

SUFI SURFING

How Phillip George is using surf boards to bridge the great cultural divide at the Casula Powerhouse in Australia until 18 January.





On a smooth polished floor stands a forest of boards, tall and proud, like great trees. The difference, however, is that these are not trees, but surf boards, and emblazoned on them, instead of Ripcurl motifs and acid colours, are Islamic designs and patterns. *Borderlands* is made up of 30 inscribed surf boards inspired by three distinct periods of Islamic culture. On display until 18 January at the Casula Powerhouse in Liverpool, New South Wales, Australia, the surfboards are the culmination of seven years of work carried out by Phillip George within Australia as well as throughout the Middle East, bringing together the ‘borders’ of Australian beach culture and the Middle East.

In fact, George is no stranger to the Middle East. “My father was born in Alexandria, in Egypt, but his father had Greek heritage,” says George. “I have an interest in the East which stems from my heritage. One of my first trips in 1979 was to Turkey, but since 2000, I have travelled very regularly to the region.” *Borderlands*, then, has been inspired by George’s extensive travels, as well as recent world events in, and related to, the Middle East. “Of course, current world events have had a great influence on the work that I have been making for the past seven to eight years,” says George, referring to September 11. “There is an urgent need for Eastern and Western culture to have an understanding of each other and an acceptance of the ‘other’, particularly by those in the West.”

The boards themselves fall into three clear groups that George describes as “Arabic, Ottoman and Persian”, the patterns taken from photographs shot while travelling through the these regions. From the Sunni inspired geometry of the ‘Arabic’ boards to the Shi’ite organic forms of the Persian, he has drawn on the Ottoman Tree of Life and Garden of Eden found in the latter’s imagery (such as in Persian carpets) as well as the calm order of Islamic geometry. In fact, it has been remarked that the calm and

feeling of ‘oneness’ that Islamic geometry and Sufism aspire to is similar to the feeling described by many surfers who find exhilaration and complete spiritual unity while riding the perfect wave. In this sense, the use of surfboards as the canvases for these designs is much more apt than one would first think, and the smooth surfaces and perfectly symmetric curves of the boards only go to enhance the patterns they are adorned with.

George has also inscribed some of the boards with Arabic phrases, such as *Inshallah* (‘God Willing’). He is quick to point out, however, that none of the boards are intended for actual use, and so none of the phrases or patterns would ever be stepped on by feet or put on the ground, something which has raised a few eyebrows and brought on cautious questions from some Muslim communities. Furthermore, the boards, echoing the *mihrab*-like geometry found on them (the niche found in mosques to point the way to Mecca) are all aligned to Mecca when installed in situ.

“The larger body of work which we hope to publish in book form is titled *Images from the Borderlands of Empire*,” adds George, “which is a large range of photographic mural works.” He concludes, “The combination of the Arabic, Ottoman and Persian imagery inscribed into an object like a surfboard speaks about two very different traditions, making something new. Where each difference is accommodated, one tradition enriches the other, and each culture can move forward in appreciation of the other.”

Hoping to take the exhibition around Australia after good audience responses as well as international press, George hopes to bring the exhibition to the Middle East in the future. With trips planned in 2009 for the UAE as well as Jordan, Syria and the Sinai, says George, “I think I have been seduced by the desert - the deserts of Australia and the Middle East have had a great influence on my work. The work has its own life and I keep needing to travel into the Middle East.”