

## Painter Mixes Art, Philosophy and Activism

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When he painted his first piece, Tom Block had no idea that art would become a forum for his activism. He didn't intend for his painting of a grapefruit resting on a pedestal with a spotlight shining on it to seem edgy. But his teacher looked at his work and saw subtext, telling him it was a fascinating rendition of a grapefruit being interrogated.

Although Block wasn't aware of the subtext he had created at the time, he looks back on his professor's comment now as a sort of prognostication. Block evolved into a political activist artist, using visual expression to promote intercultural understanding and world peace as well as awareness of philosophical, spiritual and human rights issues.

His series inspired by writings of 14th-century mystic Meister Eckhart is on display at Montpelier Cultural Arts Center through May 27. "Heretical Paintings -- Meister Eckhart's Spirituality" is a group of vibrant paintings on wood that the Silver Spring artist created in response to Eckhart's ultimate philosophical dilemma of how to find God in all parts of the human experience.

"I consider myself operating in the intersection of art, philosophy and activism," said Block, 40, who discovered art as a means of self-expression after spending several post-college years as a freelance writer and photographer. When he decided to enroll in an art photography program in Boston, he was required to take basic drawing and painting classes because he had never been trained in art. His father joked that Block couldn't even draw a good stick figure as a child, but to everyone's surprise, Block fell in love with drawing and painting and never pursued photography.

"Art is very personally based. I think technique is a learned thing. I was not someone who drew the perfect flower at the age of 12 or 13," Block said.

But as soon as he got the basics, he took off for Caceres, Spain, where he painted and read a lot about philosophy and religion.

Although Block paints on canvas most often, it was in Spain that he began to use wood as a foundation for his art. Because canvas was expensive, he would go to construction sites and find discarded wood crates that he rebuilt into makeshift canvases.

Years later, after he returned to the United States, Block went back to wood for the Eckhart series, not to save money but to symbolize the cross, because Eckhart was Christian. Much of Block's work is focused on the historical interaction of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim religions. He continues to work on his "Shalom/Salaam" project, a combination of visual art and writing that reflects the historical entanglement between Jewish and Muslim mystics.

Although Eckhart's ideas are not evident in the abstract explosions of color in "Heretical Paintings," Block said he uses his art as a way to introduce people to the spiritual social philosophers who have captured his attention. It is not a requirement to read beyond the visual on the wall, however.

"I'm hoping that what I'm offering is a layered response. You can be attracted by the beauty of my paintings. I think the beauty captures the mystery and mysticism that Eckhart offers. I don't think it's necessary to read Eckhart, but if it leads you to that, great," he said.

Instead of creating paintings of "an old guy with a beard," Block created pieces with abstract patterns of swirling shapes that he gave such names as "Paintings for a Young Soul," "Necessity of Service" and "Humility." The names come from quotations of Eckhart that he pasted onto the wall before drawing sketches and working up to the final paintings.

"Eckhart's a wide-ranging thinker. The fact that he's lost to our contemporary culture to me is tragic and sad," Block said. "I want to use a fresh way to bring his ideas to a contemporary audience."

**Sara Gebhardt, Washington D.C., April 29, 2004**