



Transforming anguish into beauty at Concordia College

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If you see only one exhibit this season, let it be "Cities of Peace: Transforming Anguish Into Beauty," at Concordia College's OSilas Gallery in Bronxville through Dec. 14. It's an unusual show, at once sad and uplifting and ultimately transcendent in both its loveliness and its themes. It's certainly one of the most haunting exhibits to be presented here in recent years.

"Cities of Peace" memorializes nine cities that have known great tragedy in their respective histories but have nonetheless endured - Baghdad, Beijing, Hiroshima, Jerusalem, Kabul, Lhasa, Monrovia, New York and Sarajevo.

The cities are recalled in nine shimmering illuminated canvases created over the last three years by artist and scholar Ellen Frank, working with interns from around the world. Frank is the founder of the 2-year-old Ellen Frank Illumination Arts Foundation in East Hampton, N.Y., a not-for-profit organization dedicated to revitalizing the ancient tradition of illumination as well as fostering peace and justice.

"Technically, it's challenging," says Serdar Arat, director of the OSilas Gallery. "What happens, for instance, when you use gold leaf to illustrate a small book? It's OK. But to use gold and gold leaf on a large canvas is another matter."

The successful blend of various metals with such traditional painting media as watercolor and egg tempera has yielded a scintillating art that at first glance appears to be something of an abstraction. The roughly 5 1/2 -foot-by-8 1/2 -foot tribute to Monrovia - capital of the African country of Liberia, which has known its share of civil strife since it was colonized by freed American slaves in 1822 - looks like the distillation of a silvery, deep-blue night sky.

It's only when you get up close to the work and read the accompanying text that the title "Monrovia: In Constellation" reveals itself fully, for the painting - consisting of palladium leaf, moon gold and watercolor on Belgian linen - recreates the pattern of stars that shone down on Liberia the night of July 26, 1847, the date the republic was founded.

There's a sense of destiny about Monrovia, the painting and the city, which was named for James Monroe and



Tania Savayan/The Journal News

OSilas Gallery Director Serdar Arat with "Lhasa: 10 Directions," which is part of the exhibit "Cities of Peace: Transforming Anguish into Beauty" at Concordia College in Bronxville.

If you go

What: "Cities of Peace: Transforming Anguish Into Beauty"

Where: Concordia College's OSilas Gallery, 171 White Plains Road in Bronxville

When: Through Dec. 14. Hours are 11:30 a.m.-7:30 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays; noon-5 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2-5 p.m. Sundays

Admission: Free

Information: 914-337-9300, www.osilasgallery.org

remains the only non-American capital named for a U.S. president.

The use of a constellation that blessed Liberia's birth typifies "Cities of Peace." Some of the works may look like abstract paintings from a distance, but they are chock-full of maps, street grids, representative symbols and, above all, language - in keeping, Arat says, with the notion that illumination has traditionally illustrated texts.

The dizzying vision of New York's dazzling skyline is accompanied by the phrase "This is my city!" in numerous tongues, as befits the polyglot. The golden rooftops and dancing figures of Kabul are embellished with the words of the 17th-century Persian poet Mirza Muhammad Ali-Sa'ib: "I sing bright praises to her colorful tulips. The beauty of her trees makes me blush."

Yet while the works incorporate texts and symbols - which the OSilas Gallery supplements with archival photographs and other material - they're never dogmatic.

And while the paintings are about cities that have suffered, they reference the specific tragedies only obliquely, if at all, Arat says. "What they do not do is comment on religion, politics or history. ... They're not taking sides. They're not for any political viewpoint. They're just for peace."

Perhaps the reason they do not comment on the particular events that led to their unique tragedies is that we supply the subtext for them, and the sorrow as well. It is impossible to see a work called "Hiroshima: Winter Bloom," and not think of the devastation that resulted from the American atomic attack of Aug. 6, 1945, which killed about 70,000 people outright and destroyed almost 70 percent of the city's buildings. The very subtitle, "winter bloom," conjures a mushroom cloud, although it actually refers to the canvas' stunning array of plum blossoms.

"Cities become great because of their commerce," Arat says. It is that very greatness that makes them not only beacons for artists and entrepreneurs but targets for conquerors and terrorists.

In "Hiroshima: Winter Bloom," however, the plum blossoms overlay a photograph of Hiroshima taken by American reconnaissance in April 1945: Natural beauty trumps man-made might.

"I think the works say, 'This is what we destroyed. And what we destroyed is so fragile,'" Arat says. "But these paintings also give you a place to revive your minds and souls. They give you hope. They let you dream."

<http://www.lohud.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071202/ENTERTAINMENT/712020306/1031/LIFESTYLE01>