

Growth, Struggles Reflected in Exhibit

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When a committee at Howard County Center for the Arts pulled together an exhibit of figurative art, the result was a show that explores the human experience along with the human form.

Tom Block of Silver Spring makes large, boldly colored portraits that depict individuals involved in the struggle for human rights around the world. Jessica Damen of Baltimore paints colorful, textured works focused on children and the experiences of growing up.

The two Maryland artists are joined by Nebraska artist Kristin Powers Nowlin, who uses embroidery and printmaking to examine cultural identity, and Randy Simmons of Kentucky, who makes large, detailed charcoal drawings of children.

"We saw some broad connections," said Amy Poff, deputy director of the art center. "All of them express in some way issues of identity."

Two other shows on display at the center through Aug. 19 feature artwork by adults with disabilities. A reception is scheduled for all three shows from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. tonight.

Block's paintings are part of the Human Rights Painting Project, which he developed for Amnesty International.

Amnesty provides biographical information about the individuals, such as Sowore Omoyele, who suffered abuse by military police in Nigeria before becoming an activist, and Gjergj Komnino, who spent 25 years in prison in Albania before seeking asylum in Italy. From these, Block creates sketches followed by small, mid-sized and large paintings.

"The point of this project is to say to an audience that this is an issue that touches every part of the globe," he said.

Block had the idea for his human rights portraits for many years before he approached the Takoma Park chapter of Amnesty International in 2001. Once he started working, he said, his project drew the attention of the national organization and other supporters.

To date, he said, he has done about 200 drawings and 70 paintings of 40 subjects.

Block said one of his goals was to draw the attention of people who are interested in human rights and equality, even if they are not usually interested in art.

"In this particular series, you can see it on a lot of levels," he said. "It seems to capture the imagination of a fairly wide audience, which is exciting."

Block, 42, earned a bachelor's degree in English at Vassar College in New York and took several courses at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. He is now an artist and freelance writer who uses abstract and figurative painting and scholarly writing to explore spiritual and social issues. He plans to start earning a master's degree in fine art at Goddard College in Vermont this fall.

Block said the human rights paintings are "something I see as a lifelong project. I don't think these issues will be cleared up in my lifetime."

Sandy Alexander, Baltimore, Md, July 15, 2005