

Art overcoming politics

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Jewish, Muslim artists exhibit work together

Art and historical truth can trump political hostility.

That's the idea behind an exhibit of the works by Jewish artist Tom Block and his Muslim counterpart, Karim Chaibi. *Convergences: Toward a Jewish/Muslim Renewal* will be on display at the Heliport Gallery in Silver Spring, Feb. 9-April 9.

"Art is a higher level of communications that goes beyond political frictions," says Chaibi, 43, of Bethesda. "We want to invite people to see that the two traditions can work together, and by exhibiting together and talking together, to let people know we have a lot in common."

Much of the current enmity between Jews and Muslims is based on history, but there is "a whole positive history that is ignored," says Block, also 43, pointing to the period between the seventh and 15th centuries when Arabs and Jews lived together in the Middle East in amity. People will learn from the exhibit that the story is "far more nuanced" than they thought.

Washington-born Block, who lives in Silver Spring, is an artist and scholar who has published many articles tracing the influence of Muslim Sufi mysticism on its Jewish counterpart, Kabbalah.

There was a "porous relationship" between Jewish and Muslim mystics - Muslim texts were translated into Hebrew and scholars from the two communities quoted each other - leading to a "positive, but virtually unknown mystical entanglement," Block says.

He illustrates this in his portraits of medieval Muslim and Jewish mystics in the exhibit.

"By bringing the story into the public square, Jews and Muslims will see each other in a different way," says Block, who belongs to Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda.

A mutual friend, David Fogel, the Heliport Gallery's director, introduced him to Chaibi, Block says, and the two realized how much they had in common.

Born in Tunisia, where he received a degree in Islamic theology from Zitouna University, Chaibi began his philosophical odyssey after marrying Lora Berg, a State Department officer who is Jewish.

"I discovered a more open world and a different tradition that I wasn't familiar with at all," he explains. "Over time, I changed from a fundamentalist to an open person and discovered a tradition I thought I could never get near for political and religious reasons."

Chaibi believes that although both Islam and Judaism are "text-oriented," that Jews over the centuries were able to interpret the Torah in a "more open" or liberal way, "while Muslims consistently insist that the understanding that took place 1,500 years ago is still valid today."

One of the openings to more liberal interpretations that took place within both religions, he notes, was the rise of mysticism - the Muslim Sufi and the Jewish Kabbalah movements - which enabled both groups "to see and read beyond the text, in many ways, enriching their respective traditions."

Not everyone needs to be a Sufi or a Kabbalist today "but that [mystical] path can open a lot of doors for Muslims to be more free when dealing with their texts," says Chaibi, who, despite his Muslim heritage, joins his wife as a member of Beth Chai Jewish Humanist Congregation in the District.

His works in the exhibit illustrate his beliefs, he explains, by emphasizing colors ("Sufis and Kabbalists believe that colors have their own souls, that you can express feelings with them"); using imagery of the Middle East; and showing a connection in his paintings, with words or letters, to text.

But the fact of the exhibit itself may be the most important element in trying to reach Muslims, he believes. "Working with a Jewish painter is already a message in itself. My tradition isn't literal. You don't send a direct message in the Arab world; allusions work better to make people question things."

Chaibi has exhibited his work in the Slovak Republic, in the U.S. and is part of a traveling exhibit in Europe celebrating Mona Lisa's 500th anniversary. He also has published a book of short stories, *Soul of a Harpist*.

Block's art has been displayed worldwide, including in New York, Chicago, Venice and Florence, Italy, and Madrid, Spain. Locally, it has been shown at George Washington University and Georgetown Hospital. He also has published a book, *Shalom/Salaam: The Untold Story of a Mystical Entanglement*.

Block hopes to take *Convergences* to the Middle East in the future, but believes America's "cultural openness" is the best place to start on the road to Jewish-Muslim renewal.

Aaron Leibel, Washington D.C., January 25, 2007