



JAMES ESBER: YOUR NAME HERE, ALDRICH CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM, JANUARY, 2011

By Richard Klein

In 2005 James Esber did his first drawing of Osama bin Laden. Long interested in working with charged subject matter, Esber understood bin Laden's image was clearly different than other subjects, and his exploration of bin Laden's likeness and its meaning required a thoughtful and measured approach. Although the artist's work in the past had at times exhibited a provocatively humorous attitude, in this instance Esber brought no sense of irony to his use of what had become literally the face of Islamic terrorism. As an artist of Arab-American ancestry (his paternal grandparents were born in Syria) living in New York City, the events of September 11, 2001, were colored by a perspective that was much more personal than the majority of sources he had mined thus far in his career.

In the early 1990s, Esber was drawn to the era's preoccupations with cultural identity and image appropriation, but from an unusual, and—with hindsight—prescient position. Beginning in 1994, the artist did a series of paintings that utilized iconic photographs from the Vietnam War, a war that Esber was too young to have directly experienced. As an adult he was drawn to Vietnam not only because of its impact on the American psyche, but also because of the fact it was the first war to be covered "live" and unmediated by government control. These paintings begged the question of who was entitled to utilize these images: could an artist use (as Esber did) Eddie Adams's well-known photograph of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan shooting a Vietcong soldier in the head? This complex question is still informing the artist's practice today: Esber believes that in an age dominated by media, everyone has a relationship to the images that are presented, whether or not we have any firsthand experience of the events or individuals that generate these images.

This exhibition brings together two concurrent bodies of work that were both begun in 2009 and approach this question from separate directions. *This is not a portrait* is an ongoing project that takes the form of a series of ink drawings (now numbering over 120) created by invited individuals and based on one of Esber's own drawings of Osama bin Laden. Juxtaposed against this are six¹ of Esber's

¹ Also included in the exhibition is the work *Lightblue Michael* (2006), which is the first portrait of a celebrity (Michael Jackson) that the artist rendered in Plasticine. It is

portrait “paintings” done with Plasticine clay that depict people whose fame is based in fleeting media obsession: “Sully” Sullenberger, the pilot who ditched a passenger plane into the Hudson River; Falcon Heene, the Colorado “balloon boy” who was supposedly carried away in his parents helium balloon; Jaycee Dugard, the girl who was kidnapped in California in 1991 and was missing for over eighteen years; John Yettaw, the American citizen caught trespassing at the home of Burmese political prisoner Aung San Suu Kyi; and Artyom Savelyev, the Russian child who was returned alone on a plane to Moscow by his adoptive American mother.

Esber approaches his choice of subjects through a subjective process: their media presence either resonates with the artist in an interesting way² and/or their physical appearance suggests a fruitful avenue to follow in constructing a new portrayal. The actual choice of a particular subject is partially determined through a process of trial and error. For instance, Esber has attempted to work in the past with images of Mao Tse-tung and Marilyn Monroe, but abandoned these efforts because he didn’t have enough emotional connection with the subject matter. The artist’s modus operandi is taking what we think we know (do any of us really know Sully Sullenberger?) and submitting it to a process where our lack of real knowledge becomes the subject itself. In Esber’s hands, what we think of as being familiar becomes strange; where is the point that the known becomes something completely new and yet is still tethered to some degree of objective reality?

We all know that the media has a tendency to distort reality, and this distortion is most extreme in the case of individuals who primarily inhabit media space. Bin Laden is perhaps the prime living example of this. Other than a handful of portrait photographs taken of him in the 1990s, the only images we have of him from the recent past are those provided by Al-Qaeda as media-directed propaganda. These images are repeated endlessly in print and video as visual symbols of Islamic militancy and its radical aspirations. Esber’s *This is not a portrait* project comments on this phenomenon and amplifies it to the point where bin Laden’s image is revealed as being more of a mask than a likeness.

By utilizing the title *This is not a portrait*, Esber is connecting the meaning of the project to Rene Magritte’s famous painting *La trahison des images (Ceci n’est pas une pipe)*. Magritte’s work pictures a pipe, together with the written disclaimer, “This is not a pipe.” Commenting on the nature of picture making, Magritte archly reminds us of the difference between the actual thing and its depiction. Similarly, the myriad of bin Laden drawings that Esber has orchestrated are not really bin Laden, but rather examples of how meaning gets

different from the recent portraits in that it is completely flat (its substrate is not carved PVC board, but rather canvas).

² For instance, Esber was drawn to the story of Artyom Savelyev because he and his wife adopted their son from Russia.

changed by both transmission and repetition. Somewhat like a crazy game of telephone, Esber first filtered the photographic “truth” of bin Laden through his own subjective calligraphic drawing process, passing the result through the skills, beliefs, and temperament of others. These drawings are really triple-portraits: yes, they superficially represent an individual named Osama bin Laden, but in terms of “real” information, they actually say more about Esber and each of the people who created the new drawings. Like fingerprints, they share a general resemblance, but the individual identity of each is unique.

A little bit about the process: Esber gives each willing participant a photocopy of his bin Laden drawing that has been overlaid with a stout piece of semi-transparent parchment. Accompanying this paper “sandwich” are a small Chinese brush, a bottle of black ink and a bottle of sepia ink, a small bottle of gesso for corrections, a plastic yoghurt container for water, and a sheet of instructions. No particular skill (other than patience) is necessary, as the process involves using the original drawing under the parchment as a guide. The artist is quite specific about how to approach remaking his drawing: “You must try to draw every line in the drawing. You may, but don’t need to make precise replicas of my lines. Yours can be thinner, thicker or the same width as my lines. They should have whatever character is natural to your way of making marks.”³

Besides artists, professions represented in the project so far have included lawyer, hair stylist, musician, writer, investment manager, psychiatrist, journalist, chemistry teacher, and dentist, as well as a number of children and the artist’s relatives (including his mother and father). As the project developed, Esber quickly realized that other than the expected difference in each individual’s mark making, some participants were interjecting content and/or personal imagery. For instance, photographer Fiorenzo Borghi used the difference between the two colors of supplied ink to superimpose the silhouette of a father holding a child’s hand on top of the lines in the original drawing, while several others chose to emphasize the resemblance that a group of marks on bin Laden’s cheek have to fighter aircraft. Can the media be singled out for putting a spin on personalities and events when it seems as if it is human nature to embellish what is provided? By entitling this exhibition *Your Name Here*, Esber is slyly suggesting that all of us have our hand in adding to the false or disproportionate meanings ascribed to our circumstances.

For Esber, the aspect of “having one’s hand” acknowledged in the process is critically important for another reason. Unlike many artists who utilize appropriated media subject matter without significant alteration, Esber personalizes the impersonal by using careful and painstaking handcraft in creating his work. This belief in the importance of the artist’s hand is also apparent in the collaborative bin Laden drawings; unlike the superficial relationship we usually have with images provided by the media, participants in

³ From the written instructions that Esber provides to the participants in the project.

This is not a portrait have to sit down and patiently focus on the image as they remake it. This is not to say that they necessarily think about bin Laden as they work, but rather that they seriously invest a part of themselves in a process that results in a tangible product. Watching a segment on CNN about bin Laden is primarily an exterior experience; taking two hours to interpret a drawing of him is principally an introspective and meditative practice. If one believes that time is money, it is not so far a stretch to believe that attention is another kind of capital: accumulated experience adds value to and transcends the fleetingly superficial.

Esber has been working with colored Plasticine clay for almost fifteen years. Chosen as a medium because of its intense physicality and its way of amplifying the artist's hand (it actually preserves Esber's fingerprints), it has the added benefit of being downright weird. Others have commented on the grotesque character of the artist's works with Plasticine,⁴ which in the past have featured imagery such as Abraham Lincoln, Hummel figurines, and wrecked automobiles, and the portraits included in this exhibition certainly expand Esber's interests in an aesthetic that is not based in a classical notion of beauty. These portraits, however, shift Esber's concerns somewhat; by focusing on singular, living individuals taken from the media, they take attention off the artist's personal psychology and focus it instead on the sociology of media space. These individuals, whether they are Jaycee Dugard or Artyom Savelyev, have been made into characters by the news cycle: they are first introduced as an urgent headline, followed in the ensuing days by the elaboration and embellishment of their stories, ultimately culminating in a slow fade from media attention as they are replaced by others. (The preeminent ones often end up in places like Barbara Walters's "10 Most Fascinating People" of the year list). There is a parallel process going on in the newsroom and Esber's studio: the media objectifies and commodifies these individuals, and the artist takes up where the media has left off, pushing this objectification and commodification to an outrageous degree. Their smiling (or sad) faces are pixelated on our monitors or half-toned in our newspapers, but in Esber's hands they are physically wrought in a startling and turbulent manner that is not so much an image, but rather a very real sculptural presence.⁵

When looking at these distorted objects with their restless surfaces, one might first think of Expressionist painters such as Chaim Soutine or Oskar Kokoschka, but their lineage also includes the hallucinatory color and paint handling found in Monet's Rouen Cathedral paintings, as well as the exaggerated style of cartoons and caricatures. Esber's Plasticine works, as well as his bin Laden drawing

⁴ See Rob Storr's essay "Taking Liberties" in the exhibition catalogue *James Esber* (Pierogi Gallery, Brooklyn, NY), 2006.

⁵ In the new Plasticine works, the artist has used carved PVC board as a substrate, making them more low reliefs rather than paintings. Additionally, the three-dimensional modeling of the surface does not correspond to the topography of the subject's face, introducing another distorting element.

project, share certain similarities with the art of caricature, including the ludicrous exaggeration of physical particularities. But the impulse behind the work is different; caricature is used to either poke fun at or demonize an individual, while Esber's distortions are aimed at both critiquing certain aspects of society and commenting on our relationship to the real world through images. There is, however, one interesting parallel with caricature. Historically, during times of stress (particularly war) caricature used as a social tool often becomes extreme. Think of the bizarre drawings of Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo made during World War II, or the often-demented renderings of Richard Nixon made during Vietnam. Esber is acutely aware of his times, and the distortion he feels compelled to engage in reflects the often terrible and troubling reality of this world.

The two bodies of work presented in this exhibition exhibit an animated optical quality, where the images alternate in and out of legibility. At one moment one is looking at a series of abstract marks and at the next moment they resolve themselves into a visage. Similarly, the individuals portrayed, whether they are Sully Sullenberger or Osama bin Laden, flicker and flare: both on our screens and in our consciousness. Esber's work always implicates the viewer by requiring engagement beyond a mere superficial glance.

- Richard Klein, exhibitions director