

## Give Salaam, Shalom and Peace a Chance

Silver Spring, MD, February 28, 2007 | *Gazette Newspapers*

With ethnic and religious divisiveness stirring up every corner of the planet, any unifying event, whether major or minuscule, matters. And when it happens locally, making a pilgrimage to said site matters even more — even if it is housed in the Heliport Gallery in Silver Spring's downtown through April 9.

"Convergences: Towards a Jewish/Muslim Renewal," with artwork by Karim Chaibi and Tom Block, who are Muslim and Jewish, respectively, "explores the positive aspects of the Jewish/Muslim liaison," insists Heliport's curator David Fogel. "We can reach into the shared history of both peoples for resources to lead towards a positive renewal of this relationship." These cousins enjoyed a friendship "during the Middle Ages, when, circling the Mediterranean Sea, these two peoples built one of the most peaceful societies of human history."

At first glance, there appears to be few, if any, connections between the two artists' work. The self-taught Chaibi is a surrealist painter who produces ethereal shapes and images reminiscent of Marc Chagall and head shop posters. From his research, Chaibi learned that both the Qur'an and the Talmud value dreams and what they represent. Although he has decided, "The conclusion wasn't necessarily important," delving into the subconscious is essential. "Mohammed said people are asleep and only wake up when they die."

For this exhibit, Block is more pragmatic, hoping to educate by creating abstract collage portraits of influential Sufi and Kabbalah scholars. He includes a short biography of each scholar's accomplishment. Block is unafraid of annoying others by his assertion of a "strong Sufi influence on the development of Jewish mysticism."

In the exhibit, Block profiles Bayazid Bistami (804-874) who "was the first to speak openly of 'annihilation of the self in God' and 'subsistence through God,' ideas which came to underpin Sufi prayer worship and, later, the Jewish Kabbalah and Hasidism."

Throughout his career, Block has insisted that contemporary art, at its best, should move outside the "narrow confines of the art world, approaching the general public through genuinely creative thought and a gentle activism." He seeks to enlighten, maybe even uplift, but he never allows himself to get bogged down in political suppositions. This well-known Silver Spring art activist and writer admits his goals can seem contrary to the ideas postulated by other artists, but, he figures, "Why repackage the news?"

Chaibi probably made local news or at least gossip when the Tunisian-born Muslim fell in love with and married a Jewish-American diplomat working in Tunis.

"Everyone thought she must be part of Mossad," he recalls.

The diplomatic family made their homes in Saudi Arabia and Slovakia, while Chaibi worked as a computer programmer and taught Arabic. His wife prodded him to paint; he also can thank her — at least partially — for influencing his subject matter. After his marriage, Chaibi's interest in finding correlations between the Muslim and Jewish faiths took off. He was already familiar with the Christian-Islam connections, having attended a Jesuit elementary school. "Both religions have the same beliefs: heaven and hell, we are so good and everybody else is going to hell," he half jokes.

The artist believes his use of bold and brilliant "Mediterranean colors and ghostly human images" can be attributed to what he calls "arteism, an art form that avoids conventional forms." Recalling the Bible's second commandment about not making graven images, he notes similar precepts are articulated in Islam.

For both artists, the similarities outweigh the historical differences, with Chaibi believing "the United States is important since only in this country can tolerance be established and then exported."

Let us hope.

**Karen Schafer, Silver Spring, MD, February 28, 2007**