

Wednesday, April 29, 2009

## Silver Spring artist crafts portraits of courage

### Paintings capture the faces of those who took a stand against human-rights abuses

by Jeremy Arias | Staff Writer

A dazzling array of colors sprang out from the canvasses lining the walls of the Pyramid Atlantic Arts Center in downtown Silver Spring on Saturday evening. Bright, vibrant reds and oranges mingled to create deeply textured, haunting portraits of human rights activists from all over the world.

More than 20 portraits were featured at the exhibit displaying the work of Silver Spring resident and artist Tom Block. Block has completed more than 100 portraits of more than 45 human rights activists as part of the Human Rights Painting Project he founded in 2002 with Amnesty International, a nonprofit human-rights watch group.

"I wanted my art to have social relevance," Block said. "It's been a [productive] experience. I've learned a lot about how to make art outside of the gallery setting ... making art that has a meaning."

Block, who gives 50 percent of each portrait he sells to Amnesty, has raised just over \$15,000 so far for the nonprofit. Aside from the financial support he is able to give Amnesty, one of the best parts of his work is getting to meet some of his subjects in person, Block said.

Jose Gallardo, a former brigadier general in the Mexican army who spent eight years in jail for publishing an essay describing human rights abuses in the army, met Block for the first time Saturday. Gallardo spoke at length with Block and others about his experiences.

"I want to thank Tom, who, through his paintbrush, captures and expresses what Amnesty International is fighting for," Gallardo said through a Spanish translator. "As human rights activists, many times we don't know each other [personally], but we can feel each other in our hearts."

Block has painted several portraits of Gallardo, including a prominent portrait of the general gazing out from behind a set of bars. That piece was on sale at the event for \$6,000.

Despite the dark nature of his subject matter, which includes torture and death, Block said he uses bright colors to express the other side of each portrait.

"There is within these peoples' souls a tremendous amount of beauty and [conviction] that they can actually make a difference," he said in a telephone interview following the event. "... As well as the horror of what they run into along the way."

Washington, D.C., resident and art enthusiast Laurie Duncan admired Block's works as she strolled around the small gallery, pointing out the detail hidden in the broad strokes of each face.

"It's very powerful, it's interesting because it's so bold," she said, eyeing a portrait of Yan Xhengxue, a Chinese artist who was jailed and beaten for protesting his treatment by corrupt police officers. "You first look at it and all you see is the color, then you start to see the details and the subjects. They're really very personal."

Sean Gallagher, of Takoma Park, commented on the loose style Block used to paint his subjects.

"It's really fun to imagine just how he applied the paint, you know?" he said, examining a portrait of Guatemalan columnist Irma Flaquer, who disappeared in 1980 after criticizing the government. "He's very colorful."