Sandow Birk's *American Qur'an*: Scenes of contemporary American life

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American Qur'an *by Sandow Birk at P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York City, September 7-October 12, 2013*

The latest installment of Los Angeles-based artist Sandow Birk's ongoing project *American Qur'an* at P.P.O.W. Gallery in New York City adds twelve *suras* (chapters) to what, when finished, will be a complete English transcription of the Muslim sacred text illustrated with scenes of contemporary American life. The project will eventually run to 400 pages and be published as a book in 2014.

Each chapter is written out in English translation (only the original Arabic text is considered sacred by devout Muslims) in a graffiti-inspired script that simultaneously suggests Arabic calligraphy. Maintaining the format of Persian illustrated manuscripts with wide borders, decorative frames and medallions, the *suras* are illustrated with scenes that run the gamut from the mundane to the catastrophic.

People boarding a plane, a military cemetery, US soldiers patrolling the streets of an Iraqi city, immigrants hiding from border police, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina—these are not scenes which one often encounters in art galleries, at least not placed together in such an encyclopedic fashion. The connection between text and image is frequently pointed. The verse excoriating the impious for failing to give to the needy, for example, is illustrated by a scene of a homeless man on a New York street, or another extolling the earth's abundance is juxtaposed to an American supermarket.

In some cases, the association between a given text and Birk's choice of images is less obvious. What is the connection, for instance, between the story of Moses encountering the burning bush and a woman being questioned by police at a crime scene? Or between a construction worker standing by a backhoe and the warning that "those who deny our signs are deaf and dumb," except perhaps that the worker wears headphones and is absorbed by his mobile phone?

Birk began the project in 2004 in response to what he felt was a general misconception about Islam promoted by the American media. The artist—who does not have any religious affiliation—says that his goal was to make the Qur'an more familiar and accessible to non-Muslim viewers. Birk had already travelled extensively in Muslim countries when the United States launched its series of wars on Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of the "war on terror."

"All the American media debate about whether or not Islam was terrorism was completely at odds with my experiences in these places, so I decided to learn what the Qur'an actually was," Birk told the *World Socialist Web Site* .

His decade-long research into both the content and aesthetic traditions of the Qur'an has taken him to the Institut du Monde Arab in Morocco, the Cité International des Artes in Paris, the Museu Calouste Gulbenkian in Lisbon and the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, which houses one of the largest collections of hand-illuminated Qur'ans in the world.

Birk's project gives viewers, many of whom may have never read the Qur'an before, a chance to do so. But perhaps more important is what Birk shows of American life. His highly detailed, slightly cartoonish images owe a good deal to the tradition of illustration that has at its best produced indelible images. Francisco de Goya, Thomas Nast, Honoré Daumier and Toulouse Lautrec were considered illustrators at least in portions of their work. In the 20th century, great illustrators have often been among the more incisive social critics.

Birk readily acknowledges these antecedents. However, his work inhabits an ambiguous place between high-end gallery artwork and popularly oriented public art projects. Beginning in the 1990s, with the aim of becoming a modern-day history painter, he has depicted scenes of gang battles in Los Angeles, the plight of US veterans, the 1969 Stonewall riots for gay civil rights in New York City and other scenes of social unrest and struggle. *In Smog and Thunder: The Great War of the Californias* (1996), the artist chronicled an imaginary conflict between Los Angeles and San Francisco in 120 paintings and other works, including a video

documentary inspired by Ken Burns's "The Civil War." This fictional history of a war between the two cities is too hit-or-miss to be deeply insightful, but the scenes of civil strife and urban warfare are certainly suggestive.

Birk frequently models contemporary scenes on artwork from the past, with greater or lesser success. For instance, the death of a gang leader in his Chevrolet Impala lifts its composition directly from neo-classical painter Jacques-Louis David's famous painting of the murdered French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat.

While the desire to view things with and from a historical perspective is welcome, Birk's early work tends to suffer from a superficial understanding of the social and historical context in which the referenced artwork was produced and sometimes makes dubious connections to events in the present.

However, Birk's more recent efforts, *Prisonation* (2001), a series of landscape paintings and prints of California's thirty-three prisons done in the tradition of 19th century paintings of the American West, and *Death in America* (2005), a set of ten etchings of the leading causes of death in America, are more successful in balancing a historical source with a contemporary subject to create visually interesting images in their own right.

This is most particularly true of a set of fifteen large-scale woodblock prints, *The Depravities of War* (2007), published by HuiPress in Hawaii with the collaboration of several other artists, including Masterprinter Paul Mullowney.

Taking a cue from Jacques Callot's "The Miseries of War" in the early 17th century, which in turn were the inspiration for Goya's "The Disasters of War" in the early 19th century, Birk's prints chronicle the crimes of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq with an acuteness that often finds expression in telling details: a US military recruitment table adorned with a sign that says "Enlist Army: Free college"; Iraqis gesturing to a dog not to give their hiding place away to American soldiers; and most poignantly perhaps, a disabled vet returning to his dilapidated, inner-city apartment complex.

Indeed, prints are often Birk's strongest work. At the P.P.O.W. gallery, the large scale *"Monument to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights"* is impressive not only in terms of size (48 x 63 inches), but in execution. Suggesting both the Vendome Column (1806-10, celebrating Napoleon's military victories), knocked down under the direction of artist Gustave Courbet during the Paris Commune in 1871, and Vladimir Tatlin's " *Monument to the Third International* " (1919-1920), Birk's column—topped with the Universal movie studio logo—is inscribed with the articles of the Geneva Convention guaranteeing human rights. It leans precipitously to the side, however, held up only by virtue of scaffolding arising from a vast international slum, while it is guarded by barbed wire and security cameras and to the left rise the gleaming towers of a wealthy megalopolis.

In any event, Birk's work is perhaps less noteworthy at this point for its politics than it is for its feel for the texture of everyday life. Whether it is a woman on a cellphone in front of a discount store on a busy city street; an ominous looking "operating" table; duck hunters firing at dawn or the tracks in the snow made by a car parked in front of a house in the winter twilight, the *American Quran* presents an unusually concrete survey of life in 21st century America.

Questions inevitably arise in regard to Birk's goal of making the Qur'an accessible. One certainly sympathizes with his hostility to the anti-Muslim propaganda campaign, essentially launched to justify military interventions in the energy-rich region. A turn toward Islam may be the response of many in the Middle East and elsewhere to the depredations of imperialism, and socialists defend the right of Muslims in the West to dress and worship as they choose. However, there is no reason to extend historical-cultural sensitivity and opposition to racism into an uncritical attitude toward any religion or institution or to consider the present state of religious belief, for example, to be a permanent feature of life. A great deal depends on the growth of working class opposition in Europe and North America to the present order, including its brutal wars.

Still, by virtue of its format—text boxes partially or in some cases almost entirely blocking the scene behind—the *American Quran* creates a peculiar process of looking which may be of greater value than its more limited aesthetic qualities or moral message. One finds oneself trying to peer around the text to better see what is going on, which in turn creates a sense of inquiry into and frustration with our partial grasp of a given scene's significance. This effort to uncover what is going on under the surface of contemporary American life may have far-reaching implications in the present situation.

Selections from "American Qur'an" are also on view at Winter Center Gallery, Millersville University, Pennsylvania: Sept. 5 - Nov. 9, 2013; as well as "And the WORD is..." at Towson University, Baltimore, Maryland: Sept. 12 - Dec. 7, 2013

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