

## Art in the Service of Politics

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Tom Block is an artist with an activist bent.

Art has traditionally "been prophetic and inspirational," says the Silver Spring painter, whose works are on exhibit at two local venues, with two more shows set to open next month.

"In a contemporary milieu, that translates into more direct action where I use my art to propose positive responses to problems I see in the world."

He points to his exhibit *Shalom/Salaam: The Untold Story of a Mystical Entanglement*, on display at George Washington University's Gelman Library in the District.

Block says he uses the little known story of the involvement of Jewish and Muslim mysticism "as a way to insert a positive relationship between these two current enemies."

The exhibit will include a program in which two scholars -- Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, professor of Islamic studies, and Rabbi Marc Eli Saperstein, director of the Jewish studies program -- will speak on Nov. 11 at 3:30 p.m. There also will be an interfaith Ramadan iftar (break fast) on the same day following the discussion.

"My ultimate goal would be to show this [exhibit] in a [Muslim] Middle Eastern country and in Israel at the same time as a way of providing a bridge between the two," the artist explains.

"I view art as providing a gentle impetus that nothing else can."

Block says he "fell into painting" as a young adult.

Born in the District in 1963, he grew up in Bethesda in a family in which his grandfather was Orthodox, his father became bar mitzvah at the Conservative Adas Israel Congregation and he was confirmed at the Reform Washington Hebrew Congregation. Block, who says he is joining Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, attended Hebrew school at WHC.

He graduated from Georgetown Day School in the District and then received a B.A. in English from Vassar College.

After trying his hand at travel writing and finding it wanting ("It wasn't creative enough") and working as a waiter, a profession he found more "honest" than travel writing, Block decided to take an art photography course at the age of 26.

"That opened up the whole world of art," Block says, convincing him "that I had been a painter, but didn't know it."

He loves painting because it gives him the opportunity of "relating to someone in a direct, emotional fashion."

His work has been exhibited in New York; Chicago; Florence and Venice, Italy; Madrid, Spain; Lisbon, Portugal; and other cities.

In addition to his *Shalom/Salaam* exhibit, with its 245 paintings, Block has a two related series -- *Paintings from the Baal Shem Tov* (eight paintings) and *Sufi Secret Garden* (a wall installation of about 70 individual text and visual elements) -- at the Eckles Library on the Mt. Vernon campus of GWU.

Block terms the American political system "Machiavellian" and offers his *Response to Machiavelli* as an antidote, on display starting next month at the HNTB Architecture office in the District.

The artist calls contemporary American politics "amoral," with politicians only interested in getting elected.

"The exhibit proffers a morally based political view in response to the contemporary Machiavellian political system," he says.

Finally, in *15 Years of Figuration*, on display starting next month in the Sharon Fine Gallery in Bethesda, Block shows the "rigorous figurative underpinnings" of his other abstract works.

The exhibit contains portraits and still lifes done from the outset of his work as a student through this year, he says.

Block also is writing a book tracing Sufi mysticism's influence on the development of Jewish mysticism from the 10th to the 19th centuries. He has had five articles published, which are excerpts from the book, but has yet to look for a publisher.

**Aaron Leibel, Washington D.C., September 9, 2004**