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Exhibit explores urban tales and spiritual journeys

On View | Claudia Rousseau

The work of Montgomery County artists Tom Block and Michael Enn Sirvet is at the District's Hamiltonian Gallery as part of the fifth of its series of exhibits of Hamiltonian Fellowship winners, along with paintings by their "mentor artist" Lisa Montag Brotman of Bethesda.

Wrapping around the gallery's back walls are the 25 mixed media panels comprising Block's "Conference of the Birds." Each panel is 6 feet high, and together they measure 62.5 feet wide. Thus, Block's work, which, at these dimensions, becomes a kind of wall itself, fills the viewer's visual field with what at first may appear to be a chaotic jumble of brightly colored graffiti-like marks. In fact, it is a very carefully orchestrated series of images echoing the allegorical quest of 30 birds in the spiritual epic of the same name written by the Persian Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar in 1177.

Block has become something of a comparative theologian in the past decade or so, publishing scholarly articles on the relationship between Sufism and Jewish mysticism. He has delved extensively into Sufi thinking about the path to enlightenment, the obstacles along the way and its equivocal end where "drunk on God," the pilgrim finds that God is within. The idea of God within is an idea intrinsic to interpretations of Sufism dating back to the roots of Islam.

What Block has done here is reinterpret the poem in a pictorial sequence taking place in the urban setting, and featuring the artist. Executed on canvas, it exhibits an amazing density of painted and pasted elements, paper sketches in ink and pencil, and acrylic, gold and silver paint. These are layered, drawn and re-drawn. Sometimes, collaged elements are torn and reworked. Handwritten text, with references to everything from current events to the Kabbalah, appears everywhere, requiring the viewer to get up close to and get lost in the surface.

The translation of the spiritual journey, with its didactic stations, into contemporary street imagery takes it out of the exclusive religious context of its source and universalizes it. Thus, at the end (the work "reads" like a scroll from left to right), hands point back the other way — back into the world. For Block, the aim of classical mystical enlightenment is wrong. For him, rather than sit in perfect contemplation, the goal of knowledge is action. The meaning here is about returning to the world with the benefit of wisdom gained.

The transition from innocence to knowledge, if not enlightenment, is the theme of many of Brotman's paintings. In this exhibit, the best of them date from the early to mid-1990s when she painted images from photos of her adolescent daughters in leotards, set against suggestive backgrounds, to connote the budding of desire and self-consciousness.

Much of Sirvet's sculpture has taken on an increasingly painterly aesthetic by the use of colored elements of various kinds. A number of pieces include colored Plexiglas which the artist, a structural engineer, has discovered how to bend and bolt together with metal components of varied origins. Beyond his former use of aluminum, brass, copper and wood, Sirvet is also using rusted steel from found objects like junked kitchen cabinets that often retain their original painted colors. "Panopticon?," a nearly 8-foot tower form, is made of all these materials, its multicolor surface luring the viewer to examine its composition. Ironically, a "panopticon" is a tower permitting observation of a whole class of people, whether literally as in a prison (its first use), or virtually, as on the Internet. The interaction between observer and object is certainly among Sirvet's aims here.

A number of wall reliefs are in this exhibit, which are even more strikingly painterly, even evoking landscape. "My Blue Heaven" contains three distinct registers of smallish pieces: torch-cut rusted steel on the bottom, aluminum and copper plate in the center, and mechanically-cut blue Lucite on top, held together with stainless and alloy steel bolts. Unlike the impeccable precision and measured progress of an earlier work like "Birch Wall" (2003), also in this exhibit, "My Blue Heaven" displays a more intuitive approach, something more personally expressive of a longing for the sky, or the perfect life suggested in the old song of that name.

"Metroscape" is another wall piece in a series Sirvet calls his "metal quilts" because they are pieced together. This work, which the artist describes as having the "energy of a dense, evolving city," is made of "metals, wood and plastic; materials of a city." It makes a nice comparison with Block's walls, telling urban tales from a different vantagepoint. Still, I am drawn to the elegance of the more "engineered" pieces like "Ming's Flame" and "Crystalline Pod," with their flowing tails and sense of cometlike motion. The exquisite technique of a work like "What the Shifting Sands Reveal," another tower form in aluminum and brass, conveys a natural sense of growth or evolution. Rising from the brass bottom, this round tower begins with squared aluminum parts carefully linked together. Near the top, the form becomes irregular and lacelike, with holes cut into the metal suggesting a metaphor of a tree canopy, or perhaps clouds; the culmination is satisfying formally but subjectively provocative. As a person who loves the outdoors as much as the city, Sirvet asks questions with his work about the connection between the natural and the manmade, about human existence and our place in nature.