly), Mr. Block is a teacher at the Summit Art Group in Gaithersburg. He's also artist-in-residence at the Longview School for the Handicapped in Gaithersburg.

Mr. Block has indeed traveled a bit: Spain, Portugal, Boston, Denver, Gaithersburg.

The place he recalls most vividly is Caceres, Spain. He had gone to the Boston Museum School for a year and, after waiting tables for awhile, had decided to travel to Europe.

"I just wanted to sketch," he says. "I wanted to get away from the art world and paint. I didn't want to hear a lot of voices telling me what was wrong with my art."

Caceres is a "provincial capital" of about 79,000 people in western Spain, about an hour east of the Portuguese border, he says. "It's definitely a small, Spanish town that shuts down from 2 to 5 o'clock in the afternoon," he says. "It was a seductive, romantic lifestyle, but I was the only American in town."

Although he has thought about going back, he says he likes it here. His personal experience has been that Americans appreciate his artwork more than the folks in Europe, particularly in Caceres.

"There were no outlets like here -- museums, galleries," he says. "The lifestyle was one of the most satisfying I've ever met though."

"I drank a lot of wine."

You can see that influence in the splashy "Goyo Dancing," which vibrates with the movement of a sideburned slickee boy gyrating to the Latin beat, with his pinky deftly waving in the air. Yet, ask Mr. Block point blank, and he won't tell you what any of it means.

"I want to provide artwork that raises questions," he says. "It's about approaching the viewer on an emotional level; my work is not a clever puzzle to decipher."

He delights in telling about another canvas in the exhibit, "Fred and Rachida." It shows a sensually ecstatic woman next to a serene older gentleman and they're both wearing huge earrings.

"One viewer was looking gravely concerned at this painting," he relates. "'Why does he have an earring? Why does he look like that?' I couldn't answer her questions.

"People want context, answers, an explanatory guidebook, but I can't give it to them. Look, as an artist, it's nice to see at least that an audience member is disturbed by your work. You take what you can get."

These are linear figures that he's talking about, human representations that one can actually make out with the naked eye.

But when he hits the abstracts, where he puts oil paint on surfaces such as rotting wood, Mr. Block's images go way beyond the extreme. And he loves it. He says that there is a philosophical tension that comes from painting on the wood.

"It's not as explicit -- I try to offer a mysterious vision," he says. "The colors are quite vibrant when I work on wood."

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