

Tom Block's "Cousins" Mixes Abstraction, Philosophy

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A group of small acrylic paintings on paper, combining areas of color, line drawings and bits of text, is on view at Space 7:10. Located inside the Kefa Café on Bonifant Street in downtown Silver Spring, this new art venue is just the sort of place where artist Tom Block prefers to exhibit his provocative work. What he likes about such places is the opportunity to use the "diversity of a locale as an asset by emphasizing not only the different cultures in the community, but how they positively interrelate."

The Silver Spring-based multimedia artist has spent the past few years involved in various art projects with activist themes. As a painter, he is probably best known for his series of large works expressing such themes as "Amnesty International." Painted in a colorfully abstract style -- a not always successful mixture of Arshile Gorky and Marc Chagall -- they are often more interesting for the ideas they express than for their formal artistic value. The little paintings in the series called "Cousins" are very different stylistically, although they, too, are about ideas -- big concepts like commentary on the spiritual state of the world in which we live -- expressed in tiny format.

Block, who also has published many scholarly articles, a number of them comparing Sufi Muslim and Jewish mystical thinking, makes every effort to fuse his passion for scholarly research with his art making. He has spent long hours reading and comparing the writings of mystics and philosophers of all the world's major religious traditions, from ancient to modern times, to find their common ground. The works on view at Space 7:10 specifically address these interests, combining selected text and abstract imagery to underline these similarities. Block's title posits a kind of family relation among the world's religious thinkers; they are, in effect, spiritual "cousins."

Block's unassuming abstract paintings don't attempt to illustrate the aphorisms written on them. Indeed, the very fact that the abstract imagery used here -- almost Asian in its simplicity -- is so alike whether accompanying the words of a Sufi master or Thomas Merton, seems to underline his thematic point. The typography tends to work with the abstract designs, which compositionally support the words.

The paintings in the Silver Spring exhibit are a sampling from the larger series "The Tempe Project: Cousins," totaling more than 50 works, which Block made in preparation for an outdoor installation in Tempe, Ariz. For the "The Tempe Project," the artist made a group of poster-sized digital prints of the small format works. Twelve have been installed in two bus shelters (six in each) in two different parts of Tempe. The works are intended to invade a public space usually filled with advertisements, unreadable maps or bus schedules. They are meant to shake up the sameness of ordinary experience, to provide the numbed commuter a direct encounter with ancient and modern spiritual wisdom in an unexpected context. By placing these visually spare but attractive paintings bearing the words of thinkers as diverse as Ghandi, Muhammad, Lao Tzu and Rabbi Levi Yitzhak in places where people of very different cultural backgrounds and economic classes find themselves, Block hopes to intervene against their complacency and indifference, even, perhaps, against their prejudices and divisions. The installation began June 30 and will remain in place until next June.

While the works at Kefa may seem quite modest (as are their prices!), the combination of text and spare image has a good and long pedigree in modern art, notably going back to Surrealists like René Magritte and Joan Miró in 1920s Paris. An often reproduced 1925 painting by Miró features the word "Photo" in the upper left corner, while a small patch of blue in the lower right floats over the words "this is the color of my dreams" in French. The otherwise blank canvas leaves a lot of room for the viewer to fill in the meaning. Conceptually interactive, works such as these demand viewer participation and involvement. Block has taken the same artistic premise and used it with a distinct purpose, leaving a lot of room for contemplation by the viewer -- but with direction. Indeed, although each work in the café space stands on its own, it is together with the others that the unifying significance emerges most clearly -- perhaps an unexpected intervention into your thoughts and feelings whilst eating your gelato on a warm summer's afternoon.

Claudia Rousseau, Silver Spring, MD, August 31, 2005