

Sandow Birk

WEEKLY

Know Your Street Art: Monumental Edition

By Jonathan Curiel

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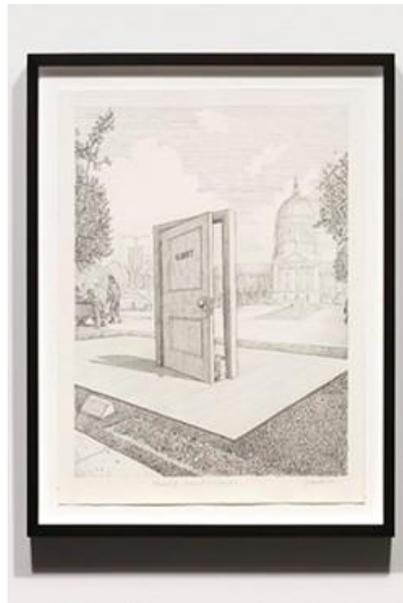
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In his ink and gouache artwork, *Proposal for a Monument to Christobal Colon*, Sandow Birk imagines a run-down, three-story tribute to the Spanish explorer known in the United States as Christopher Columbus. Blood drips from a giant globe atop Birk's urban edifice, which also features a Spanish crown, replicas of Columbus' ships, and a giant transcript of the letter that Columbus wrote in 1493 to Spain's monarchy, where he pronounced the natives "timid and full of terror" as well as "guileless and honest." Birk's monument — surrounded by drooping telephone wires, poorly constructed homes, factory smokestacks, and a McDonald's outlet — is a sad and (depending on your perspective) darkly funny homage to a man whose name is forever linked to European colonialism.



Proposal for a Monument to Harvey Milk, by Sandow Birk.

Birk has a history of engaging with serious subjects that other artists might be too nervous to address, and his new exhibit, "Imaginary Monuments," dovetails with the publication of his book *American Qur'an*, an illustration of the Muslim holy text with scenes of recent American history and culture, including the 9/11 terror attacks, RV camping, and race-car driving. *American Qur'an* took almost a decade to research and illustrate, and its artistic approach parallels that of "Imaginary Monuments."

"They're definitely connected," said Birk, who will sign copies of the book at Catherine Clark Gallery on Saturday, Nov. 21. "The connection is taking a text and making an image out of it, and still using the text in the image. I don't see them as illustrations. I see them as, well, there's no real word for it. It's important that it's legible, but it's not a picture or an illustration, really. It's a new thing. *American Qur'an* was so heavy, and so serious and so much research was involved. This project was fun because I can have an idea, think about it, read about it, learn, and start drawing — and from start to finish, [a piece] can take a month. And that's nice."

"Imaginary Monuments" has its origins in Birk's 2007 research fellowship at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., where he was inspired to create an art project that played with the way Americans consider this country's formal past.

If history is written by winners, then "Imaginary Monuments" pictorializes history's messy, complicated aftermath. For instance, *The Forgotten Garden of Treaties Never Ratified by the United States* imagines an urban tribute of statues for all the international agreements that the United States has — surprisingly, perhaps — never officially agreed to, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Criminal Court, the Employment Policy Convention, and the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. And Birk's first imagined monument was to the U.S. Constitution.

"I was at the Smithsonian for two months, and they kind of gave me a backstage pass so I could go to all the museums, and ask them to pull stuff out of the drawers, and it was great," Birk said in a phone interview from his Los Angeles home. "I did all the tourist things, and went to the archives, and what gradually started to strike me was that the whole tourist sense of D.C. was always about 1776 and Ben Franklin and the patriots, but at the same time, you're walking around the city, and inside those buildings people are making decisions that affect your lives right now. I started thinking about that, and I had seen the Constitution — I bought a tourist pamphlet that had the text, which I hadn't read since high school, if ever — and got the idea that a monument to the Constitution, with the text, was important. I imagined the Constitution and how it still affects our everyday activity."

"Imaginary Monuments" has a lighter side, too. *Proposal for a Monument to World Football* depicts an edifice reminiscent of Manhattan's Washington Square Arch but with soccer's original rules written across its surface. In this imagining, a gaggle of young people kick a ball. Birk included soccer in his series after reading an article about 100 documents that changed the world.

"It was great, because it had the obvious ones, like the Declaration of Independence, but it had other ones you didn't expect, like *The Communist Manifesto*, and it even had the rules of soccer," Birk says. "I think the rules of soccer were written down by four guys in a pub 150 years ago, and now 200 countries play soccer and it's the biggest game in the world."

"I'm a soccer fan," Birk adds. "And I like to have a little bit of humor in what I do."