

Art helps religions converge, emerge enlightened

Silver Spring, MD, January 31, 2007 | *Gazette Newspapers*

Two artists, one Jewish and one Muslim, examine their faiths' common ground in upcoming exhibit. Through their art, Tom Block and Karim Chaibi hope people can see more of the similarities between the Jewish and Muslim religions and less of the misunderstandings.

Block, a Jewish/Sufi artist from Silver Spring, and Chaibi, a Tunisian Muslim artist, are working together on a project called "Convergences: Towards a Jewish/Muslim Renewal." The exhibit explores the intertwined traditions of the Muslim and Jewish religions from different points of view through paint and similar media, in a nonpolitical way.

Chaibi looks at the similarities between Jewish and Muslim law. Block looks at the links between Jewish and Islamic mysticism.

"I believe we have a lot in common with Jews," said Bethesda's Chaibi, 43, who was born in Tunis. And if Muslims and Jews would take the time to look at what they have in common, it would be more peaceful in the Middle East, he said.

"They would see that they are more brothers than enemies," Chaibi said.

"Convergences" will be on display at Gateway's Heliport Gallery, 8001 Kennett St., Suite 3, Feb. 9 through April 9. There will be an opening reception 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. Feb. 9 at the gallery.

Block, 43, who considers himself Jewish/Sufi, has been researching the similarities between the two religions for the past eight years. In particular, he is interested in how Sufism influenced the development of medieval Jewish mysticism.

"I felt it was highly relevant to the political situation today," he said, adding he found many Jewish fundamentals are based in Sufism, a mystic tradition of Islam. For instance, Kabbalah, which esoterically interprets the Hebrew Bible and other Jewish texts and practices, is based in Sufism, Block said.

Block uses his art as a means to re-introduce that part of history, he said.

"I use a contemporary medium to represent solid historical ideas," he said.

Political history between the two groups is important, Block said, but the history is much richer and more positive than that. In his work, he said, he hopes people can take away some of his ideas, as well as form a few opinions of their own.

"When you see a work of art, you see the canvas, the artist and his feelings," said Chaibi, who has an art studio in Takoma, D.C. In his own work, he hopes the colors and figures that he uses help convey his thoughts and emotions about the two religions, as well as the words he incorporates.

The Muslim and Jewish religions have many similarities, Chaibi said. Both religions have an attachment to their texts — the Koran and the Torah, Chaibi said. And, he added, "both have tried to see beyond what the texts offer."

Chaibi married a Jewish woman, and the couple joined a humanitarian Jewish congregation. It was at that point, he said, that he began recognizing similarities and started doing research, while also looking at the path his own life has taken.

"Over time, I discovered [the Muslim religion] had its sources and roots in a different tradition that was Judaism," Chaibi said.

As a Muslim, he fasted, something he discovered Jews also do. Two years ago, he celebrated his son's bar mitzvah, which was held with an Orthodox Jewish rabbi. He realized that Orthodox Jews had similar beliefs to Orthodox Muslims.

"They see the world in the same way," he said.

Meredith Hooker, Silver Spring, MD, January 31, 2007