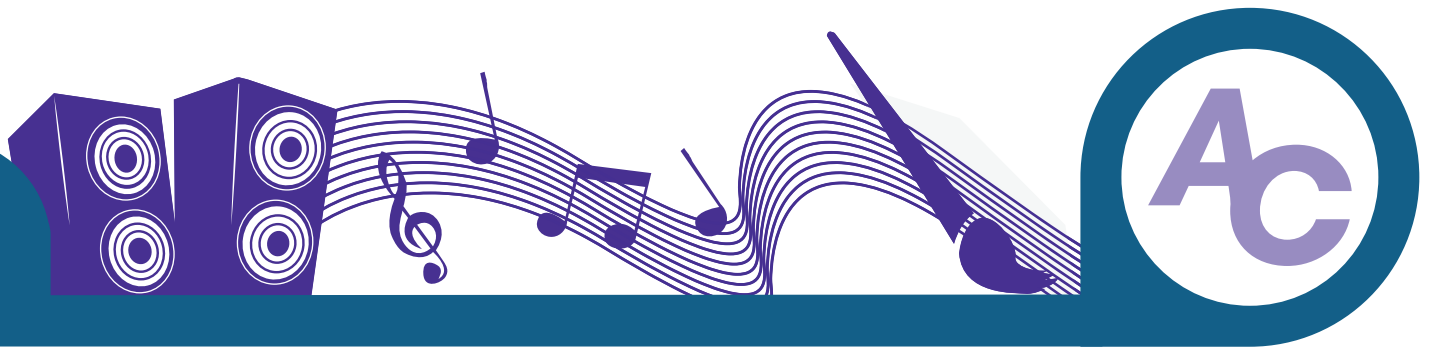


Arts & Culture



Artists, activists unite for human rights

Art festival aims to raise awareness, inspire social change

by Luke Wilusz
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THE CITIZENS of Iraq are no strangers to atrocity. Crimes against humanity have been perpetrated there and around the world for years, yet many Americans are largely unaware anything is wrong. This week, a group of artists and legal activists will do its best to change that.

The Iraq History Project Art Festival will run from Sept. 28 to Oct. 3 at DePaul University. The six-day series of events will include panel discussions, lunch lectures and film screenings addressing human rights issues, culminating in a large exhibition of work by 19 artists on Oct. 3 in room 120 of DePaul's Lincoln Park Student Center, 2250 N. Sheffield Ave.

The exhibition will feature art based on work by the DePaul International Human Rights Law Institute's Iraq History Project, which was created in 2005 to document human rights abuse in Iraq, both under the regime of Saddam Hussein and later under the occupation of the U.S. military.

"They have documented the stories of both abusers and abused Iraqi citizens from 1968 to 2008," said Tom Block, director of the festival. "They just took a series of testimonies. They have hundreds of them. They contracted with me to...use art to highlight these stories and raise awareness of these issues as well as the work the law institute is doing."

Each artist in the festival chose a specific testimony from the Iraq History Project and created work around it, with the



Courtesy TOM BLOCK

Tom Block's artist book "Mazlum" is based on the testimony of a man named Mazlum who was held prisoner and interrogated by U.S. soldiers after they killed his brother and searched his house without explanation. This is one of hundreds of testimonies documented by the Iraq History Project from 2005 to 2009.

intention of raising public consciousness of human rights violations and inspiring social change.

Block, a self-described activist artist, produced the first Amnesty International

Human Rights Art Festival in April, and he said his experiences with that and other projects he has worked on inspired him to create this festival.

"The idea was originally to marry the art with the law school's activism," Block said. "Using the art, [I'd] reach new audiences and bring disparate audiences together."

Artist Isra Fakhruddin submitted a series of ink drawings to the festival based on the testimony of a man named Abbas, who was kidnapped and taken away from his family. Fakhruddin said she believes it's important to educate the public about the kinds of atrocities being committed around the world.

"I think we each have a responsibility to be aware of international affairs," she said. "I think it's very important to at least be aware of and educate oneself about. We can't just live close-minded, thinking that our life is the only one for us."

Playwright Kristin Idaszak wrote a one-act play called "Phases of the Moon," based on the testimony of a woman named Dina, who was kidnapped at a government party by Uday Saddam Hussein, son of the deposed Iraqi president, who held her captive and raped her. The play juxtaposes Dina's story with the story of a woman living in Chicago to highlight how drastically different and horrific life can be for women in Iraq.

Idaszak said theater, as an art form, lent itself well to telling stories meant to deeply affect an audience and raise awareness about important issues.

"I believe that theater, at its best, has the power to be an incredibly healing art,"

Idaszak said. "Theater is the only art form where the audience and the artist are going through a journey together at the same time."

However, Block said, raising public consciousness about issues wasn't enough. In order for activist art to be successful, he said, it has to inspire people to take action.

"I think [art and activism] do go well together," Block said. "But I think, in terms of activism, artists are often too satisfied with simply raising awareness of an issue and enjoying a sense of personal catharsis as they express their own ideas. [Artists must] move beyond that, to where art can actually reach out to a more general audience and perhaps inspire some specific and quantifiable social change."

Julia Dougherty, the IHRLI director, worked with Block to organize the festival. Dougherty said while many people don't immediately act on social issues after they learn about them, social consciousness is a good starting point.

"It's not necessarily the easiest thing to make that next step," she said. "Sometimes awareness is the best you can do, because discussion ... can then move to igniting a charge in somebody else, and then from there it can move into a movement and then change. But it's steps. You have to build the foundation to get to that ultimate change."

For more information about the Iraq History Project Art Festival or for a full schedule of events, contact Julia Dougherty at JDoughe3@DePaul.edu.



Courtesy TOM BLOCK

Tom Block used a combination of collage and drawing techniques to create his "Mazlum" artist book.

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