

Tom Block: The Human Rights Painting Project

Greensboro, NC, July 28, 2005 | *Greensboro News-Record*

It's a hot Friday evening and sound checks for 4th Street jazz are cranking up just up the street from the Tessera Gallery. I'm ducking into the cool gallery space to check out a show of dramatic paintings by Tom Block.

Each of the paintings shows a real-life human being who has suffered extreme human rights violations. Block donates one half of the proceeds from the show's art sales to Amnesty International.

Thickly painted expressionist portraits of the survivors line the white gallery walls. Grim reality is balanced by rich color giving the work emotional vibrancy. Each work is accompanied by a brief written description of the travails of these victims. Many have overcome their personal anguishes to become champions for justice.

One such example is that of Wei JingSheng of China. Jailed for 18 years for questioning the Chinese Communist Party, Wei, now in exile, continues to fight for democracy. In the foreground a restless hand holds a cigarette that twirls smoke upwards. In the set of this thinking man's jaw and the hot colors of the piece overall Block captures the fighting spirit of this stubborn battler against oppression.

Nigerian Sowore Omoyele's reaction to seeing his family raped by military police at age 10 was to become an outspoken activist for change. Block's portrayal of Omoyele reminds me of the art of Chaim Soutine, who was also persecuted as a Jew during the German invasion of France. Omoyele, who has been arrested many times, is captured by Block as a warrior against oppression.

One of the more heartbreaking images is of 12 year old Manoj Singh from India. Manoj Singh is a painting of anguish that brings to mind Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. The crying boy seems to want to crawl inside of himself as a strong hand roughly pulls him away by the arm. Manoj was arrested for stealing a purse. Inexplicably, Indian police brutally killed his father who had escorted him to the station. Manoj was severely beaten. There is anguish in this painting and story that is truly painful to observe.

The art of Van Gogh comes to mind in Block's painting called *Albanian Refugee*. An old woman, her face crumpled in grief, is all I need to see to understand the hurt this displacement caused. Against a hot yellow background and wearing a blue head covering, the woman's intense emotional expression tells the tale of physical and emotional hardship. More than a million ethnic Albanians were forced from Kosovo by Serbian troops in 1999.

United States policy regarding the death penalty is taken to task in *Shaka Sankofa* (Gary Graham). The artist paints Sankofa close up against a chain link fence. In his wide staring eyes it is easy to see the fear and desperation of the young man who was executed on scant evidence by the Texas Court under then governor George W. Bush.

Block paints *The Dalai Lama* in reds and deep yellows as a man that sees a troublesome truth. Nonetheless, the spiritual leader radiates inner peace due to the courage of his convictions. As in most of these oil paintings the layers of thickly applied pigment and jewel-like color give a sense of psychological depth to the images.

Besides being a strong, expressive painter, Tom Block is also a writer and philosopher who working for change and justice in a grassroots manner. So hats off to Block, Amnesty International and Tessera Gallery for this important show lauded by senators, Amnesty International officials, and even some of the victims of abuses that continue to fight on.

Keith Buckner, Greensboro, NC, July, 2005