

CATHARINE CLARK GALLERY



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco, CA
August 2, 2009

What.....Solo Exhibitions: Sandow Birk: *American Qur'an*

and in the Media Room: Packard Jennings: *Afghanistan 1985*

When.....September 3 – October 17, 2009

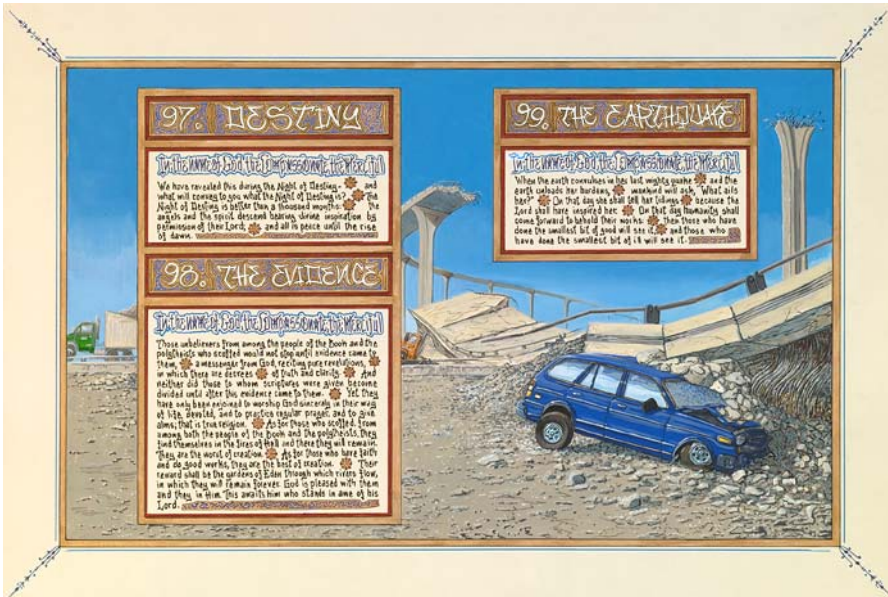
Reception.....Saturday, September 5, 5 to 8pm

Where.....Catharine Clark Gallery, 150 Minna Street, San Francisco, CA 94105, USA, www.cclarkgallery.com

San Francisco, CA: Catharine Clark Gallery announces two solo exhibitions of work: *American Qur'an* by Sandow Birk and in the media room, *Afghanistan 1985* by Packard Jennings. The exhibition dates are 3 September – 17 October 2009. The artists will be present at the opening reception on Saturday, 5 September, from 5 to 8 pm. Birk's *American Qur'an* is an exhibition concurrently presented at Catharine Clark Gallery in San Francisco and Koplín Del Rio in Los Angeles, and another installment of the project will be exhibited at PPOW in New York in 2010.

Sandow Birk's *American Qur'an* is an ongoing project to hand-transcribe and illuminate the *Holy Qur'an* with scenes from contemporary American life. Birk's objective is to create a version of the Islamic manuscript in contemporary English. As in traditional versions of the Qur'an, Birk renders the text in black ink; however, Birk's calligraphic style is one associated with contemporary American graffiti rather than Arabic script. Birk's version of the Qur'an is based on traditional manuscripts—chapter headings are decorated and the pages are illuminated with miniature paintings in full color, using inks, acrylics, gouache, pencil, and metallic paints—and the style of some of his imagery is based on traditional Persian miniature painting

and the traditional painting styles of Indonesia, India, and the Middle East. Unlike conventional Qur'ans, Birk's depicts contemporary life in America: Americans working, socializing, celebrating, fighting, and engaging in daily activities. The narrative images relate to the text in the chapter, or *sura*, of the Qur'an he is illustrating. The resulting works on paper that combine image and text, each measuring 16 x 24 inches, illustrate the 114 *suras* of the Qur'an. The project, when completed, will number more than 300 works on paper that collectively constitute the entire *Holy Qur'an*.



Sandow Birk: *American Qur'an/Sura 97-98-99, 2008*; gouache and ink on paper; 19 x 27 inches framed

preoccupation with, and often vilification of, Islam. Questioning how Americans could consider the Judeo-Christian religious texts—which originate from the same region of the world—in such opposition to Islam, Birk wondered if he should attempt an *American Qur'an*. He thought that if the content of the Qur'an were presented as an American story with relevance to American life and society it would become more accessible to Americans and possibly foster reflection about the Qur'an's relationship to Judeo-Christian beliefs and Western society. Birk approaches each *sura* by working from three sanctioned English translations of the *Holy Qur'an*. He then transcribed the text from these versions in a graffiti-like calligraphy that

After spending several years studying the complexities and politics of Christianity in his version of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (2001-2004), Birk took notice of the growing American

overlays a narrative scene depicted behind the stylized text. Birk paints scenes that are iconic in recent American history, such as smoke swirling from the World Trade Center buildings after being hit by the airplanes on 9/11 to illustrate the text for sura 44 titled *Smoke*:

"In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Hā. Mim. * By this clear book! * Behold, on a clear night We have sent it down, for We are always warning man; * on that night the distinction between all things good and evil was made clear * by Our wishes. Truly, We have always sent our messages * in pursuance of God's grace. He hears and knows all things, * Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between – if you are firm in faith. * There is no God but Him – He gives life and deals death – He is your Lord and the Lord of your ancestors. * Yet they linger in doubt. (10) But expect a day when the sky will bring forth a smoke * which will overwhelm the people – this is a painful punishment. * They will cry, "Lord, relieve us of this torment! We are believers!" * How did this reminder benefit them, seeing than an apostle had previously come to them * but they turned away from him saying, "He is taught by others, he is a madman. * We will relieve the torments for a little while, but you will certainly relapse. * On the day when We seize all sinners in a mighty onslaught, We will surely take revenge on them. * And long before their time We did indeed try the Pharaoh's people before them, when a noble apostle came before them * saying, "Bring me those devoted to God, for I am a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust." * And, "Do not think yourselves above God, for I come to you with clear authority." (20) And, "I have taken refuge with my Lord and your Lord, lest you revile me. * And if you do not believe in me, then stay away from me." * But when they beset him, he cried to his Lord, "These are wicked people!" * And God said, "Set out with my devotees at night, for you will be pursued. * And leave the sea parted, for they are a host to be drowned." * How many gardens and springs did they leave behind, * and sown fields and noble dwellings * and blessings that they had enjoyed. * So it was. We gave them as a heritage to another people. * And neither heaven nor earth wept for them, nor were they allowed a respite. (30) Indeed, We delivered the children of Israel from the shameful suffering * inflicted by Pharaoh, for he was outstanding and given to excess. * And We chose them knowingly above all other peoples, * and gave them signs that were clearly a test. * Yet these people say, * "Bring back our ancestors, if what you say is true." * Are they better than the people of Tubba' and those before them, who We destroyed because they were lost in sin? * We did not create the heavens and the earth and everything between them in jest; * None of this have We created without truth – but most of them do not understand it. (40) The day of judgment is the appointed time for all: * the day when no friend can help another friend, and when none will be helped * except those on whom God has mercy – as God alone is almighty and merciful. * Truly the tree of deadly fruit * will be the food of the sinful: * like molten lead it will boil in the belly * like the boiling of burning despair. * And it will be said, "Seize him and haul him into the midst of the fire. * Pour over his head the anguish of burning despair. * Taste it – you who were mighty and honored – (50) here is what you were doubting! * But the pious will find themselves in a secure state * among gardens and springs * clothed in silk and rich robes, facing one another. * Thus shall it be. And We will pair them with companions pure, and beautiful to the eye. * In that paradise they shall claim all the fruits of their past deeds, resting in security. * There, having passed their first death, they shall taste death no more and God will preserve them from the torment of the blaze * as a blessing from your Lord. That is the great salvation. * We have made this message easy to understand, in your own tongue, so that you may take it to heart. * Therefore, wait, for they, too, are waiting."



Sandow Birk: *American Qur'an/Sura 44*, 2003; gouache, acrylic, and ink on paper; 19 x 27 inches framed each

Birk embarked on the work for *America Qur'an* in 2004 and since then has created two other projects that were exhibited at Catharine Clark Gallery: *The Depravities of War* and *The 99 Names of God* (in collaboration with Elyse Pignolet). The remaining work to complete *American Qur'an* will take two more years.

Raised on the beaches of Orange County and currently living in Southern California, **Sandow Birk** is a product of West Coast culture. Well-traveled and a graduate of the Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design, Los Angeles, Birk has explored Los Angeles County in its entirety through his work, and has incorporated references to his travels to locations around the nation and abroad in many of his projects. With an emphasis on social issues, frequent subjects of his past work have included barrio life, inner-city violence, graffiti, prisons, surfing, skateboarding, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the War in Iraq. Often merging fact and fiction and drawing upon art historical and literary precedents for many of his compositions and content, Birk creates salient and humorous works that invite a closer reading of a particular issue. He frequently pursues a subject in depth, and through a multi-disciplinary approach—painting, drawing, printmaking, film and video, and sculpture—supports his ideas. In the past several years Birk's work has been presented in more than two dozen museum and gallery exhibitions and his work is in as many public and museum collections. Birk has received an NEA grant, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Fulbright Fellowship, a Getty Fellowship, and a City of Los Angeles Fellowship. Two of Birk's major projects, *In Smog and Thunder* and *Incarcerated: Vision of California in the 21st Century*, were published as monographs by Last Gasp, and Birk's version of *Dante's Inferno* was published by Chronicle Books in 2004 and subsequently published *Dante's Purgatorio* and *Dante's Paradiso* in 2005. Most recently, *The Depravities of War* was published as a monograph by HuiPress, Makawao, Hawaii and *Grand Central Press, Grand Central Art Center, California State University, Fullerton*. In the past few years, Birk has often collaborated with his wife who is also a practicing artist, Elyse Pignolet. Birk has exhibited with Catharine Clark Gallery since 1994.

In the media room, the gallery will screen the video montage by **Packard Jennings** titled *Afghanistan 1985*. *Afghanistan 1985* is a video recasting of Ronald Reagan into the film *Rambo III*. In *Rambo III* the reluctant one-man-army, John Rambo,

takes on the Soviets side-by-side with the Taliban and other Mujahidin. The comedic dialog between the Taliban, the Soviets, and Regan is created entirely from appropriated Hollywood film footage. Underneath this comedic veneer lie the true origins of many of the United States problematic relations with Afghanistan and the Middle East, from the Reagan Doctrine to the abrupt cease of aid. The video also explores propaganda and our understanding of other cultures and war through the media.

The Reagan administration supported the Afghan resistance, including the Taliban, against the Soviets from 1984-89 by providing funding and weapons. That war is the backdrop for *Rambo III* where Sylvester Stallone is sent on a classified mission to fight the Soviets alongside the Taliban. After the real war was over, the Reagan-lead government ceased all aid to Afghanistan. This swift and negligent abandonment of the country set the Taliban firmly in power, created a safe haven for terrorists (such as Al Quaeda and Osama Bin Laden), and helped sew the seeds of US hatred in the Middle East. Ronald Reagan built his acting career by appearing in many westerns as a hero taming the Wild West.



Packard Jennings, video still from *Afghanistan 1985, 2009*
Single-channel digital video; edition of 6; 20:00 minutes

With wry and pointed humor, and shifting between fact and fiction, Packard Jennings works across a range of media including sculpture, illustration, video, public installations and interventions. His work often addresses corporate transgressions against public interests through subverted advertising tactics. He has worked in residence at Kala Institute in Berkeley, 3-Walls in Chicago, Cite Internationale des Arts in Paris, Djerassi Resident Artists Program in Woodside, California, Marin Headlands Center for the Arts, and the Sanitary Landfill Company in South San Francisco. Packard Jennings has garnered critical attention from publications like *The New York Times*, *Artforum*, *Playboy*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The Washington Post*, and his recent collaboration with Steve Lambert, *Wish You Were Here! Postcards from our Awesome Future*, was commissioned by the San Francisco Art Commission and named Best Public Art in San Francisco by *SFWeekly*. Packard Jennings lives and works in Oakland, California and has been exhibiting with Catharine Clark Gallery since 2005.

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New Gallery Hours Continue: In response to the increased demand for the gallery to keep later hours, the gallery is now open Tuesday through Saturday until 6pm. The gallery opens to the public each day at 12pm, and staff is present at the gallery beginning at 9:30am for private appointments and meetings. Appointments to view any exhibition prior or after public hours are welcome. Additionally the gallery regularly participates in the San Francisco Art Dealers Association's "First Thursday" on the first Thursday of each month from 6-8pm.

About Catharine Clark Gallery: Established in 1991, Catharine Clark Gallery presents the work of contemporary artists. A wide range of media is represented in the gallery program with an emphasis on content-driven work that challenges both the traditional use of materials and formal aesthetics. The gallery is the first in San Francisco with a dedicated media room. Exhibitions are hosted on a 4-6 week schedule and generally feature one or two solo artist exhibitions, in addition to media room installations. The gallery also regularly participates in national and international art fairs in Miami, New York, London, and Brussels, among other cities. Housed in a former 1920s farming equipment warehouse, redesigned by Los Angeles-based designer Tim Campbell in 2007, the gallery is situated among numerous arts-related landmark buildings in San Francisco's Yerba Buena Neighborhood; it is adjacent to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), the Museum of the African Diaspora (MOAD), and is housed on the ground floor of the same historical building as SF Camerawork. For more information, please visit www.cclarkgallery.com or email info@cclarkgallery.com. Visit cclarkgallery.blogspot.com for up-to-date information about exhibitions and reviews.

2009 Advanced Listings:



October 24 – December 12
Solo Exhibition: Walter Robinson
Media Room: Adam Chapman



December 19, 2009 – January 30, 2010
Solo Exhibition: Anthony Discenza
Media Room: Anthony Discenza and Rebecca Bollinger



February 6 – March 20, 2010
Travis Somerville