

TAUHID AND THE SPIRIT OF SURFING.

All good works of art are the products of fortuitous intersections of diverse kinds. Worthy work offered in the wrong place or at the wrong time is unlikely to win over an audience. Similarly, a well-intentioned response to timely social issues will not connect if it is not informed by a personal history and appropriate visual skills of a kind that enable those issues to be captured in the form of memorable representations or metaphors. Therefore, the works that we remember and which most effect our perception of the world are, in a very real sense, the products of chance. Sometimes, when the right artist tackles the right issues with the right means, the result can be very pure and very eloquent. A timely visual metaphor can act as a catalyst, provoking in us a new perspective on matters that we had previously only understood in a matter-of-fact or rational manner. For these reasons art can never really be “timeless” in the sense that so many conservative commentators would like us to believe it can and neither can contemporary art be condemned in an off-hand way as merely “fashionable” just because it addresses issues that are of its moment.

Phillip George’s Islamic patterned surfboards offer a particularly clear illustration of the kinds of forces that have to intersect in order to produce a socially useful aesthetic response of the kind I am trying to describe.

In the first instance his project most obviously responds to major trends in global politics; to the events of 9/11, the War on Terror, and the Manichean division of the world into East and West that has been such a marked feature of the foreign policy of the United States and of nations, such as our own, that have followed in its muddy wake. Only in such a world could a *mihrab* patterned surfboard gain any kind of traction, since its apparent incongruity depends entirely on an audience predisposed to accept, or to have been on the receiving end of, a range of Western presuppositions that foreclose on the possibility of any meaningful association between surfing and Islam. These presuppositions demand not simply that Muslims *don’t* surf, (since the prototypical Muslim is imagined as an Arab living in a desert far from the sea), but rather and more strongly, that they *could not* surf because Islam is such an austere and puritanical discipline that it could not conceivably approve of such an indulgent, pleasant and self-directed activity. In the absence of prejudices such as these George’s boards would fail to dislocate our perception (that is, amuse or annoy us). Which is to say, they would fail to work as art.

The second axis that transects or mobilizes these artworks is that of recent local history. This includes not just our unnecessary commitment to support the United States in the invasion of two foreign (Islamic) countries, but also the corresponding rise of a jingoistic neo-nationalism premised on the exclusion of all non-anglo/celtic citizens, refugees and migrants. This new chauvinism reached its symbolic culmination, at least in Sydney, in the Cronulla “race riots” of 2005. Here the surf beaches of the eastern seaboard became the battleground for a struggle over the virtues of an *inclusive* view of Australian identity as against one founded in the assumption of closure, stasis and *exclusion*. As a result of two days of rioting surf culture became associated with a kind of thuggish white supremacist ideology that most genuine surfers would and did, abhor. Further, the events

of December 2005 presented the popular media with the opportunity to portray kids of Lebanese background as hooligans and ersatz or aspiring terrorists. This was the moment, in the popular imagination, when the Muslim met the surfboard and it was at this moment that George started to contemplate, in his artistic imagination, the implications of that meeting.

The third contingent ingredient in the formulation of George's boards is of course the artist's own background and his predilections. As George's work is positioned between what we once might have simplistically called "east and west" so too, in a real sense, is the artist himself. He is, in many respects, quintessentially Australian, raised in Bondi, with a passion for surfing that has continued unabated throughout his life and yet his ancestry is Alexandrian. This great cosmopolitan city, founded by Alexander the Great in the Third Century B.C.E. is the birthplace of figures as diverse as Demis Roussos, Marinetti, Nasser and Omar Sharif. It is a port city that has occupied a grandstand seat for so much of what has passed for world history over the past two millennia. It is also a site on which almost all of the diverse cultures of Africa, the Middle East and Europe have mixed and mingled since its foundation. Like his ancestral city, George aspires to a perspective governed by what the famous French historian Fernand Braudel described as *longue duree*. He knows that the events of recent history are little more than addenda to those tectonic shifts associated with Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire and Islam in all its varieties; phenomenon that demand to be measured in reference to an altogether different and less frenetic temporality than that which we apply to quotidian life in Australia. From such a perspective Anglophone culture looks far less central than so many of us (myself included) were brought up to believe.

For most of what we call "modern history" Western Europe has existed more or less on the fringes of civilisation. The so-called "Middle East" was the site on which many of the planet's most significant civilising projects were fomented and transacted. It is useful to recall that it was not until the Nineteenth Century that a European city became the largest on earth. For the preceding 3000 years the title was distributed along an axis extending from Istanbul to Beijing. The understanding of "deep" history is fundamental to the cultures of the Middle East. To take but one example, the martyrdom of Hussein, like the crusades, is not an event that is shrouded in the mists of time; it is rather a catastrophe that is re-lived every year (with the *Ashura*) and which determines the Shiite worldview. The crucifixion of Christ is a similarly determinate event in the mythology of the Christian West, but there again, like the bible itself, it was an "eastern" phenomenon that was only later re-jigged as emblematically Western.

Even in the case of Australia's own domestic foundation myths the East cannot be expunged. After all, the presumptive "coming of age" of our little settler culture was marked by a defeat at the hands of the Ottomans at ANZAC cove and even today our shiny new and popular Prime Minister is scheming a deeper involvement in Afghanistan; an involvement that history teaches us will finally be his undoing.

This stubborn persistence of distant history in the "mysterious" lands of the East is occasionally cited by Western commentators as evidence that Islamic cultures are in

some sense not fully constituted in the present; that they drag with them medieval baggage that prevents them embracing social modernity with the requisite enthusiasm. Accordingly, the resistance to capital accumulation (*riba*), the failure to distinguish with sufficient enthusiasm between the secular and spiritual state, (*Umma* and *Dawla*) and the treatment of women, supposedly so at odds with the example set by the enlightened West, serve to consign one third of the world's population to a twilight zone suspended between a goat-herding past and an oil-drenched present.

George is intensely aware of the wedge that western prejudice, ignorance and caricature drive between states and between communities that reside within them. He knows too, the political advantages of generating domestic consensus and acquiescence by conjuring up a demonic and covetous enemy. He should, for this is the point of the great poem by C.P. Cavafy (another Alexandrian) that ends by asking:

*Now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.*

George has travelled extensively in the Middle East and he is as much at home in the great Damascus *souk* or in the coffee bars of the *Hamra* as he is in Westfield, Bondi or in Paddington. He has spent much time photographing the ruins at places such as *Balbek* and *Palmyra* and assorted crusader forts dotted throughout the Levant and further east and he has used these images assiduously in his past work to evoke the vanity and decay of previous imperial attempts to mount quests for domination disguised as "civilising" missions. Indeed he reserves his most intense venom for those who feel that the "West" and "Civilisation" are synonymous. He knows that any elderly Arab enjoying a *narghileh* in a village square has a far greater grasp of world history than some HSC student who can list the Prime Ministers of Australia. For George this embedded sense of history translates as patience in the face of global transformation and imbroglio; a patience that will see off America and Israel as it has previously seen off or assimilated the Romans, the Moguls, the Crusaders, the French and the British.

These are then, the principle coordinates (global history, local history, biography and artistic abilities) that had to be in place in order to open a socio-aesthetic space for the creation of the Islamic surfboards. They also demarcate the conjuncture that allows us to "read" these boards in terms of their contemporary relevance. In another time or place they would simply not connect with an audience, or they would connect in quite different ways. They have a seismic resonance that is entirely of their time and place, which is to say only that they exemplify political art at its best and most powerful.

If the boards merely revealed what we already knew then they would probably remain, at best, well-intentioned propaganda. What is important about the boards is that they help us to make connections that go beyond a conventional linear understanding of the issues that are at stake. I'll try to give an example of the manner in which such "transversal" connections might be made. The decorative motifs that George transfers to his surfboards are essentially of three types; the more monochromatic geometric patterns are *Sunni*. For well over a millennium such rational mathematical forms have been employed to evoke,

by association or metaphor, the notion that the divinity is manifest in a sense of rational order that pervades the entirety of the natural (and spiritual) world. Accordingly *Allah* is conceived not on the model of a super- or supra- being like the god of the Christian churches, but rather as a guarantor of the principle of rational organization underwriting all of creation. For the great mosque designers and decorators of past and present geometry offered itself as the best vehicle (alongside calligraphy) for the presentation of this idea of underlying unity (*Tauhid*). By comparison the divinity conjured by Islam's older Abrahamic siblings, Christianity and Judaism, seems somewhat less sophisticated and intellectual. For example, the concept of the Trinity, so central to Christian doctrine, appears to contradict this sense of unity, as does the default image of god as a kind of anthropomorphic being with super powers. Islam is thus in a real sense, more modern, abstract and rational than its Western counterparts. The divinity is construed more as a principle of order than as an active agent of intervention. Allah does not suspend natural laws in order to conduct miracles and nor does "he" operate through a hierarchy of intermediaries like some kind of heavenly CEO. The understanding of *Tauhid* is absolutely central to Islam in a manner that has no strict parallel in the Christian faith, and geometric patterning organised according to the principle of its potential for infinite expansion is the way in which the long history of Islamic decoration has chosen to capture this. Like the universe itself, the part contains within it the structural principles of the whole.

The second and third kinds of decoration deployed on the boards have their origins in Ottoman (Turkish) and Persian (*Shi'ite*) cultures. The intertwined organic and botanical forms sourced from architectural ceramic *faience* are evocations of the paradisaical afterlife awaiting the faithful. Their flowing patterns point to the origins of the Western term "arabesque". Here, too, there is allusion to a universal grammar of geometry since these patterns are frequently deployed within an arrow-like rectangle (*mihrab*) that is aligned with Mecca, as, indeed, are the thirty surfboards in this exhibition.

Thus Islam combines a kind of Platonic faith in the prior non-material existence of rational form with the belief that this form is discernible in, and indeed animates, the whole of the natural world. It is thus a religion that resonates as strongly with certain more contemporary versions of pantheism as with the human-centred worldview of Christianity.

This may help to explain the comments of the champion surfer Pam Burrige who, when she first saw the digital sketches for one of the boards, commented that the patterns captured with a particular eloquence the feeling of harmonious unity she felt when "locked into" a tube. The surfboards gesture to the spiritual aspects associated with surfing culture; to the kinds of non-material values that lead its exponents to a lifetime quest for their own form of *Tauhid*. The *Sufi* adepts that "loose" themselves in a cosmic oneness provoked by ritual dance and surfers who experience a time that stands still while riding the perfect wave may be enjoying psychological states that are so very distant. In each instance the sense of self is suspended, if only temporarily, and a different kind of perception is conjured (a state appropriately described by Sigmund Freud as "oceanic").

These boards are most likely destined for art galleries or private collections; it is unlikely that the majority of them will ever be ridden. Nevertheless, it is important to George that they *could* be. They are seven-foot “Thrusters” that have been crafted by Mark Rabbidge who is both a legendary surfer and a board shaper whose work is known and respected throughout the world. The difference between a great board and an ordinary one is measured in fractions of millimetres, and no one is better able to sense and shape these nuances than Rabbidge. George could have had his designs inscribed on mass produced blanks, but that was an option that he never considered. It is important to him that they have been forged by someone with a degree of skill and understanding for the discipline of board riding commensurate with the dedication shown by the craftspeople that manufactured the ceramics that serve as the visual sources for his transfers.

George’s boards do not necessarily “close down” the distance between surfing culture and Islam. These are, after all incommensurable things. However, what they are able to do is to suggest the existence of common assumptions about the limitations of a life founded in the priority of acquisition alone; a belief in the virtues of working *with* the world in which we find ourselves rather than working *for* mastery over it. An exhibition that draws out coincidences such as these is audacious not just because the events of December 2005 seemed to imply an unbridgeable gulf between the one world and the other, but rather because the boards make visible a possible point of intersection that was previously unthought. Of course this strategy is not devoid of pitfalls and risks. Any attempt to reach beyond what one lives will always attract the possibility of failure and of giving offence. For example, a Moslem viewer criticised an earlier prototype board because it placed the Arabic term *Inshalla*, (loosely translated, “God willing”) on a surface where it might be stepped on. George quickly assured her that the work would never be ridden but the fact remains that he is not Moslem himself and consequently he will necessarily run the risk in works such as these of misunderstanding or insensitivity. Nevertheless these are risks that absolutely need to be taken since the only alternative for an artist is to remain within the orbit of that which is already known, already familiar. At best, works manufactured within this kind of “comfort zone” can aspire to the quality of good decoration, condemned forever to repeat tried and tested configurations of form and colour. The fact that most of the art we come across fits this description only makes more valuable those instances that charter new territories and connections.

It has recently been argued that contemporary politics has become, in essence, a struggle for control over representation (rather than, say, a struggle for the control of oil reserves). If this is true it opens a wealth of new opportunities for the artist with a conscience. However, this will be the case only if, like George, their timing is precise enough to take advantage of the appropriate configurations of global and local history, and provided too, that they have the capacity to seize and reconfigure forms in ways that oblige us to see a world that we may have taken for granted from some new and skewed perspective.

The message that these surfboards bring into the art gallery is, finally, not all that complex and it pretty much comes down to this; we must not let political leaders (ours, or anyone else’s) dictate the ways in which we understand the disparate cultures of the

Middle East because their views have always been, and will always be, opportunistic, selective and inflammatory.

David McNeill,
Centre for Contemporary Art and Politics,
University of New South Wales.