

Spiritual Abstractions

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Tom Block worships in a Conservative synagogue, but he paints Hasidic messages. Inspired by the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, the artist uses recurring abstract forms to celebrate the joy of mystical prayer. He also fills some canvases to capture similar devotional intent expressed by historic Christian and Islamic mystics.

"Tom Block, Archeology of a Painting -- The Dance of the Hasidim," an exhibit running through December 16 at East Lansing's Kresge Art Museum, depicts the mystical worship carried out by song and dance. "In my painting, I interpret the teaching of various spiritual masters in a contemporary visual language, introducing viewers to age-old mystical systems in a fresh, personal manner," says Block, 38. He is showing some 15 works in the exhibit presented in collaboration with the Jewish studies at Michigan State University.

"I begin by studying the teaching of specific, historical figures, translating the message into a visual shorthand through a series of ink meditations. Then, working in a general way from these studies, I create a series of paintings that embodies the underlying message of spirituality."

Block, who became disappointed with his writing career 12 years ago, enrolled in an art photography class, found that more satisfying and moved on to painting. Based in Maryland, he has been represented in solo and group exhibitions in the United States and Europe.

"As I got into painting, it became important for me to make my art relevant to a larger population," says Block, who uses a faint circle to stand for unity and a lattice work of thin lines to symbolize the unseen ideas of consilience that mystics try to uncover.

The artist, who has completed a series of portraits of human rights defenders for Amnesty International to help raise funds for that organization, ultimately wants to express the universal elements that people share.

A larger exhibit, scheduled for next fall at Detroit's Swords into Plowshares Peace Center and Gallery, will connect mystical reverence in all three religions and supplement the ideas with discussion programs.

"My different series (of paintings) interrelate in much the same way as the various spiritual systems do -- in subtle, quiet ways that speak more of convergence than conflict.

Suzanne Chessler, Detroit, December 14, 2001