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SANDOW BIRK: 'American Qu'ran'

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P.P.O.W.

511 West 25th Street, Room 301

Chelsea

Through Oct. 9

For information value alone, and entirely apart from recent threats of book burnings, it would make sense for our museums to offer Koran-related exhibitions. Yet P.P.O.W.'s show of hand-copied and illustrated Koran pages by the contemporary California artist Sandow Birk is the only such show I've seen on the new-season schedule.

Mr. Birk began his long-term Koran project in 2004. In a format roughly based on Persian miniatures, he has been transcribing the Muslim holy book, chapter by chapter, into rectangular compartments on sheets of paper, then filling the blank space around the boxes with paintings inspired by the words.

Strictly speaking, everything about his version of the book is unorthodox, from its use of an English translation ([the Koran](#) is considered to be only truly the Koran when written in Arabic), to the inclusion of pictures of human figures, and everyday American figures at that, among them mall shoppers, suburban golfers and New Orleans flood casualties.

Mr. Birk's stated intention was to create a cross-cultural version of a monumental and fundamental book that few Westerners have read and that many seem to fear. His efforts to make it accessible can be clunky: the illustration for the Koran's 10th chapter, titled "Jonah," shows a middle-class family on a fishing trip.

A painting for the chapter called "Mary," which tells the story of the birth of Jesus, is better: an image of a supermarket mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe in a Latin American neighborhood in Los Angeles. Here he suggests a spiritual commonality between religions

without trivializing the Koran itself.

Inevitably, some associations of text and images are confusing. Chapter 21, “The Prophets,” has three illustrations. One, of a deep-sea diver, nicely complements a description of God creating the oceans. A second, depicting the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, lines up, in disquieting ways, with Koranic predictions of both divine punishment and resurrection. How to interpret a third picture — an image of tourists viewing the Statue of Liberty in a text that predicts the destruction of false gods — is an open question.

Like the Bible, the Koran is built on ambiguity: you filter its messages through the beliefs and needs you bring to it. It is also, even in English, rhetorically powerful in a way that Mr. Birk’s illustrations are not. His tidy vernacular style, with its awkward figure painting, seems to be geared to the opposite effect, calm reassurance, no doubt partly as a result of his being cautious about how he visually packages delicate religious material.

He still has time to play around with his approach. The project is only at midpoint. He estimates that he will need three more years to complete all 114 chapters and publish them.

Whatever the final strengths and weaknesses of his work, he is paying close, complicated attention to what may be the single most important, and least understood, book in the world at present. Just by trying to introduce it to a new audience, and to do so with maximum ease and minimum harm, “American Qu’ran” is an ambitious and valuable undertaking.

HOLLAND COTTER