

Wednesday, May 6, 2009

Taking a stand

Silver Spring artist highlights the struggle for human rights

by Karen Schafer | Staff Writer

Tom Block once suffered what he likes to call the "ultimate humiliation."

Just shy of his 30th birthday, the Vassar College alumnus was waiting tables in Boston when a college buddy sat in his section. As Block served and his customer supped, the former English major learned that his friend was working in finance, "probably making well over \$100,000 a year." If that wasn't enough to make a grown man green, said friend was accompanied by a "beautiful woman and drinking good wine."

Although Block's acquaintance attempted to assure him that his life wasn't so great, he wasn't convinced.

Fast forward a few decades, and Block is no longer waiting tables. He also hasn't become one of those guys "Vassar funnels down to Wall Street," he proclaims. Instead, Block is an artist, human-rights activist, writer and, most afternoons, stay-at-home papa to his two daughters.

The Silver Spring resident isn't just any old painter hauling his easel out to capture another glorious Potomac River sunset. Rather, he insists on making art that has social relevance.

"I am an activist first and an artist second," he says.

His expressionist style — think Willem de Kooning and Francis Bacon — gives a raw intensity to his subjects.

And while Block has become known for his public art murals in Takoma Park, his Human Rights Painting Project portrait series gets the most buzz. Seventeen portraits of human-rights victims, along with each subject's individual story, are on view through July 22 at the Visions Exhibition Space in the Bethesda North Marriott Hotel and Conference Center.

Inaugurated in 2002, the portrait series has grown exponentially, and Block intends to continue creating the paintings for the rest of his life. Now made up of some 100 works, it has been shown in some 30 venues in the U.S. and Europe. From the onset, the artist has given from 30 to 50 percent of his profits to Amnesty International. To date, \$15,000 has been raised.

Block searches for subjects from around the globe, but isn't afraid to point his paintbrush at the United States. While he plays it safe with a dramatic depiction of the long-suffering Sojourner Truth, he also painted Yudaya Nanyonga, who at age 19 fled Uganda for the U.S., where she was incarcerated in a maximum-security prison for two years. This isn't unusual; asylum seekers are frequently sent to federal prison when detentions centers become over-crowded. When choosing his subjects, Block insists that "no one is too controversial."

Amnesty International Mid-Atlantic Executive Director Folabi Olagbaju calls this collaboration "unique. I don't know of many other artists doing this. We are delighted about it."

Upon seeing the show, Olagbaju was "blown away. It is not always uplifting, but it brings out the individual humanity. The work is inventive and colorful, telling the stories of each individual."

Block has paid a price — albeit just barely — for aligning himself with Amnesty International. Two years ago, a lone Frederick County Commissioner, angry at Amnesty International for calling the Guantanamo Bay

prison the "gulag of our time" had Block's artwork banned from a Frederick County library. In the end, Hood College showed the work.

Susie Leong, who directs the Public Arts Trust on behalf of the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County and organized the Visions show, admits exhibiting a human rights activist's art within the Marriott organization is "unusual." She hopes Marriott's management will understand the work, since it's designed to be "in your face."

Block says his ultimate goals are to "highlight the struggle for human rights the world over — and the important work Amnesty International does. Using a contemporary artistic voice, I interpret different aspects of the struggle for human rights, emphasizing the stories that bring it to life. "

In addition to the human rights portraits, the artist has explored the complex relationship between Jews and Muslims and is currently finishing a book on the relationship between Muslim and Jewish mystics. Block, who is Jewish, will lecture on the subject in Cairo next month.

Exactly how this prep school product — he attended the District's Georgetown Day School — turned into both a humanitarian and an artist who sends his daughter to public school and lives in south Silver Spring baffles the artist himself.

"It must be genetic," he jokes.

Figuring out his activist origins may not be so easy to trace, but Block became an artist at age 26 when he picked up his first charcoal pencil and put it to paper in a class at the Boston Museum of Art.

Of course, Block's parents worried he was turning into a "dilettante," especially after he gave up a career as a freelance writer for national newspapers and became a waiter to support his art. Their doubts may have been justified until Block's chance encounter with his former classmate. And, as luck would have it, this floundering 20-something decided to use the "seed money" his grandparents gave him to buy a house for European adventure.

"They've never given me any money since," he laughs.

Block met a Moroccan woman on a train and "followed her to Spain," he says. There he painted, exhibited and sold his work. At first, he created mostly bold abstractions that his European costumers lovingly referred to as "loud, obnoxious and obviously American."

By the mid-1990s and back in the U.S. — minus the Moroccan lady friend — Block became progressively more outraged by the social inequities rampant throughout the world. Rather than simply rant around the dinner table, Block took action.

"Tom's passion for painting and using his message to bring people [and their stories] to life is truly important," notes Joseph Monteville of the Abrahamic Family Reunion in McLean, Va., an organization offering ways to use psychological and spiritual approaches in reconciling conflicts among Jews, Christians and Muslims in the United States.

Monteville compares Block's social ethics to the biblical Abraham.

With all this effusive praise, Block is nonplussed, saying most people wouldn't know that he "can put three coherent words together."

When it comes to the depressing world of human rights, Block knows a little laughter goes a long way.

Tom Block's "Human Rights Painting Project" is on view through July 22 at the Visions Exhibition Space, Bethesda North Hotel and Conference Center, 5710 Marinelli Road, North Bethesda. An opening reception is planned for 3 to 5 p.m. Saturday.