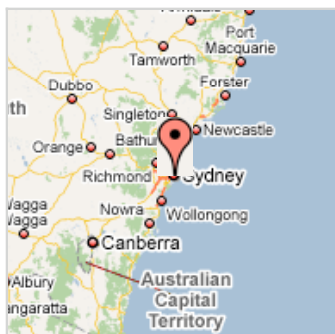


Phillip George holds one of his surfboards at Bondi Beach



Three years after beach race riots, art bridges Sydney divide

Dec 14, 2008

SYDNEY (AFP) — An Australian artist has combined his love of the surf with that of the Middle East, producing surfboards adorned with Islamic art in a fusion he hopes will help broaden understanding.

Three years after ugly race riots between white and Lebanese Australians rocked Sydney's Cronulla Beach, Phillip George has opened an exhibition of surfboards bearing Muslim motifs.

"It's a way of getting an Australian iconic image like a surfboard and putting it together (with Islamic artwork) as a new Australian icon," he told AFP.

"They are, in a soft way, saying, 'Well, everyone's got a right to be here.'"

The "Inshallah" or "God willing" surfboards were partly inspired by the violence of December 11, 2005 in which mobs of white Australians descended on Cronulla and attacked Lebanese-Australians to "reclaim the beach."

The riots were the worst of modern times and sparked a series of retaliatory attacks in which churches, shops and cars were trashed.

George was surfing in the eastern Sydney beach of Maroubra on the day of the riots. And even he, despite his long love of the Middle East, received an unsolicited text message inviting him to go to Cronulla "and help bash a Mussie (Muslim)," he said.

He hopes his exhibition, in which all the surfboards face the Muslim holy city of Mecca, brings the "joy and wonderment of Islamic art" to a broader audience.

"The mainstream community may not go to an art gallery to look at Islamic art," he told AFP from Bondi Beach.

"But when you put it on a surfboard, they go, 'Oh, wait a minute this is something different on a surfboard'. You walk down the beach with a board like that and people stop."

The surfboards, 30 of which form the new exhibition at Sydney's Casula Powerhouse arts centre, are adorned with photographic images taken from mosques and other Islamic sites seen on his travels in the Middle East.

"It's not pointing the finger at anybody, it's not blaming anybody. It's just saying, 'Hey look this art work coming out of Islamic culture."

"So I'm saying have a look at the Ottoman artwork, have a look at the Persian artwork, have a look at the Arabic artwork -- isn't it beautiful."

George, who is of Greek descent, is not a Muslim. But he said the work is done with "the utmost amount of respect" for the Islamic tradition and the surfboards, which are priced at 10,000 Australian dollars (6,580 US) each will never be used in the surf.

"Some say you can't have inshallah on a surfboard. The two surfboards which have inshallah on them will never go in the water because they are artworks," he said.

"They are not going to have people put their feet on them."

George is not the only artist who has been inspired by the events of late 2005. Roslyn Oades spent two years interviewing people from Cronulla and from Sydney's Lebanese communities following the riots for her play "Stories of Love and Hate".

Speaking to 65 people -- from surfers, to Lebanese youth, police, and the media who covered the event -- she has created a play which dissolves the stereotypes of "Lebanese thugs" versus "racist rednecks".

In Cronulla, she found a community hurt and angry at its unwanted fame and loathe to be subjected to yet another of the re-education or peace projects which they endured in the aftermath of the violence.

"It was such a wounded community I found," she told AFP.

"They felt that they had been scapegoated as the racist capital of Australia whereas a lot of people jumped on the bandwagon at the time. There were people coming from all over New South Wales to be there that day."

In researching the play, which uses word-for-word dialogue from her interviews, Oades also found that some Lebanese Australians were still hesitant to venture back to the Sutherland Shire's Cronulla beach.

"A lot people from outside of the Shire that are of Lebanese Australian origin don't go there any more or are hesitant to go there," she said.

But she said time has managed to soften some of the hurt.

"Maybe three years is a good time for people to reflect on the event and on where Australian culture sits now," she said.

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