

The Bin Laden Bounce

An exhibit of Osama bin Laden "portraits" has a new vibe following his death

By Alan Bisbort

James Esers, *Your Name Here*

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum Through June 5, 258 Main St., Ridgefield, (203) 438-4519, aldrichart.org

Stephen Colbert was riffing about Osama bin Laden the other night. Struck by the fact that the anti-Western boogeyman's luxury compound was stuffed with Western staples like Nestle, Coke and Pepsi, Colbert claimed that, with Osama's death, these brands now enjoyed the "ultimate in product placement" and would reap the coveted "bin Laden bounce."

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It's probably safe to say that no art exhibit has been the beneficiary of a "bin Laden bounce." Until now, that is, with *Your Name Here*, a series of pen and ink portraits organized by Brooklyn-based James Esber at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield. Conceived in 2009, and an ongoing project since then, *Your Name Here*, on view until June 5 (along with five other exhibits of portraiture), features 157 red and black ink portrait drawings of Osama bin Laden. A collaborative effort, Esber's template drawing of bin Laden serves as the foundation of all 157 of the jarring portraits "completed" by other participants.

Not anticipating real-world events overtaking his concept, Esber intended for people to ponder the idea of Osama bin Laden, how this elusive figure of evil has become the repository of our collective anxieties. But Osama's demise was always a possibility to him.

"The meaning of art is contingent on context, and context is always changing," says Esber. "I thought, going into this, that Osama would eventually be killed. I'm interested in iconic images, how they can become the glue that binds a community of

like-minded people together, for better or worse. The paradox is that the more I worked on this project, the more it became about building community, even if it was built around an image of hatred."

There is nothing comical or ironic about *Your Name Here*. Indeed, as an American of partly Arab descent, Esber felt some emotional kinship to the issues surrounding America's reaction to Islamic terrorism. He, in fact, drew the first of many portraits of Osama bin Laden as early as 2005, four years before the idea for this project gelled. However, as the Aldrich's Pamela Ruggio observed last week, "Never have visitors' perception of a contemporary art installa-

tion at the Aldrich changed so completely overnight like this."

Esber began his project by using a Google filter to find the most familiar public image of bin Laden. This was not so difficult since few nonpropagandistic portraits exist — for 10 years, we've been fed the same few shopworn images with news stories. Adding to the sinister nature of the image Esber selected is the fact that Osama's eyes are not the same size. One is a long and thin gash, like a knife wound on his face, and the other is small and beady, a pinhole of malevolence or mystery.

Aldrich curator Richard Klein described Esber's process as giving "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 splastic yogurt container for water, and a sheet of instructions." Esber instructed participants to use the original drawing under the parchment as a guide and, further, "you must try to draw every line in the drawing. You may, but don't need to make precise replicas of



James Esber's "Your Name Here."

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." Think paint-by-numbers without numbers.

Among the participants were other visual artists, a musician, psychiatrist, dentist, writer, journalist, an investment manager, Esber's mother, his father (a New York firefighter), and even some children. The result is nearly overwhelming, a gallery filled floor to ceiling with equal-sized bin

Ladens and more spilling out into the hallway leading into the gallery, like invitations to follow the Minotaur into the maze.

Some are beautifully detailed; some are thick-lined and almost abstract; some emphasize his murderer's eyes; others turn him into barely recognizable lumps of black ink; others do the same with red, turning the squiggles into bloody viscera; in one his lips are emphasized as large and

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ridiculous as a circus clown; one is like an opera mask; another a tasteful pointillist portrait, another nearly disappears in mist, and so on. A wall monitor offers a constantly running slide show of all 157 images on view, blipping at you like a flip book. Like David Foster Wallace's fictional video in *Infinite Jest*, you don't want to look but you can't take your eyes off it.

The second, less immediately noticeable part of *Your Name Here* comprises six sculptural renderings in Plasticine clay of people with whom the media was briefly obsessed, from Sully Sullenberger (the pilot who landed a plane on the Hudson River) to Falcon Heene (the "Balloon Boy"). Of Esber's method, Klein says he takes "what we think we know (do any of us really know Sully Sullenberger?) and submits it to a process where our lack of real knowledge becomes the subject itself." Esber has also molded Michael Jackson's image in this format, a suitably bizarre depiction that serves as a nice (and coincidental) counterpoint to the giant celebrity headshot of Jackson by Timothy White that greets visitors upon entering the Aldrich,

just as Shimon Attie's "MetroPAL.IS" exhibit deals with Palestinian-Israeli issues within the context of New York City.

Esber's stated theme for both parts of this exhibit is "This is not a portrait," taking its cue from Rene Magritte's painting, "La trahison des images," which has the inscription "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" ("This is not a pipe"). A further backdrop to the show, in the "real world," is the ongoing discussion about whether or not to release the photographs of Osama bin Laden's corpse. "As an artist I have mixed feelings about withholding the images," says Esber, who also acknowledges the unique extenuating circumstance surrounding bin Laden. "Such images have the potential to be used for propaganda. The Obama administration is the first to acknowledge the potential for images to go viral on the Internet and serve as a catalyst for more bloodshed."

Perhaps this, then, is the only thing in recent weeks that won't get a "bin Laden bounce."

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