

Sandow Birk

HYPERALLERGIC

A Qu'ran Transcribed by Hand Presents Parables of Contemporary American Life

By Abe Ahn
February 23, 2016

SF

248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

313 W 14th Street 2F
New York, NY
By appointment only

WEB

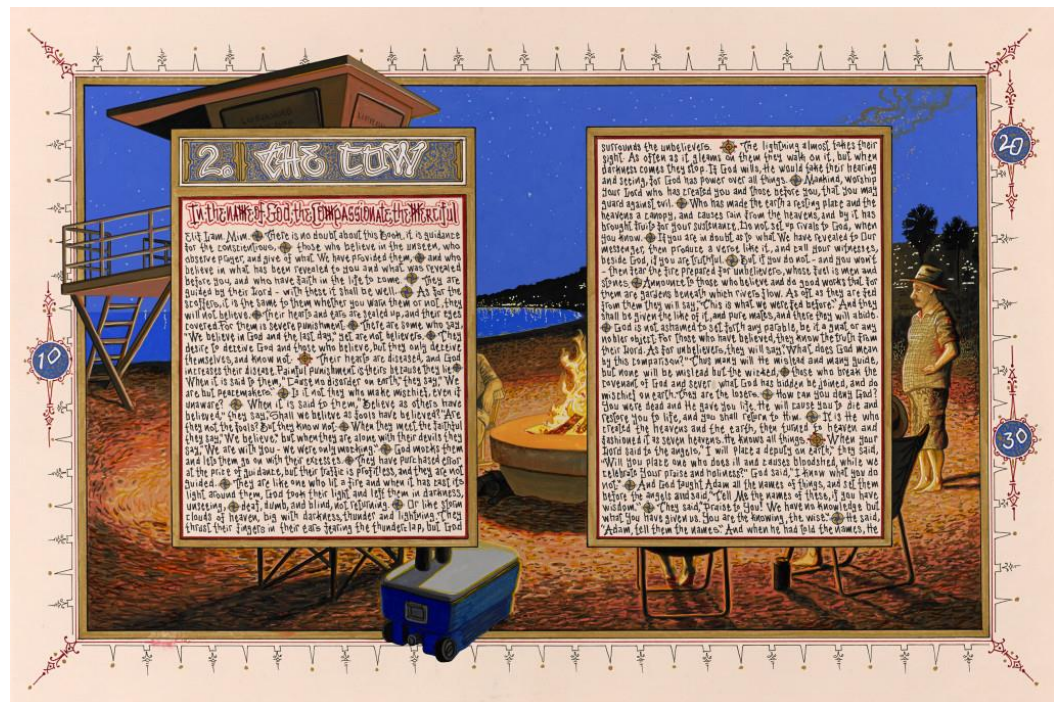
www.cclarkgallery.com



Sandow Birk, "American Qur'an, Sura 57 A" (2006), ink and gouache on paper, 16 x 24 in. (all images courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery, Koplin Del Rio Gallery, and P.P.O.W. Gallery unless otherwise noted)

NEWPORT BEACH, Calif. — In the midst of growing Islamophobia in the US, artist Sandow Birk embarked on a nine-year project to transcribe and illustrate the entire Qur'an by hand. The result is more than 300 ink and gouache paintings depicting all 114 chapters as parables of contemporary American life. Now at the Orange County Museum of Art, *Sandow Birk: American Qur'an* presents the artist's personal meditation on the book's themes as well as a radical critique of American society.

A secular artist raised by the surf and skate cultures of California, Birk seems an unlikely illustrator of the Qur'an, but his work is motivated more by the political urgency of helping American audiences understand Islam than his personal religious beliefs. With their wide margins, decorative patterns, and elaborate script, the paintings visually conform to the look of traditional hand-illuminated manuscripts. English translations of each chapter, or sura, are rendered with ink in legible graffiti lettering, while images of recent events or daily American life punctuate the themes or keywords of the Qur'an.



Sandow Birk, "American Qur'an, Sura 2 A" (2014), ink and gouache on paper, 16 x 24 in.

The first few panels in the series portray scenes characterizing American life as prosperous, bucolic, or multicultural. A bird's-eye view of a city skyline, the warm light of a beach bonfire, and snapshots of small-town America promote a familiar narrative of prosperity. Diversity is represented in one panel by a nail salon, gun shop, and Chinese restaurant, while another panel imagines a city block full of Persian, Korean, and Mexican businesses. In succeeding panels, Birk paints a car wash, summer BBQ, and hunting cabin—more examples of the "freedom" and plurality of American society.



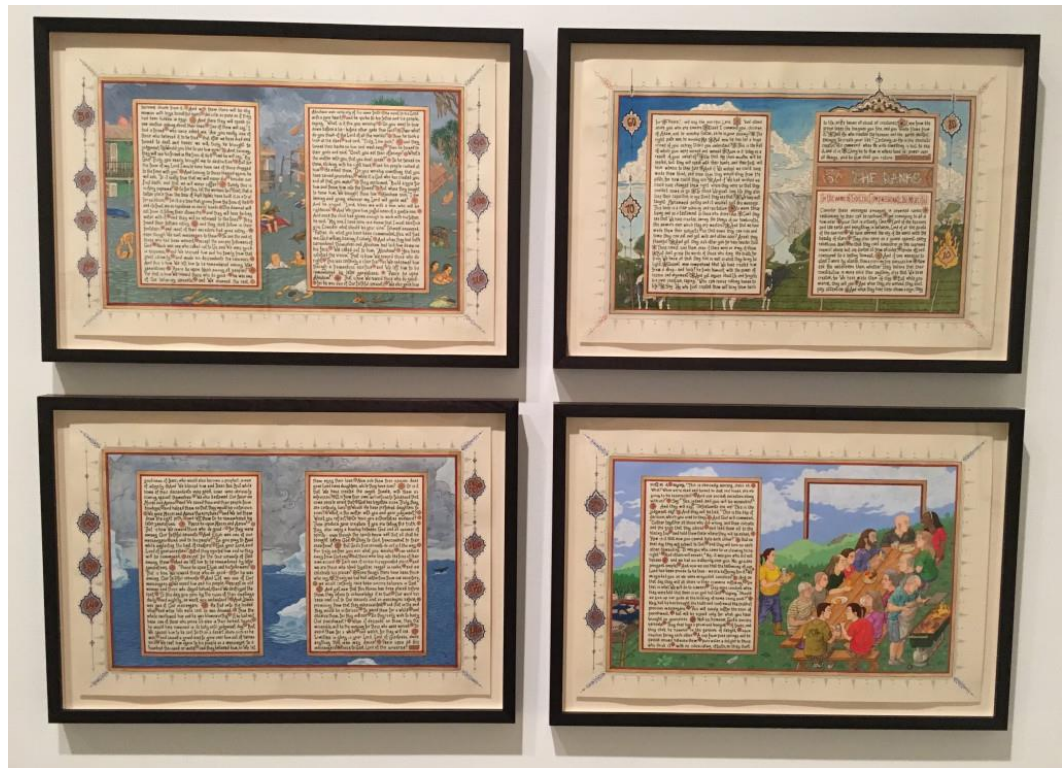
Installation view of Elyse Pignolet and Sandow Birk's "Untitled (Whoever saves the life of another surely saves the lives of all humanity)" (2015) and "American Mihrab (White)" (2009) (image by the author) (click to enlarge)

Lest the series begins to feel like a celebration of feel-good multiculturalism and "universal" human values, the panels are interspersed with images suggesting the wayward path of American society. In "Sura 2L," a homeless man pulls a shopping cart full of belongings, shut out from the street by a wall fortified by barbed wire. The text on the panel calls for advocating on behalf of the poor: "There are among you the poor, being shut up to the cause of God and have not the power to strike out across the land." Suras 107 and 108, titled "Charity" and "Abundance," center a portrait of a homeless veteran, encircled by others who go about their day in various states of inattention, while suras 80–81 juxtapose a chaotic scene of shoppers engaged in mindless consumerism with a text in which God reproaches the wealthy for neglecting the poor.

In Sandow's portrait of the US, it's not only the destitute who suffer some kind of lack. The white-collar workers of sura 57 don't look particularly happy, whether they're busy at work in their cubicles, eating dinner at a sushi restaurant, or walking listlessly back to their cars. And the family in sura 65, titled "Divorce," seems to be in the throes of a difficult separation as a pregnant woman stares apprehensively at a man who's presumably the father of her children. These scenes point to a kind of spiritual bankruptcy in American life. People's lives are atomized and insular, with only the next happy hour or marriage as a salve to despair.

Domestic struggles are presented next to larger real-life events like armed conflicts and national tragedies. Suras 105–106, which recount the defeat of a Christian army, are illustrated with a battle scene, American tanks taking the place of the war elephants described in the Qur'an. The Battle of the Trench, described in sura 33, echoes failed American military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, while the blazing fires and injured soldiers in the two panels of sura 47 cast the US soldiers as the hostile invaders defeated by the

Prophet Muhammad. Panels juxtaposing images of American soldiers, Guantanamo Bay, and a Mobil gas station more explicitly express the artist's anti-war stance.



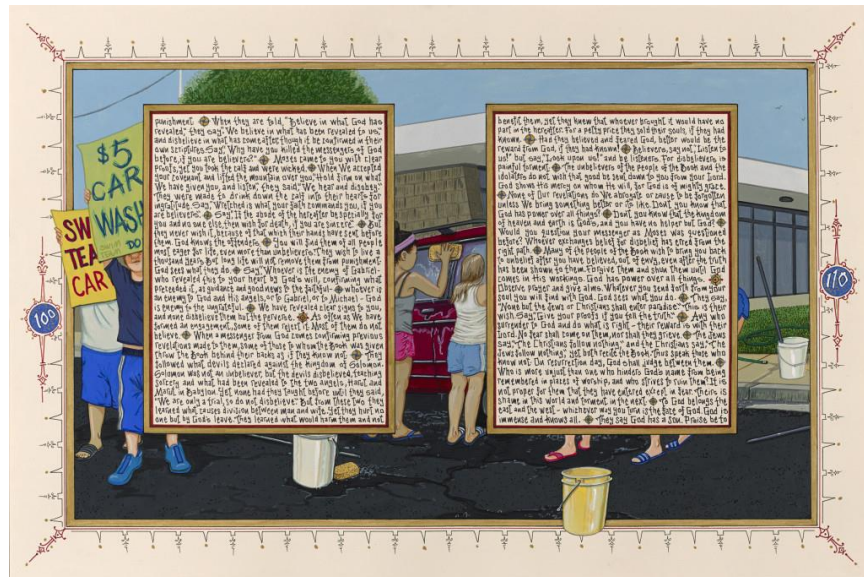
Sandow Birk, "American Qur'an, Sura 36 C/37 A-D" (2014), ink and gouache on paper (image by the author)

In sura 18, the Qur'an tells the story of a group of young believers who flee persecution by hiding in a cave. The story of retreat here is in contrast to Birk's painting, which illustrates the 2010 Massey Energy mining disaster that killed 29 coal workers in West Virginia. The story of escape and refuge resurfaces in another illustration for sura 9, which depicts Mexican migrants hiding in the Arizona desert from the border patrol. Next to more peaceful, quotidian scenes are depictions of the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center, Hurricane Katrina, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki — apocalyptic events that continue to define and even embolden the myth of American exceptionalism.

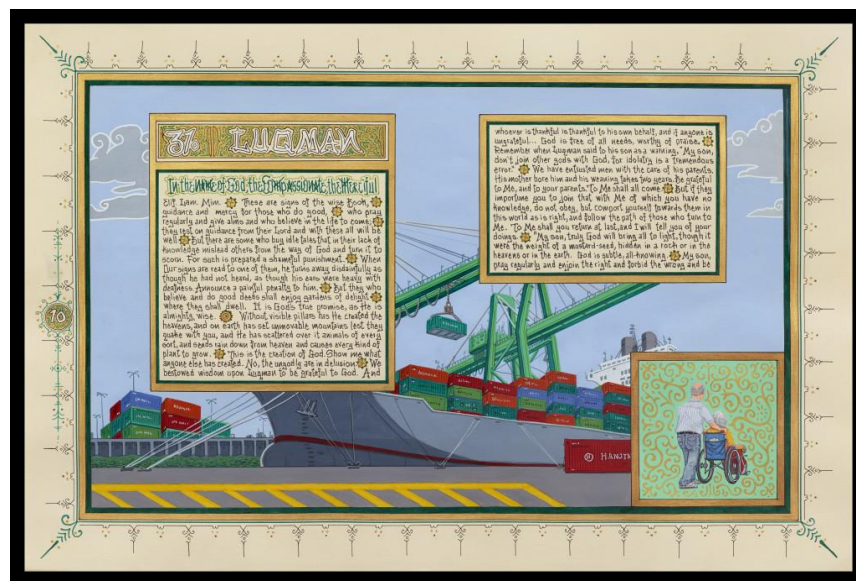
With these pluralistic portraits, Sandow Birk's project seems to resemble another mainstay of American storytelling, Chicago Public Media's *This American Life*, with its fastidiously painted markers of difference in the form of working-class communities and people of color, sometimes stereotypically represented in the form of heartland rednecks or Los Angeles cholas, and appeals to the "universality" of human experience. The audience that's seeing these paintings will more often than not resemble the educated, middle-class demographic of public radio, who can go away feeling "tolerant, culturally aware, [and] well-informed."

Unlike *This American Life*, however, these paintings don't end with a tidy summary of tropes or themes. The peaceful coexistence of one panel is undermined by the immiseration or bloodshed of another, and the

abundance of one group of people is enabled by the exploitation of others. The series succeeds not by translating Islamic beliefs into American ones but rather by providing a counterpoint to the myth of American life being uniquely righteous. Like many religious works of the past, *American Qur'an* is likely to leave you feeling small and inadequate, and the world seeming wretched and imperiled.



Sandow Birk, "American Qur'an, Sura 2 D" (2014), ink and gouache on paper, 16 x 24 in.



Sandow Birk, "American Qur'an, Sura 31 A" (2009), ink and gouache on paper, 16 x 24 in.



Installation view, 'Sandow Birk: American Qur'an' at the Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach (image by the author)

Sandow Birk: American Qur'an continues at the Orange County Museum of Art (850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach) through February 28.