

Sandow Birk

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Sandow Birk's Koran Project Continues His Ambitious, Controversy-Courting Art Career

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Photo by Shane Lopes

If Sandow Birk hadn't been surfing in Ireland, he might never have stumbled across the trove of hand-illustrated Korans inside Dublin's famed Chester Beatty library. It was 2005, and Birk, who was raised in Seal Beach and remains one of a handful of nationally known contemporary artists from Orange County, already had plans for the first fully illustrated Koran specifically meant for an American audience. Yet he knew he could never hope to match the calligraphy he'd seen in classical Islamic art. Meanwhile,

everyone he knew (with the exception of his wife, fellow artist Elyse Pignolet Birk) had told him he was nuts for even considering the idea of illustrating an entire Koran.

"Peoples' heads would explode when I asked them about it," Birk recalls over a fish-sandwich-and-beer lunch in downtown Long Beach, where Birk and his wife have been raising their family for the past several years. But after seeing the collection in Dublin, Birk changed his mind. "They had cases and cases of Korans going back 1,000 years," Birk recalls. "They were all hand-painted, and there were all these mistakes, and parts were erased. Suddenly, they went from seeming like this perfect, jeweled thing to something made by a human being. I was like, 'I can do this.'"

Birk's interest in the Koran came from two sources. Traveling the world as an avid surfer—a sport that took him through war-torn El Salvador and Nicaragua during the 1980s—had meant that he'd spent extended periods of time in Muslim countries such as Morocco and Indonesia, as well as the Muslim-majority island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines. Then came 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Birk saw how Islam was being erroneously depicted in the U.S. media.

"A previous project I did a few years ago was all about the war in Iraq," he says. "I was really following the news every day, just paying attention to the American discourse about 9/11, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and listening to all this talk about 'Is Islam fundamentally at odds with the West? Is this a clash of cultures?'"

It was a perfect project for someone who loved to wade in and thumb his nose at the culture wars. After graduating from Los Alamitos High School in the early 1980s, Birk had taken an extended leave from a four-year program at the Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles. He drove from Orange County to Brazil, where he worked at a surfboard factory for three years, then studied art history in Paris. Upon returning to Los Angeles, he chafed at the tendency of serious artists to relocate to New York. Although most of the creative people he knew in LA worked for the film industry, Birk refused to abandon his passion for visual arts. "Painting used to be the movies of their time," he says. "You would stand in line to see a painting. When I came home from Europe, I wanted to make paintings like that, giant movie-screen paintings."

Birk's study of European romantic and social realist art informed his most famous work to date, *In Smog and Thunder: The Great War of the Californias*, his humorous take on the cultural rivalry between Los Angeles and the Bay Area, in which gang members waving "Free ATM" signs appear in the same romantic poses as the sans-culottes in a French revolutionary artwork. A San Francisco curator who liked his art had invited Birk to display his work, with the condition that he move north to familiarize himself with the scene. For a month, Birk crashed with a friend, surfing or skating in the mornings, painting in the afternoons, and bar-hopping at night. "Every time I would go in a bar, people would start trashing LA, saying it's so smoggy and phony," he recalls. "That's when I decided to do this project where LA would take over San Francisco and rule over it."

A few years later, after picking up an English-language copy of the Muslim holy text at a Long Beach bookstore, he began researching the Koran. "Every day, I learned something new," he says. "The Koran is different from the Bible, in that the Bible is basically a narrative from the beginning of the world through the life of Jesus, in sequence. [The Koran] is the voice of God speaking directly to you, and it assumes you've already read the Bible and you know the story of Noah and Jesus already."

One of the first things that Birk realized is that the *suras*, or chapters of the Koran, aren't arranged chronologically, as in the Old Testament, but rather from the longest to the shortest. Also, the titles of the *suras* don't necessarily reflect what each one is about, but instead are usually named after a word that appears in the first few lines, a verbal prompt that helps students of the book memorize the text. "Several chapters have these syllables at the beginning, and nobody knows what they are to this day," Birk adds.

As he began putting imagery to each *sura*, Birk sought specific, although not necessarily emblematic, passages of the text that he could illustrate in a way that would be relevant to an American audience. He wanted the illustrations to reflect all aspects of American life; thus, the artwork ranges from multiple images of Southern California—the Huntington Beach Pier, freeways, street scenes showing suburban sprawl and urban blight—to depictions of farmland, small-town America, even a remote hunting cabin in the far North Woods. Passages of the Koran dealing with warfare show American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, and references to the Great Flood and pending apocalypse are portrayed by the aftermath of tornadoes, earthquakes and hurricanes.

Some of the most compelling scenes Birk included in his work stretch over several panels. One eight-page spread involves a cycle-of-life story unfolding on the steps of a U.S. government federal building, among them a protest, a wedding, detectives investigating a nighttime murder scene, a burial and a group of teenage skateboarders using the spot to practice their ollie skills. In illustrating one *sura* that calls for women to cover their heads, Birk wondered where non-Muslim American women typically do the same and came up with the idea for a panel showing a woman whose head and face are protected by a heavy hat and scarf braving the fierce wind of a Chicago snowstorm.

Throughout the Koran, Birk noticed, the text repeatedly reminds the reader that the words are coming directly from heaven. "So a lot of my pictures are about messages coming down from the sky: satellites in outer space, newspaper-distribution centers, television talk shows, guys fixing telephone lines, a guy putting up a satellite dish on his roof," he says. "These are all ways we are sending messages around."

In July 2014, nine years after he began his work, Birk finally completed "American Qu'ran," his collection of more than 200 illustrated—or illuminated, to use the term Birk prefers—coffee-table-sized pages of the Koran. "My pictures are not of what the text is saying, but a metaphor for what the text is saying, so it's not illustrating it," Birk explains. "The idea of making a whole book all by yourself like a monk used to do in the Middle Ages that was interesting to me as an artist because it's something people don't do nowadays."

Given the inevitable controversy that would arise from a non-Muslim American artist seeking to interpret the Koran for a Western audience, Birk was nervous that his project would be attacked as sacrilege. But after he unveiled his first 60 pages at simultaneous gallery exhibits in San Francisco and Los Angeles, an event that was covered by *The New York Times*, he quickly found support among leading Islamic scholars. "In reality, there is nothing in the Koran that says you can't draw pictures," Birk says.

"My idea wasn't to get people upset, but to do something thought-provoking, and my project doesn't have any depictions of the prophet Muhammad in it," he adds. "The funny thing is that, although people are shocked by the idea, anyone who has ever seen the exhibit has never been upset by it. And anyone upset by it has never seen it."