

Tom Block: Cousins

Detroit, MI, November 2002 | *The Detrouter*

In this age of "you're either with us or against us," Swords into Plowshare: Peace Center and Gallery is a facilitator of dialogue that seeks to bring people together and uncover commonalities between diverse groups. The gallery's current exhibition, Tom Block's "Cousins," speaks to the heart of the Center's philosophy by exploring the common links between what are often perceived as opposing belief systems.

For "Cousins," Block has created three series of abstract paintings, each based on messages found in particular sects within the larger faiths of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Working in three different styles, the artist demonstrates a common thread between the religions: the search for love, peace and meaning. Block's abstract paintings begin with text from the faith, and the paintings come to life not as illustrations, but as impressions and expressions of the text's meaning.

The "Heretical Paintings" are based on the teachings of 14th century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, who was posthumously condemned by the church for proposing that all people could have a personal relationship with God, an idea that threatened the interests of the Church. In this series, Block uses oil paint on discarded wood planks. The wood is a signifier of the Christian faith, while the decrepit state of the planks reinforces Eckhart's idea that God is found in everything.

Of the three bodies of work in the exhibition, the Meister Eckhart series is perhaps the most representational (though no Madonna and Child are found here). Colors squirm and wiggle, crowded together in forms that suggest microscopic organisms in a living soup - where the organisms both individually and collectively represent God.

The "Baal Shem Tov" series is based on the writings of 18th century Jewish mystic and founder of the Hasidic movement, Israel Baal Shem Tov. For him, God was not experienced through solemn worship but through joyous celebration. Baal Shem Tov's sayings are intended to create "spiritual vibrations" that allow a listener to be in tune with the Creator. Block develops the works in this series on canvas, weaving together paper collage, ink and acrylic paint. Though Baal Shem Tov images share a general palette and abstract quality with the Heretical Paintings, the abstract movement of colors here, which almost dance on the canvas, reflect the celebratory nature of this belief system.

Block has transformed the Center's second floor gallery into an installation of hundreds of framed Sufi drawings and accompanying sayings entitled "Secret Garden." The Sufis are characterized by a mystical approach to Islam, and Block has created a quieter, more contemplative body of work, reminiscent of Zen sayings and drawings. Working primarily in black and white brush marks with a hint of washed color, these works are the least representational of the exhibition - mirroring the Sufi means for uncovering the enigmatic mystery of their God. The "Secret Garden" works go behind columns, around corners, on the ceiling, and against the floor. An image placed in a corner offers an explanation: "The Sufi acts according to whatever is most fitting to the moment." The imagery, writing and arrangement engage the viewer in continual discovery and contemplation of the work.

In exploring these seemingly different belief systems through different styles, the artist reveals a common need within each faith to express and understand the mysteries of existence. With "Cousins" Block provides an opportunity to enjoy the beauty of art and simultaneously come to understand other approaches to life.

Nick Sousanis, Detroit, MI, November 2002