

Sadow Birk

*American Muhammad: An Interview with Artist Sadow Birk – Wade Linebaugh*



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TAMMANY HALL, THE DIAL

Sadow Birk's new exhibition and book publication of his nearly decade-long project, *American Qur'an*, drew media attention last month including both praise and scattered condemnations. 'Merica sat down with Birk for an in-depth conversation about his project, Islamophobia, the relationship between the Qur'an and American culture, and the ways in which art might bridge that gap. This interview was conducted by assistant editor Wade Linebaugh.

*Both questions and answers have been edited for length and clarity.*

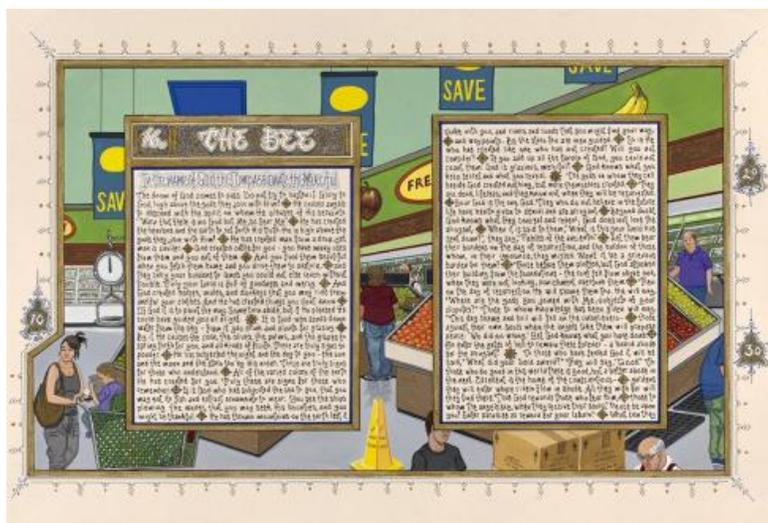
'Merica Magazine [MM]: Let's start by talking about process.

Sadow Birk [SB]: At the beginning of the project, which from its inception was to transcribe and illuminate the entire Holy Qur'an in English, I started by making a sort of template for the pages which was based on historical koranic manuscripts. I used the tradition of the large border margins, the border decorations, the boxes for the text, the colors of the text and chapter or *surah* headings, and the use of gold decorations within the text (called "palmettes") which mark the beginnings of each verse. I then went about working page by page, both following the template and then occasionally breaking it as well when it was needed for a particular image or for more visual interest.

Since the Qur'an was new to me and I was learning as I went, the way I would work was to begin by transcribing the text, which took a couple of days, and during that time I would consult footnotes, histories, look things up, maybe write to a scholar if I had questions about a passage, and also I would ponder the message of the text and how it might relate to my life as an American in the 21st Century. Hopefully during that time the text would suggest an image to me, and then I would paint the image around the text boxes. The images are all scenes of life in the United States today—actually a scene

from each of the 50 states is included—and each image is a metaphor for some passage in the text on that page, whether obvious or obtuse.

MM: What went into the process of selecting text and choosing the imagery for each illumination?



SB: The message of the text itself would suggest images to me. Some of the images are more obvious, such as the scenes of flooding in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina that accompany passages about Noah and the Great Flood. Then other images are more obscure. I'm very interested in the idea that the Bible and the Qur'an are about spirituality and the life beyond this life, yet when someone goes to a church or a mosque and hears about that spiritual life, then they go out and stop at the gas station and the ATM machine and supermarket, or goes to their cubicle at work in an office. All of the ideas of religion are going on inside your head while you do the most mundane things in life. So a lot of the images show the mundane.

MM: How important is the juxtaposition of text and image?

SB: It's everything, it's the crux of the project. The idea was that Americans are so unfamiliar with Qur'an that it's appalling. I'm not a religious person, but I make the argument that the Qur'an is probably the most important book in the world during the last 20 years, for better or for worse, based on everything from global events and wars to politics. And yet almost no Americans have any inkling of what is inside it. For the average American to not have any idea at all what the most important book in the world even says is just appalling, given that we are fighting wars in Islamic regions and [competing voices] are telling us that Islam is one thing or another.

So I set out to find out for myself rather than be told. And the truth is that the Qur'an is very familiar: it's the story of Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, Abraham and Isaac, Moses, Jesus and Mary, and on and on. And so the goal of my project was to make the Qur'an more accessible to Americans, to show it's not something

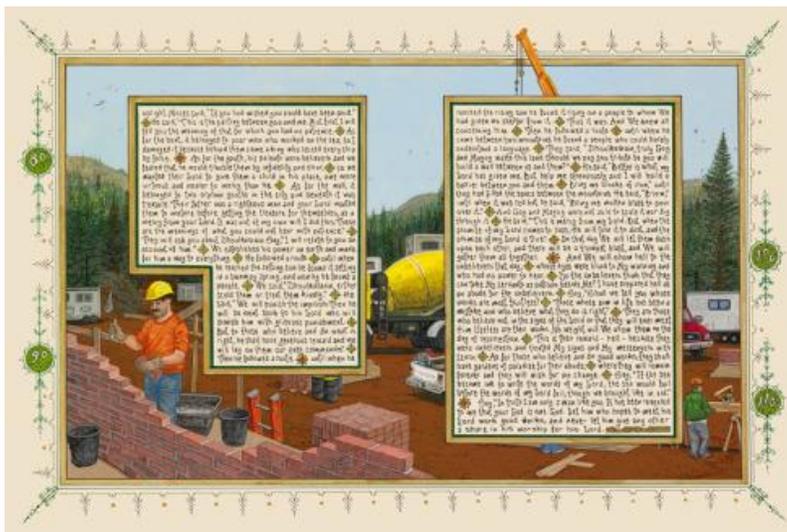
foreign and exotic but something that could relate to an American's everyday life, just as most Americans see the Bible.

After all, most Americans would say that this one ancient book from the Middle East is at the heart and soul of what it means to be an American. And that book is the Bible. So why would we expect another ancient book from the Middle East to be incredibly foreign and hard to comprehend? The answer is that it isn't.

MM: Can you speak to the Pan-American aspect of the work? It seems like representing a wide array of American experiences was important to you.

SB: Yes, but that's coming to the conclusion from the back way around. Initially I just wanted to learn and see for myself what the Qur'an was about. Eventually, my interest was in trying to understand what makes the Qur'an seem foreign as opposed to the Bible. They contain largely the same message and in reality the Qur'an is seen as a universal message by the majority of the world. So obviously Muslims—and 85% of Muslims do not live in the Middle East—live globally and relate to the message of the Qur'an globally, not as an Arab or Middle Eastern thing, but as a universal message, which is what the Qur'an says it is.

So by casting the message of the Qur'an in the streets of America, all of America, I hope that it takes the foreign out of the message and makes it accessible and relatable to Americans. And part of that was making it broadly American. So yes, showing all of the 50 states wasn't necessary but I thought it was interesting, to show the breadth and disparity and diversity of the United States and show how the message of the Qur'an could span that vastness.



MM: It sounds like the heart of the project is to recast Islam in a different light? Or to be more blunt: are you fighting Islamophobia?

SB: I didn't begin this project with any goal other than to learn about Islam for myself. But the more you know about Islam and the Qur'an, the less you see it as an alien text. So I simply hoped to bring the text to

Americans, so they had some idea of this globally important book. The more you know the better, obviously. And if you delve into the Qur'an you will find it familiar, and if you are familiar with something that might dispel irrational fears. So yes, in a roundabout way, I went from curiosity to hopefully fighting Islamophobia. It's just that Americans' ideas are so erroneous about Islam that it's sad and appalling, as an educated people.

MM: Two of the most striking images contrast Surah 44 A-B with an image of grieving New Yorkers on 9/11. Do you mind sharing a little about your decision to engage this difficult imagery?

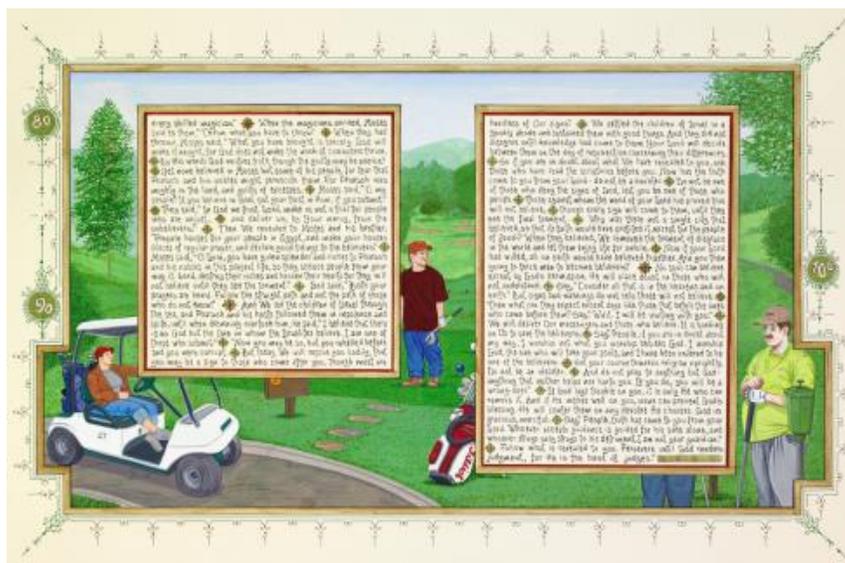


SB: I think every decent, sensible, intelligent, thoughtful, person realizes that the terrorist acts of September 11<sup>th</sup> were the works of fanatics with their own agendas and not representative of an entire, global religion of more than a billion people. However, the attacks of 9/11 were obviously a crucial moment in the relationship between Islam and the West, Islam and America, tragically and unfortunately. As an artist and as an American, I realize that the momentousness of that day in American consciousness can't be ignored in any project dealing with the relationship between American culture and the Qur'an. It had to be confronted and considered, and not doing so would seem disingenuous to me as a human being, as an artist, and to the project itself.

I'm not sure what all the details and specifics are in the endless arguing about specific verses of the Qur'an and the Bible and their condemnations or encouragement of extreme behaviors. But to me, this discussion had to be acknowledged and considered. After all, the events of Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> have led to wars in various countries, to an alteration of global history, to the deaths and displacement of countless people, and to this project itself, I suppose.

And the imagery that I've created shows the event from afar, as a tragedy unfolding for all people. The imagery itself is a metaphor—for calamity, for suffering, for despair, for tragedy—rather than a condemnation or an accusation.

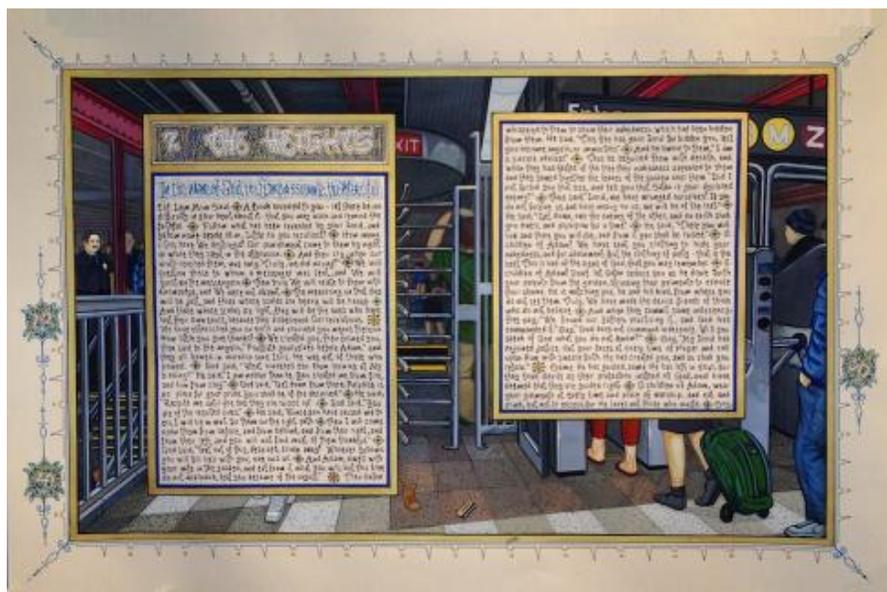
MM: On a lighter note concerning imagery, I was really taken by some of the more playful seeming scenes. We see, now and then, lifted trucks, beach scenes, graffiti artists at work, and a cookout. Alongside the imagery that confronts terror and tragedy, it's quite a contrast. What statement is made by commingling the pedestrian with the tragic and (even the triumphant) throughout the series?



SB: I'm glad you noticed that, because a lot of the scenes are really about the mundane aspects of American life: stopping at the ATM machine, the supermarket, working in a cubicle, getting your car repaired. One of the things that strikes me about religion in general is that it's all an internal, philosophical undertaking, this pondering of life beyond life. So when one goes to church or a mosque and hears a sermon in which the leader reads a bit of scripture, then talks about how one can put those ideas into your daily life, and then you go out into the world and on your way home you might have to pick up the laundry and buy some milk, but meanwhile these ideas of the afterlife and morality are buzzing inside your head. So my scenes often try to depict that, with people doing boring things superimposed with the monumental ideas of the message of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an is believed to be a message from God sent down to all humanity, and so another theme that runs through the images is that of messages being conveyed. There is an image of a guy installing a TV satellite dish, which is one way we receive messages from the sky, and there are scenes of telephone repairmen at work, TV talk shows, newspaper distribution and print shops, people talking on cell phones: all ways in which messages and ideas are disseminated.

And there are the tragic scenes of tornados and floods and storms and natural disasters as well, which often strike out of the blue and then move on, and which the Qur'an and Bible say can be read as signs of God's displeasure. So there are all of these things in the imagery, and I try to create both the complexity and boredom of American life.



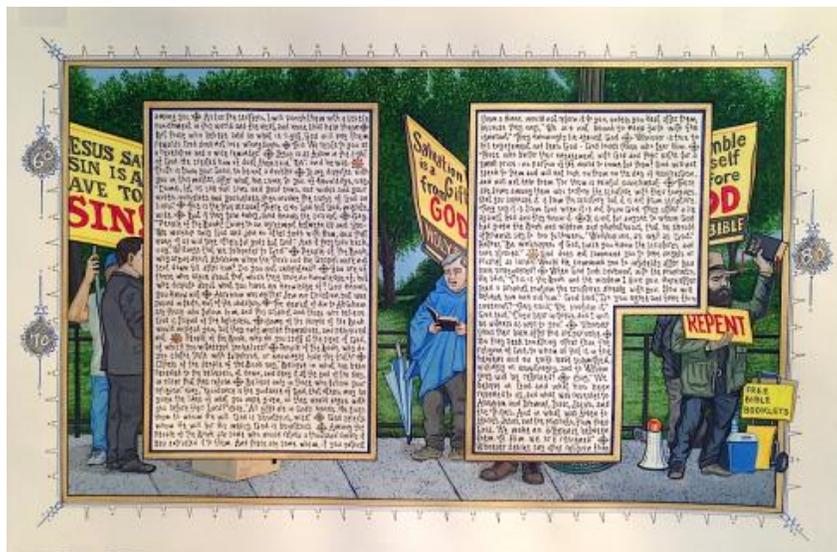
MM: How do you react to critiques like that of Mohammad Qureshi (as quoted in the Atlantic), who said something along the lines that Qur'an didn't need any help becoming accessible? Do you have anxiety about being perceived as appropriating a sacred text?

SB: Oh, I would agree with Mr. Qureshi, and I would say you can say the same thing about the Bible. These are messages and texts that have influenced the world for thousands of years and they obviously withstand the test of time and they are obviously hugely influential, independent of any pictures or imagery. There is no need to illustrate the scenes of the Bible nor the Qur'an, the message is there and it reaches people. That said, there is also no reason not to do so, and as an artist it's my occupation to make images, and then there is the Qur'anic tradition of the *tafsir*, which is one's interpretation of the text, which is what this project is doing. And just as Mr. Qureshi says that the Qur'an doesn't need my help in any way, then of course the message of the Qur'an will not be harmed in any way by my project. I would just hope that my project would make people interested enough to learn more.

MM: Have you experienced negative reactions from non-Muslims as a result of this project?

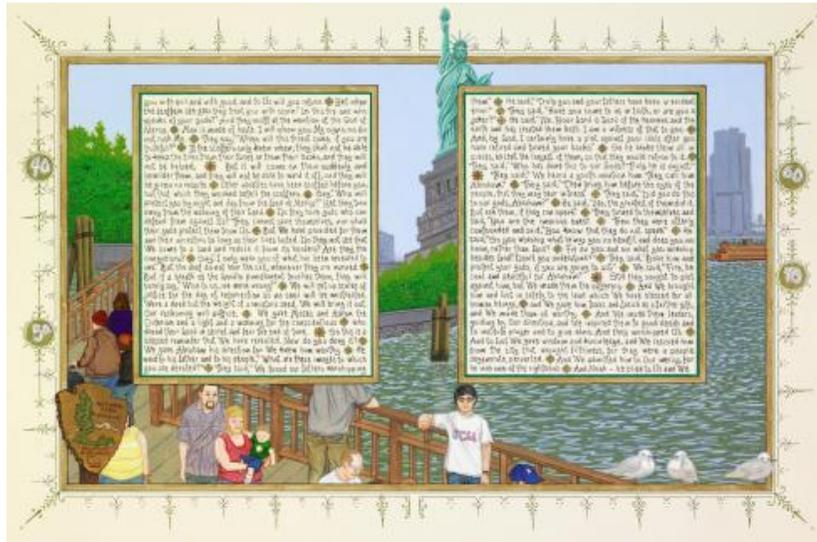
SB: One of the most asked questions about this project is: *Are people mad at you?* And I think this question goes to the heart of why I think this project is necessary, which is that the question itself is formed from American presumptions. After all, it [usually] implies that Muslims are going to upset, angry, violent, intolerant. Why do we not assume that the vast, vast majority of Muslims won't see this as an art project and take it or leave it, as Americans might? And I think it's because Americans confuse the idea of Muslim with a small region of the planet, forgetting that it's a global religion. Yet no American would say that the killing of homosexuals in Uganda by Christians is representative of all Christianity, or that the Bible must be an inherently violent book since the Lord's Resistance Army is forcing children to be soldiers and raping children in the name of setting up a state to be ruled by the Ten Commandments.

But you asked about reactions from non-Muslims. And yes, in fact, the only real angry response has been in the form of emails to my gallery in Los Angeles the first time I exhibited this project. They were emails from Christian groups saying that the show should be taken down because no one should be teaching Americans about the Qur'an and no one should be seeing the project.



MM: That negative feedback from Christians: how seriously do you take it? To what extent does that kind of reaction get to you? Even if it's predictable that some Christian groups might be knee-jerk reactionary, does it still frustrate you?

SB: It was early on in the project and I was momentarily taken by surprise. But then it seeped in that it was just bigotry and ignorance rearing up, so then it was just a big “sigh” of disappointment in my fellow countrymen. Again, Yes, I have hoped that the project would lead to at least a bit of opening of minds, or of bridging gaps, but on the other hand I’m not too optimistic. I do the best I can but the wall of ignorance is sturdy and tall. I was confronted at my current show at OCMA [The Orange County Museum of Art – go see it! —ed.] by a woman who told me, while standing in the galleries, that Islam was horrible and nothing in my show would change her mind. And she hadn’t even been inside for five minutes. It’s odd and unsettling to meet bigotry face to face. So yes, it’s frustrating.



Sandow Birk's *American Qur'an* is available in (impressively huge) book form at Amazon and his work can be seen online at his personal website and also in person at The Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach through February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016.