

Silver Spring Artist puts Human Face on Suffering

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"I didn't pick up the brushes until I was 26," (Tom Block) says, laughing softly at the thought. "I had no art background. When I called my father to say that I was going to art school, he said, 'Holy mackerel, you couldn't even draw a stick figure when you were a kid!'"

Suffice to say that Block the elder got over his initial disbelief, and that Block the younger proved himself adept with the paints and brushes. More than adept, he became an award winning young artist whose work has been displayed in galleries around the country and the world.

When he embraced the life of an artist, though, Block also embraced a particular vision of the artist's role in society. He had a social conscience and he wasn't afraid to use it. His goal was to raise awareness of social issues through his work as a contemporary artist . . . "If you have a bunch of people each doing one small thing, it starts to make a difference," he says. "The sound of a thousand voices talking in protest is a roar and that is the ultimate goal. Not only is consciousness raised, but people take action."

A revolution, Block observes, starts small and grows little by little.

Everybody knows that the first perk of being an artist is the opportunity to be surrounded and uplifted by beauty and vision except when you're choosing subjects for the *Human Rights Painting Project*. "It was a somewhat depressing process," Block admits. "Reading through this incredible list of people who were being tortured for their beliefs, their principles."

He stuck with it, though, determined to represent the humanity of prisoners of conscience and refugees from every corner of the globe. Some of his subjects, like the Albanian Refugee, are otherwise anonymous and uncelebrated. Others, like the Dalai Lama or Mahatma Gandhi are instantly recognizable. Some, like Chinese dissident Wei JingSheng, have broken free from their oppressors and gone on to carry the campaign for human rights to a new level.

"Wei JingSheng heads the Overseas Chinese Democracy Coalition," Block says, recalling the day that Wei, despite incessant demands on his time, came to see him in his studio to discuss the project. "He held up his hand and said, 'Look, human rights is a very dry subject. It turns people off. I'll do anything to help you on this project, to make them listen.'"

Turns out that he was not the only one. Block speaks with awe about the donations of time and money that have talent transformed this dream into a viable reality. "I have been amazed at how many people have done things pro bono," he says. "Janelle Welch is a graphic designer who have up her weekends and evenings to lay out the 32-page catalogue. Webfront Solutions put up the Web site; Image Power PR company got us in touch with everybody from the Gazette to Oprah. These are people who clearly have a social conscience and want to be involved."

His own contributions, the artist plays down, but it must be said that as a portrait painter, Block opens a window through which the unhindered and unoppressed may gaze at their not-quite-so- fortunate brethren and recognize the humanity they share.

Chris Slattery, Montgomery County, MD, April 3, 2002