

Portraits of Pain

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Tom Block is deeper than deep. He paints and writes on all manner of serious subject matter. Thank goodness, the guy has a sense of humor, especially when he proclaims he should have gone shirtless for The Gazette's photographer.

This self-described "wild-haired activist" is passionate, liberal and too, too smart. When Block jokingly calls himself a Jewish/Sufi, a trip to the online dictionary is in order. The Vassar graduate is even writing a book on the influence of Sufism -- Islamic mysticism -- on the development of Jewish spirituality.

Of course, there is more to Tom Block than a grocery list of superlatives. This Bethesda-bred, private school-educated -- Georgetown Day and Landon -- expressionistic painter "walks the walk," according to Kim Ward of the Washington Projects for the Arts, headquartered at the Corcoran Gallery. He is a "grassroots artist," she says, creating political art with an "edge and angst." And Ward is in a position to know, since the WPA's mission is to support promising local artists.

Block always has created "art outside the narrow confines of the high art world. I wanted to take a contemporary vision and take it to a wider audience," he explains from his home in "multi-cultural Silver Spring."

His business manager Debbie Grossman Shaked believes Block will be famous before too long, and she "wants to help him get there." "It is not just his work, but his ideas," she says.

World renowned or not, the artist has spent the last few years painting portraits of victims of political and social upheaval and people who have devoted their lives to human rights causes. His "Human Rights Painting Project" is on view at the Ratner Museum in Bethesda through Sept. 1. The exhibit is interesting to art lovers as well as political activists.

Clearly influenced by expressionist painters William De Kooning and Oscar Kokoshka, Block piles thick mounds of brilliantly hued paint on the canvas, comparing said pigment to butter and icing. In fact, there is nothing sweet about these larger-than-life expressionistic portraits, some measuring four by five feet.

Block created the portraits to promote human rights awareness, with 50 percent of painting proceeds earmarked for Amnesty International. Some depict well-known individuals such as Mahatma Gandhi, while others are of personages relatively obscure to westerners -- like Faraj Sarkouhi, former editor-in-chief of Adineh, a Iranian socio-literary journal. The exhibit also includes more generic subject matter including portraits of a death row guard and refugees.

Beside the portraits, biographical notes, written by Nancy Golden, further engage the viewer. The "depth and passion in his strokes and color blocks and the way he cuts and frames his subjects" first attracted Ward to Block's work. "Things aren't at peace on the canvas," she says. She is pleased that he has "achieved a measure of success," even without the backing of a commercial gallery.

As far as his "Human Rights Painting Project" is concerned, Block isn't in it for the money. "I proposed the idea to the local Amnesty International Chapter and received a response like 'Put them in a bar and raise a couple of hundred dollars.' But I had other plans," he recalls.

From the outset, plenty of friends took up the cause, helping him put the project together. For the inaugural showing at the AFL-CIO headquarters in Silver Spring in 2002, Amnesty International's Chief Executive William F. Schulz and the labor organization's President John Sweeney met for the first time, Block notes. The exhibit then traveled to Chicago and Ohio State University and was highlighted on National Public Radio's "Talk of the Nation."

"So how did a nice Bethesda boy become an activist artist? "It's in my genes," Block opines. "My dad was political."

After earning a bachelor's degree in English in 1987, Block made a nice living as a freelance travel writer. Newsday and the Los Angeles Times were on his resume and a staff position was on the horizon. But there was one problem, he says: "I hated it." Travel writing felt like "glorified advertising," he recalls.

At age 27, Block bagged it all and started waiting tables in Boston. During his stint as a travel writer, he had taken black-and-white photographs and thought about becoming an art photographer. He decided to enroll in the Boston Museum School, just across the street from his home. He had never taken an art class, but balked at the school administrators' insistence that he take some basic art classes.

When Block realized his options were either taking a basic art class or scrambling for quarters, Drawing 101 didn't seem so awful. After just two weeks, he admits, "I fell in love with it [painting and drawing]."

Of course, Block's family was skeptical. His father wondered how a kid who couldn't manage to draw a decent stick figure could decide to become an artist. His pragmatic grandmother suggested finding an art expert who could tell them if her grandson had any real talent.

Through it all, Block stood firm. Looking back, he realizes his behavior might have been all right at 27. But by age 40, he acknowledges, "I could be a complete failure."

"Block studied art for 18 months before striking out on his own. First, he moved to Denver, then traveled to Spain, where he recalls "the cragged, almost desert-like landscape coalesced with my own feelings of detachment as an expatriate to produce the motivations" for a series of paintings. Almost as important, he could sell a painting for a couple of hundred dollars and support himself for a month.

Living in an unheated room in the small village of Caceres, Spain, he read and reflected. "It was around 1993. What can I say, I am a late bloomer," he quips.

He returned to this area in 1996, living in a Gaithersburg basement and teaching art to disadvantaged and emotionally disturbed children. He began painting what he describes as the "mythology of the mundane. As we trudge through our daily lives, we pass through literally millions of moments that act as metaphor for our personal struggle and the struggle of humanity in general."

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out this expressionist painter wasn't about to paint pretty petunias. Even so, Block sought something more.

Back in 1998, on an extended honeymoon, Block whiled away the hours reading books on social and political philosophy. While reading may not be on most people's honeymoon to-do list, Block "realized how to put it all together." "It" meant introducing larger philosophical issues and ideas into some of his paintings.

Now that Block has turned 40, his family has nothing to worry about. In addition to his one-person exhibit, he is working on a public art project in Silver Spring, a book proposal and a multimedia catalog on Jewish and Islamic mystics. Such a nice Jewish boy, with or without his shirt.

Karen Schafer, Montgomery County, MD, July 30, 2003