

Sandow Birk

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## 'American Qur'an' is an old/new masterpiece

By G. Willow Wilson January 22

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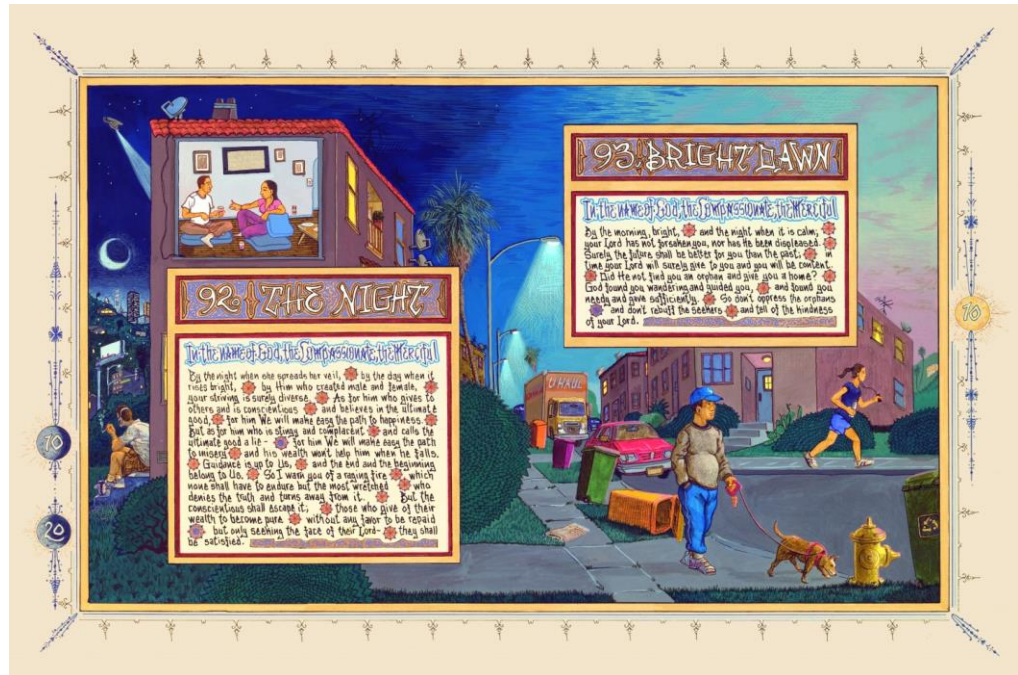


Illustration from "American Qur'an" artwork by Sandow Birk. (2016 by Sandow Birk)

Images are the easiest way to lie. Images enter our minds as infallible: Few of us wonder whether the carpet on the floor is true or false, whether the person who smiles at us on the subway is real or unreal. Daily life would be impossible without this visual credulity. But the same instinct that tells us everything we see is true makes us intriguingly vulnerable to distortion and suggestion in art.

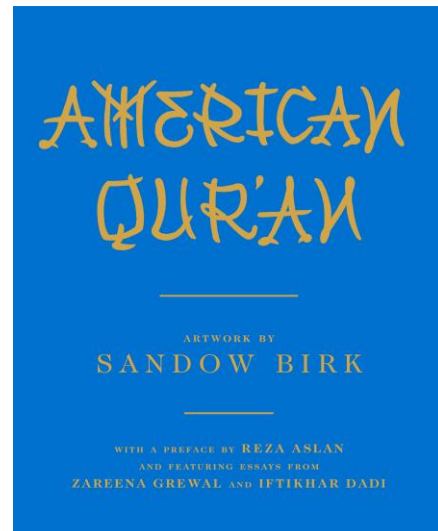
It is this visual vulnerability that prompts most schools of Islamic thought to prohibit images of sacred figures — prophets, angels, Allah — and in a few extreme cases, images of any living being whatsoever. In a religious context, images tempt us to worship the concrete rather than

contemplate the abstract. It's far better — or so the bulk of Islamic thinking goes — to leave the unseen, unseen.

That being the case, artist Sandow Birk's massive, richly illustrated "[American Qur'an](#)" would seem, at the outset, to represent a contradiction. Birk prepared for this project — a full-size Koran, transcribed entirely by hand according to the exacting medieval tradition, but in English instead of Arabic — by carefully studying the rules of the art form. The margins must be a certain width; the medallions that mark one's progress through the holy book placed at specific intervals.

But rather than leave the margins empty or decorate them with abstract geometric patterns, as is customary, Birk frames each page with lush, mural-like depictions of American life: farmers in their fields, clerks at their checkout counters, congregants at Sunday church; migrant workers, homeless people, hunters, surfers, men, women, children, along with cars, garbage, floods. An undertaking that could veer easily into sentimentality or cynicism does neither. Birk depicts the beauty and mess of Americana with the detachment of a photographer. And he marries the result — in a way that is at once baffling and oddly intuitive — to an English interpretation of the holy book of Islam. It is a masterpiece, and its flaws only serve its virtuosity.

Birk states that he cobbled his Koran together from several different English translations available in the public domain. This is perhaps the most American component of the project: taking bits and pieces of things you like and remixing them to arrive at something you like better. But translating the Koran is a notoriously difficult task. Classical Arabic, based on a root system of complex, interrelated meanings, is a language that implies rather than dictates, leaving much of the key terminology in the Koran open to different interpretations. It is unsurprising, then, that English translations of the Koran are so fraught. Each translator has a specific pedagogy; each translation is a complete thought. Subtle contradictions emerge depending on the interpreter's background and motive. By mixing and matching translations to arrive at his version, Birk has inadvertently created one of the most accessible interpretations of the Koran in English, but also one of the most ideologically opaque. This is neither the literalist translation propagated by the Saudis nor the rationalist one composed by Jewish convert Muhammad Asad, nor the stilted interpretation popularized by the Victorians. It is something else, something more comforting but less instructive. This, too, is profoundly American. We like our religion, but we like our religion anodyne.



"American Qur'an" by Reza Aslan and Sandow Birk (Liveright)

Regardless, it would be foolish to assume that the text itself is the point of Birk's artwork. The text is there to provide allegorical reference for Birk's marginalia. The story of the birth of Jesus is illustrated with images of a pregnant woman getting an ultrasound; Surat al-Baqarah, the Chapter of the Cow, features ranch hands and livestock. Yet Birk is capable of subversive subtlety. Surat al-Fatihah, the Chapter of Opening, often invoked as a prayer of guidance and mercy, is superimposed over a bird's-eye view of downtown Manhattan. Chapter fifteen, al-Hijr, here translated as "Rock City," is illustrated by off-road trucks roaring through a muddy hinterland. Though seemingly impudent, this pairing is not only apt but precise: "Rock City" is indeed a story about a city called Rock, whose worldly inhabitants reject the prophet Salih. Al-Hijr also repeats the story of Iblis, the devil, who refuses to bow to human beings, and since they are made of mud, tempts them with the material distractions of a muddy world. As an allegorist, Birk is at once simplistic and uncannily insightful.

"American Qur'an" is not a Koran in the sacred sense. As an English interpretation, and a non-academic one at that, it is not subject to the same rules of ritual purity that practicing Muslims would extend to an Arabic iteration. Instead, it's a masterful reminder that America and Islam are, as ideas and as histories, deeply, painfully interlinked.

*G. Willow Wilson is co-creator of the Ms. Marvel comic book series and author of the novel ["Alif the Unseen."](#)*

AMERICAN QUR'AN  
Illustrated by Sandow Birk  
Liveright. 464 pp. \$100