

## Have a Coke for Islam! Adel Abidin exposes at the Kiasma Museum for Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland February 12th – April 25th 2010

By Lauren Hasty



Adel Abidin, *To Mohammed! To Mecca !*, 2009, Photo courtesy: Finnish National Gallery / Central Art Archives, Petri Virtanen.

Since the beginning of the Internet, mass emails cursing the devilish western drink of choice, Coca-Cola have been sent out to Muslims by the thousands. Yes, the message was as clear as the glass bottle: when you place the Coca-Cola logo in front of a mirror the letters reflected spell out “No Mohammed, No Mecca”. Of course, the western powerhouse was leading a huge conspiracy against Muslims. It’s logical right?

After about 10 years of receiving the emails, artist Adel Abidin’s decided to investigate the matter himself. What the Finish-Iraqi saw in the mirror was clearly not negative. On the contrary, what Abidin read before him in correctly written Arabic was the message ‘To Mohammed, To Mecca’. So instead of blaspheming Islam, when Muslim’s drink Coke, it seems they’re actually toasting it! In order for the letters to be read as “No” instead of “To”, a bar, or t like crossing should be on the C, and this is not the case. For Adel, it’s the perfect example of how fanatics and conspiracists see what they want to believe rather than what’s really there. It’s a message that speaks to all cultures and religious fanatics from all faiths, and is as refreshing in today’s hot political climate as an ice cold Coca-Cola. The work created, ***To Mohammed, To Mecca***, was purchased by a famous French collector before it was even completed.

Abidin’s work can be serious and controversial, sarcastic and funny. His work will make you laugh out loud, and only afterward will you be moved by how deep the message really is. In the artist’s opinion, no subject is too serious to joke about: “We’re only people, and laughter humanizes everything”.

The exposition at Kiasma is a collection of the artist’s work, mostly videos, which touch on various subjects. One hilarious video, ***Bread of Life***, depicts a group of musicians playing lively music on hard bread. The piece was inspired by an experience Adel had in Egypt while presenting his work at the 2008 Cairo Biennale, in which he found one restaurant’s bread more

suitable for drumming than eating. All over the world, bread is a symbol of life, of sustainability, something serious, not to be played with. In Abidin's piece, the musicians, who earn a living playing music, play with bread, the source of life.

### **Cultural differences, collective issues**

In a more somber piece, *Ping Pong*, one witnesses a seemingly endless professional ping-pong match between two men. The heat is on, the stakes are high, and in this power struggle, the outsider is the victim. Instead of a net the middle of the table, there is a beautiful naked woman. With each pass, she takes hit after hit, and the bruises form one by one, slowly covering her body. Seemingly accustomed to the pain, she hardly lets out a cry. We can't say who the players are, or why the victim is a naked woman, but the piece's ability to remind us of those who really suffer in power struggles overcomes cultural barriers. Even though Ping Pong is just a game, the seriousness of the match makes us uneasy. The violent way in which the woman is being tortured, pointlessly replacing the net is absurd.

### **Laughter can keep us sane**

Abidin was born in Baghdad, where he graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in 2000. He literally experienced what it's like to have all you've known be destroyed by war. He's been able to express his emotions through his work and, although most of his work touches on universal, non-biographical topics, his art which reflects his contemporary cultural issues and his first hand experience with war is extremely powerful. In 2007 he represented Finland at the Venice Biennale with the piece *Welcome to Baghdad!* The work is a typical, catchy advertisement, for a not so typical travel agency, Abidin's Travels. Publicizing vacations to historic Baghdad, the setting of such marvels as the Abbasid Palace and the nearby Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Abidin's travels offers package trips for a vacation that's "much more than a holiday". Using the language of travel advertising in a cheery, up-beat manner, the video shows pictures of death and devastation while giving helpful tips such as: enjoy breakfast in your hotel room in order to avoid popular or crowded places that suicide bomber generally target, since the morning is the most dangerous time; and make sure to hide your cash once you clear the borders and are on your way to Baghdad, as you are sure to be robbed. The ridiculousness of such a travel agency is comical, even though the message is bleak.

In another piece, *Memorial*, Abidin recalls the 1991 bombings. "When I was 17, I heard The Republic Bridge, my favorite in the city, and one that connected the two sides of the Tigris River, had been bombed. I couldn't believe it, so I peddled my bike over to see. Despite all the chaos, the thing that shocked me most was a dead cow laying on one of the middle parts of the bridge that had fallen into the water. Baghdad is a big, important city and I had never before seen a cow in the middle of it, much less crossing the bridge. I couldn't help but wonder what it was doing there. Throughout the years I've reflected on that dead cow and I imagined a scenario where she was crossing the bridge to reach her herd. Cows, being social animals, are rarely alone. I pictured her trying in vain to cross the broken bridge after the bombing to rejoin her family, and instead falling to her death. This piece is a memorial to her. "

### **Holy cow**

If the idea of a lone cow wanting to cross the Tigris River in Memorial is ridiculous, when seeing the piece one can't help but reflect on the fact that humans too are social animals. Through humor, we are brought together and able to reflect on serious subjects without the painful, negative emotions that can impair arduous discussions. Instead of obfuscating our thought process and manipulating us with fear and guilt like so many fundamentalist messages abounding in both Western and Middle Eastern cultures, Abidin usurps these methods of

manipulation to appeal to our innate sense of humor, and in turn creates enough distance from sticky subjects to open up critical dialogue. He manipulates us so that we are forced to think more, not less. Abidin uses humor to bring out the color in cultural and political issues, and through his humor Adel Abidin is not only creating great art, he is repairing the broken bridges currently dividing cultures.

<http://www.abidintravels.com> (<http://www.abidintravels.com/>)

<http://www.kiasma.fi> (<http://www.kiasma.fi/>)

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