

In the Struggle

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Tom Block began his professional life as a writer, but over the past 15 years he has developed a parallel career as a visual artist. Since the late 1990s he has focused his artistic energies largely on the creation of serial artworks that explore social, political and philosophical issues, he said in a recent telephone interview from his home on the outskirts of Washington.

One of his series, which he calls "The Human Rights Painting Project," consists of portraits whose subjects have been involved in the struggle for human rights around the world. The series consists of 70 paintings and 200 drawings, and about 20 of those works are scheduled to go on view Friday in an exhibition at Tessera Gallery, 628 W. Fourth St.

Block said he created the series as a visual celebration - and a tool for raising awareness - of the work of Amnesty International, a human-rights organization. Accordingly, he said, he routinely gives the group a portion of his income from sales of these portraits, as well as all proceeds from sales of an accompanying catalog and note cards imprinted with color reproductions of some of these works.

The series emphasizes the international character of the human-rights struggle, Block said, and the importance of Amnesty International's work. "The paintings themselves capture the range of emotions exhibited in this battle," he said. "Fear, destitution, pain, hope, joy and even sanguinity form themselves in these faces."

Those faces belong to historical figures and internationally recognized leaders such as Sojourner Truth, Mohandas K. Ghandi and the Dalai Lama, Block said, as well as lesser-known human-rights activists and relatively anonymous individuals tortured or killed under the supervision of repressive political regimes in 28 countries. A wall label that identifies its subject and contains summary biographical information accompanies each portrait.

"Ultimately, the paintings bring together man's best and worst impulses; the heroes of the images are a counterpoint to the authorities that forced them into that role," he said. "We are left with the uncomfortable question of which group is more typical of our human race and which the exception." Block said that he will discuss the series further in a talk at Friday's opening reception, set to run from 7 to 10 p.m. He said that Laura Moye, the acting director of Amnesty USA's Southern region, will also be at the reception to talk about the group's work.

Living in or near the nation's capital for most of his life has made Block acutely conscious of political issues, he said. Before he became a politically motivated painter, though, he spent 10 years establishing himself professionally in two different fields.

In 1987, he said, he earned a bachelor's degree in English from Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., then moved to Boston and began building a career as a freelance writer, following in the footsteps of his journalist father.

Block said that he also made photographs for publication alongside travel pieces and feature articles that he wrote for magazines and newspapers. In 1989, to sharpen his photographic skills, he said, he decided to enroll in a course in fine-art photography at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Because he had no previous art training, Block said, the school required him to also take a six-week introductory class in visual art. It was in the latter class, he said, that he was exposed to and fell in love with painting. As a result, he decided to study drawing and painting instead of photography. But he left the school after about a year and a half because he felt he had received enough training to pursue painting on his own.

To support himself, Block waited tables for a while and spent a few months traveling around Europe making sketches before returning to the United States. He went back to Europe in the fall of 1992 and settled in Caceres, a small town in western Spain, where he spent the next three years honing his painting skills and arranging exhibitions of his work in the two nearest cities, Madrid, and Lisbon, Portugal.

Eventually, he was faced with a choice of becoming a permanent expatriate or returning to the United States. He ultimately chose the latter course of action, because he wanted to start making politically themed art that he felt would be better understood by audiences in his own country. Resettling in Washington, where he had grown up, he turned to teaching art to children and adolescents in order to earn a living. In October 1998 he married the former Debbie Spielberg, and they now have two children, ages 1 and 5.

Block said he initially approached Amnesty International in 1997 with a proposal for creating this series, but it wasn't until early 2001 that officials of a local chapter of the group in the D.C. area encouraged him to proceed with it. He said he completed it in a little more than a year. It made its public debut in an April 2002 exhibit at the national headquarters of the AFL-CIO in Washington. "What I found at that show and since then is that there are a lot of people who aren't necessarily very interested in art but are very interested in this project," Block said.

After favorable press coverage of that first exhibition, he said, he was able to obtain letters of support for the project from a number of prominent individuals and gather enough private financial contributions to pay for production of the accompanying catalog.

Block said that he continues to write, but that his interests in that field have shifted away from journalism into fiction and self-directed scholarship. He said that last fall he completed the 430-page manuscript for a book on the relationship between Sufism - an ancient mystical discipline often related to Islam - and Jewish spirituality. He said that since then he has been seeking a publisher for the book.

Tom Patterson, Winston-Salem, NC, July 3, 2005