

Stirring the Imagination: Tom Block's Human Rights Painting Project

Washington DC, July-August 2002 | *Sojourners Magazine*

I'm not the only person that has made the connection between art, imagination and the heroic. This spring a show sponsored by Arts for Amnesty International opened in Washington D.C. The exhibit featured the work of artist Tom Block, who depicts both prisoners of conscience and those working for their freedom, and for the dignity and human rights of oppressed people around the world.

If there's a word that summarizes the work exhibited and people depicted, it's *diverse*. Some of the people painted by Block, such as the Dalai Lama, are known around the world. Others embody anonymity, such as the Albanian refugees and Algerian civilians. There are Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and people with no particular religion.

One of the most fascinating subjects is a man who dared to criticize the system of which he was a part. Jose Gallardo was the youngest brigadier general in the history of the Mexican army. As such, he was in a position to know about that institution's abuse of human rights. He wrote about the abuse in his master's thesis and called for reform of the army. For his troubles, he was sentenced to 28 years in prison on trumped-up charges. President Fox released him in march after Amnesty International and other groups brought attention to his case.

Block's painting of Gallardo in an officer's uniform, staring out from behind prison bars, captures the price of following your conscience in a way that words can't. Similarly, the suffering of an Albanian refugee, an old woman bearing a striking resemblance to Mother Teresa, is depicted in a disturbing manner not in the debased modern sense of upsetting one's sensibilities, but in a way that makes you think about things you'd rather not.

In his new book, *Carpe Manana*, Drew University theologian Leonard Sweet writes about the importance of what he calls "image based literacy" that is, an appreciation of the way in which images shape the way people think and feel. However well Arts for Amnesty International works as a fundraiser, it does succeed as a means of getting inside the reader's imagination and, from there, perhaps to his or her conscience.

Images like these are not a substitute for words. But they do provide, at least, a partial answer to the question, "Why should I be interested?"

Roberto Rivera, Washington D.C., July-August 2002