



'BELIEVERS, WHY DO YOU SAY ONE THING AND DO ANOTHER? IT IS HATEFUL TO GOD THAT YOU SAY THAT WHICH YOU DO NOT DO.' — AMERICAN QUR'AN

# AMERICAN QUR'AN

*The holy book of Islam, interpreted by an American artist* BY BOB KEEFER

The traditional holy book of Islam has been defaced, burned, defecated on and denounced in the decade and a half that's followed the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks by Islamic extremists on New York and Washington.

A new exhibition opening Friday and running through March 19 at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art presents a very different American reaction to the Qur'an.

In *American Qur'an*, the museum's spacious main gallery will be full to bursting with the scores of original paintings that make up Los Angeles painter and lifelong surfer Sandow Birk's reflection on the Qur'an.

The artist created his own illuminated manuscript version of the entire Qur'an, mixing scenes of contemporary American life with the 114 suras, or chapters, of the 1,400-year-old sacred text in English translation. The work took him nine full years and resulted in a 427-page coffee-table book that's been published by a division of W.W. Norton & Co.

"I've been following this project for years," says Jill Hartz, the Schnitzer's executive director. "We are the second museum — and the first academic museum — to show it."

The exhibition originated in 2015 at the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach, California.

Born in Detroit, Birk grew up in Los Angeles from the age of 6. "When I was a little kid I was really impressed by the beach," he says in a telephone interview. "My parents took me to the Redondo Beach pier, and I saw surfers for the first time."

That was a turning point in his life — and in his art. "I started surfing when I was 11 and have been surfing ever since." As an adult, Birk has surfed oceans around the world, in such places as Indonesia, the Philippines, India and Morocco — all countries with large Muslim populations.

After graduating in 1983 from Otis Art Institute — now the Otis College of Art and Design — in L.A., he saw most of his classmates head east to make their way in the then-booming New York art world. Birk stayed home. "I was never going to move to New York," he says. "I was a surfer!"

Instead he became a consummate southern California artist, a prolific painter of scenes, based in European history painting, depicting Los Angeles in its glory and its decadence. In one series, Birk imagines the results of a war between Los Angeles and San Francisco; in another, echoing work by 19th century landscape painter Thomas Cole, he follows Los Angeles from prehistoric times to an imagined apocalyptic future.