

Picturing Islam: Art and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld.* Kenneth M. George. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 164 pp.

Reviewed by Karin Zitzewitz

In one of the first of his statements we read, the Indonesian artist A. D. Pirous says, “Whatever I say in my art expresses my belief, and my faith in values for this life.... Like I say, I am an ordinary Muslim. I just want to be a good Muslim” (p. 4). Kenneth George’s nuanced ethnographic study of Pirous’s “lifeworld” reveals the ways in which this artist’s struggle to make good paintings is connected to his commitment to live a good life. The dilemmas faced by Pirous are often specific to the process of making art. But just as often, in George’s reading, the artist’s works emerge as visible manifestations of ethical dilemmas shared by many of the more “ordinary” people around him. The product of a decades-long friendship, George’s account emphasizes how Pirous’s artistic work is connected to a wide array of subjective commitments: to family, art, nation, and region. But at its root, George’s book is “a story about making art and a lifeworld ‘Islamic’” (p. 4).

George’s study of Pirous’s artistic and ethical life balances the intricacy and contingency of biography with attention to the ways in which the artist’s subjectivity was constituted by a larger Indonesian history. The first two chapters trace the artist’s emergence in a period of intense ideological debates, as the eclecticism and hybridity of late colonialism gave way to post-colonial projects of nation building. Taught in Bandung in the internationalist style by a Dutch painter, Pirous fashioned himself as a “postcolonial artist-citizen” in the 1950s (p. 29). George places the artist’s views in political context, noting that his commitment to internationalist modernism was controversial under the leftist Sukarno regime, but it won him significant government patronage under Soeharto.

Illustrating a common experience of non-western modernists, Pirous turned to Islam as a source of inspiration during a fellowship in New York City, his epiphany occurring in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The artist had been disappointed by the lack of interest in non-western modernism in the city, and he felt compelled, George argues, to develop “a nationalist ethno-aesthetics” (p. 46). That he was able to do so through an exploration of Islamic aesthetics was the product of a “shift in moral and civic vision that led him to claim an Islamic heritage for the nation at large, a move that politically and aesthetically ties together the transcendental discourses of nation and faith” (p. 46).

The central chapters of George’s book describe the development of Pirous’s style of “Qur’anic painting,” describing how the artist learned to suppress his own artistic subjectivity in order to more perfectly “surrender to God’s oneness and the divine message” (p. 61). George includes Pirous’s clear explanations of his choice to privilege the word of God. But he more dramatically demonstrates the way this commitment to the purity of the Qur’anic text violates common assumptions about the relationship between an artist and his work when George describes his own revulsion at the artist’s decision to “correct” some errors in his calligraphy for his 2002

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retrospective. Here George's style of reflexive ethnography is able to convey the relationship between Pirous's artistic choices and the ethnographer's ideas about artworks as historical markers of artistic development. With this story, George reveals how Pirous's work emerges out of a "lifeworld" distinct from his own.

George continues this discussion in a valuable section on the way Pirous's work encourages "visual *dzikir*," or mindfulness of God. The term *dzikir* is closely associated with the Sufi's effort to "interiorize a mystical 'being with' Allah" through meditative recitation or bodily practices (p. 86). As Pirous explained to George, modernist art had the power to bring him to an awareness of the divine, and his artistic goal was to make that experience available to others. The artist associates the attunement to interiority of *dzikir* with abstraction, which partially recalls the claims of American abstract expressionists. Even before he introduces his account of this concept, George describes the effects of Pirous's paintings—on himself, on the artist, or on viewers whom the anthropologist interviewed—as existing on the border between aesthetic contemplation and religious experience.

As the book proceeds, George increasingly, if somewhat gingerly, contextualizes Pirous's work within the Indonesian public sphere, discussing the artist's prominent commissions and public works of art. In a final chapter, he describes the artist's reaction to the overthrow of the Soeharto regime and particularly to the disclosures of state-sponsored atrocities in Aceh. Pirous responded to these challenges with significant changes in his painterly practice, including a turn to figuration. George centers his discussion of those pictures and the events that inspired them on a close ethnographic account of the painter's retrospective exhibition, where they were shown.

This tight focus on his ethnographic relationship with Pirous is typical of the book as a whole. George privileges the insight he has gained into the artist's point of view over all other material. As a result, his account never fully steps outside that relationship to attempt to assess the artist's work in terms of cultural politics or critical assessments of aesthetic value. That will limit the appeal of this book to readers who desire to place Pirous within an art historical context. Yet this decision allows George to present a complex view of the relationship between artistic practice and the ethical and political commitments that constitute subjectivity.

Written in straightforward language with extraordinary sensitivity, this book is addressed to undergraduate students of anthropology, religion, and art history. George directs fellow scholars to a short afterword, where he places his work within the field of what he calls "ethnographic art history" (p. 144). He briefly explains what art historical works he found useful and how he conceives of subjectivity, articulating how his work intervenes in this central debate in anthropology. George has published more thorough discussions of these issues in journal articles, two of which shortly preceded this book's publication (2008, 2009). The very brevity of this discussion signals his intention to let his ethnography speak for itself, in all its irreducible complexity.

References Cited

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