

No measly easels for big ideas

Frederick, MD, May 15, 2008 | *Frederick News-Post* by Lauren LaRocca

There's a method to Tom Block's madness, a creative process: devote yourself to an idea, nurture it, write about it, research it; then give it visual representations -- sketch it, paint it; and add these brainstorming elements to the final piece, the canvas.

He typically works in this way, and several of the fragmented ideas hang as "process studies" in his current exhibit, "Into the Singularity," at the Delaplaine Visual Arts Education Center.

But several of these brainstorms find their way into the piece itself, which spans more than 60 feet, broken into 24 panels. The drawings and paintings were either printed or painted onto the large canvas, or sometimes the paper was glued directly to the canvas, so that the result is a collage of ideas and media.

He hasn't always done such large-scale pieces.

"Size matters in my paintings now," he continued. "I like the idea of surrounding a viewer. I am presenting the viewer with a chaotic vision of repressed humanity."

The idea for "Into the Singularity" -- and its size -- developed while Block attended an artist residency through The Cooper Union in the East Village, New York City. There he began -- and completed -- the piece.

The residency studio was open from 8 a.m. to midnight, he said, and he took advantage of every minute. He completed two panel paintings and "just kept adding on," he said during a recent phone interview. "New York got in my blood and I just kind of got crazy."

While not always so large, his work has continually centered upon the theme of humanity's spiritual impulses, be it contrary to or through religion. He's trying to develop an idea of human spirituality that fits our era, he said.

"Into the Singularity" is the first of three pieces that explores the idea of this new spirituality. The painting represents Block's meditation on the mistake of classical mysticism, a flawed system, he thinks, because of its lack of community involvement. Explained by Block, classical mysticism says we can move beyond our ego and have an experience of universal being.

"To me, this is impossible," he said. "To me, all your human experiences would be repressed" -- thus his idea of a "repressed humanity," a recurring theme of his series.

"Beneath this repression is a seething humanity," he said, "buried deep inside the classical mystic. It's a lost place the mystic has turned away from."

It's this place that Block is pointing to in his piece "Into the Singularity."

Singularity is crushed, he said, "like the black hole of humanity. ... Humanity gets crushed in 9th- and 10th-century Sufi mysticism, but within that black hole is the whole world. 'Into the Singularity' is like putting a microscope on a drop of water," he said, to see what that outdated mystic overlooked -- the world through the senses, including anger, humility, desire, etc. and every thought, emotion, and action of our species.

The second painting of his series will reflect on "The Conference of the Birds," the Sufi allegorical poem, representing a movement to a new conception of mysticism; and the third, and last, painting of the series will explore prophetic/spiritual activism, "doing the beautiful, correct action." (He believes activism is the direction mysticism should go, because humans are a social, communal species.)

"The second one is in my studio and the third is in my head," he said.

A recurring symbol in "Into the Singularity" began as an "un-usable finger" with nails on both ends, but viewers continually mistook the image for a safety pin. Because the fingers were placed throughout the large painting, people thought they symbolized collage pieces being held together loosely by safety pins. Eventually, Block accepted the beauty of contemporary art (engage the viewer and consider their reaction legitimate) and began seeing them as safety pins himself. They hold the piece together "by a very flimsy method," he noted.

"I'm examining the human spiritual impulse, because I don't think religion provides the kind of vessel it did 500 years ago," he said.

Can humans be both secular and spiritual today? People go religion hunting and take a little bit of this and that, Block said, whatever suits their personality or spiritual needs at the time.

"My art is examining ways and methods ... in post-religious society, you can be deeply spiritual," he continued.

Take the issues we face today -- at the forefront, war and an environmental crisis -- a direct representation of a psychic, spiritual problem, to Block.

He considers himself an activist and said he has worked with several organizations, including Human Rights Painting Process.

He's interested in art with a moral center.

Block, who lives in Silver Spring, has been exhibiting his work since 1993. He "fell into painting" at 26. "Something just clicked," he said. "I was writing, doing features journalism. I was a moderate success, and I hated it."

He still incorporates writing into his life, through art, research, a book project and several speeches given over the past few years. The list of lectures on his website span topics not separate from his artwork -- "Painting as Prayer," "Artist as Shaman" -- because, to him, it's life work he's doing.

Lauren LaRocca, Frederick, MD, May 15, 2008