

Artist uses skills to call attention to human rights

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Tom Block, whose vibrant, but sometimes disturbing paintings which illustrate the struggle for human rights, considers himself an activist first. An artist, second.

His lecture Friday night at Hanover College brought to a close two days of art workshops and discussions on human rights as he spoke to more than 50 students and faculty about the evolution of his art.

His intent was to ignite the flame of activism in at least some of those attending.

At first glance, Block's figurative paintings take on the grotesque, paints piled thick, colors bold and angry, a collage of facial features unleashed upon a canvas that scream louder than any human voice.

Facial expressions belonging to 40 subjects he selected from Amnesty International files - from an Afghan woman undergoing horrific suffering to one of China's most prolific and famous dissidents - show torment, fear and terror. And in the eyes of the activists laying their lives on the line to work for human rights - courage.

"At the beginning, I only painted the victims," he said. "But later into the project I decided to paint the activists doing something to evoke change. They may have also been victims. I wanted to represent action that might inspire viewers to go out on a limb for what they believe in."

In The Human Rights Painting Project, Block uses 13th century mysticism with a contemporary artistic approach to interpret the subjects in a way that will inspire people to act.

"His paintings are a very intriguing portrayal of humanity," said Hanover College student Kristen Croxton, 21. "The brush strokes and the texture make you want to smooth it all out - make all their worries go away. Their experiences are obviously so deep and so painful."

A former freelance travel writer, Block was in search of a deeper purpose when he thought he might find it in art photography. But an introductory college art course opened his eyes to fine art in his late twenties and put him on a path as an artist where his deep interests in philosophy, religion and art would intersect.

"I couldn't even draw when I started the course," he said.

By the conclusion of the course, he knew he wanted to paint. But it wasn't until Amnesty International recognized his interpretive painting talents did he begin his prolific projects that include Gandhi, the Dalai Lama and the quiet heroes who fight for human rights take form and draw international attention.

His exhibit at Hanover College was his 21st for the project which he paints in conjunction with Amnesty International whose goal it is to work for justice and to defend human rights around the world.

"One of the greatest resources we have found to promote our work is art and Tom Block's 'Human Rights Painting Project' exemplifies the effectiveness of that resource," said William F. Schulz, executive director of Amnesty International USA in a statement in the project's booklet.

"My paintings are not art for the sake of art, but for the inspiration that comes from it," Block said.

His first work reflecting his newfound passion of artistic activism was in 2001 at age 38.

Today, the 70 paintings that represent the Human Rights Painting Project are currently on exhibit in New York, Washington D.C. as well as Hanover College. Each painting is accompanied by text - an inspirational saying by a philosopher and the biography describing the subject.

Block uses advertising to reach the masses about the human rights' issues, placing copies of his paintings in public places across the country where people can see them and question. It's his attempt to bridge the gap in the world as he sees it, outside the art world, to activate general concern for human rights violations, including those rooted in religion.

"Ultimately, the paintings bring together people's best and worst impulses - the heroes of the images are a counterpoint to the regimes and authorities that forced them into their roles," he said. "We are left with the uncomfortable question of which group is more typical of our human race and which the exception."

Block's project paintings are available for sale to the public with 50 percent of the proceeds going to Amnesty International. Paintings range from \$250 for the smaller canvases and upwards of \$1,750 for larger ones. His exhibit will continue until February 1. The Art Gallery located in the Fine Arts Building on the Hanover campus is open from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.

"For many artists, the object of their art is the end," he said. "For me, art is the means to an end which is to awaken the human spirit in order to make the world a better place."

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