

## Elegant rebellion

by Kim Knoppers

### Religion in Visual Art

The major world religions are not very popular in contemporary visual art. In the past this was different. Up until the early Renaissance the quest for higher things in life lay at the root of virtually all visual art. One of the theories on the meaning of the earliest cave paintings of half-human, half-animal figures (Sulawesi, Indonesia, almost 44,000 years old) is that they were made by shamans. Mosques were decorated by skilled craftsmen and adorned with ingenious geometric mosaics and carved stone ornaments. Churches were the most important commissioners of religious paintings, which submerged churchgoers in the stories of the Bible. This illustrates that the capacity to believe in higher powers and the unobservable has been hardwired into the human psyche from the beginning. For centuries art served religion.

When the power of religion waned around halfway through the nineteenth century, artists threw off its yoke as well. In our highly secular Western society modern art even seems to replace religion. Museum buildings exude the same sacral atmosphere as cathedrals and paintings are worshipped like icons. The old collective and top-down controlled religious experience in church or mosque is counterposed with the individual experience of art in a museum. At the same time, a number of artists continue to search for the divine presence in life, albeit no longer in the major monotheistic religions, but in occultism, theosophy, anthroposophy and hermetic philosophy, for example.

### New Dutch Views

Marwan Bassiouni (Switzerland, 1985) is an exception in the largely secular art world. Having grown up in a non-religious family with an Italian-American mother and an Egyptian father, he converted to Islam over nine years ago after a mystical experience in a mosque. As a multi-cultural Muslim he tried to adjust to life in the Netherlands during his studies at the Royal Academy of Visual Arts. This resulted in his series New Dutch Views. He set up his camera in front of the windows of thirty Dutch mosques and pressed the button. The views on the Dutch landscape are framed by these places of worship's walls and windows. For the final image he used several photos. Since lighting and focus are the same in both the foreground and background, the world outside and inside merge, producing clear straightforward typologies that are multi-layered at the same time. The photographs and the reflections Bassiouni wrote show the emergence of a Western-Islamic identity which is just as much part of the Netherlands as the Calvinistic or Roman-Catholic identities. With this series Bassiouni shows that Islam is the West.

### Prayer Rug Selfies

While working on his New Dutch Views, Bassiouni also starts a new and

more personal project, even though he is not aware of this himself at the time. While studying at the academy he becomes more observant of the five set daily prayer times. This takes some effort, since the academy does not have a meditation room at first, and the dynamics of his surroundings do not conform to Islamic prayer times. So everywhere he goes, he takes his backpack with his prayer rug and tries to find places offering some privacy. He then unfolds his prayer rug and performs his daily holy rituals. One day he takes a photo with his mobile phone. And voilà: the first Prayer Rug Selfie. Four years later it is an ongoing project, now consisting of over a hundred photographs.

#### Claiming Space and Time

From empty classrooms and darkrooms at the Royal Academy, from secluded places in parks to airports and hotel rooms, by unfolding his prayer rug Bassiouni turns them into prayer rooms. In a number of different positions - standing up, bent over and kneeling, his forehead touching the floor - Bassiouni testifies that there is no God but God five times a day. In his act of worship he temporarily takes possession of the secular (semi)public space and turns it into a sacred place for deep spiritual communication with Allah. For a moment the hustle and bustle of daily life come to a standstill and there is time to reflect on the essence of things. Immediately after that moment Bassiouni takes his camera to record, stop and fix it. The reappearing prayer rug and the picture itself materialize time. Time fossilized.

Not only does Bassiouni take up physical space, he also claims digital space by posting his pictures on Instagram, the digital hang-out of choice of over 3 million Dutch people every day. Where fitboys and girls, foodies, before-and-after-bros, animal lovers and Insta-mummies create their identities in perfectly stylized pictures. In this arena Bassiouni presents himself explicitly as a religious person. His claiming space for his Western Muslim identity in the 'progressive' technological environment which appears hostile to religion is underlined by the hashtag #prayerrugselfie. The tension between the contemplative prayer rug and the digital medium's volatile and light-hearted nature emphasize the poetic potential of his concentrated and high-contrast black and white photographs.

As a result of Covid Bassiouni's freedom of movement was limited. He remained in his hometown of The Hague and increasingly started to pray outdoors. Practicing his religion brought him closer to nature. And perhaps nature in turn brought him closer to Allah. Mystical experiences and nature - it is a symbiotic relationship that frequently features in visual art. Caspar David Friedrich's insignificant lone monk, floating between heaven and earth in the enigmatic painting *Mönch am Meer* (1808) is a good example of this. In Bassiouni's photographs the prayer rug takes the monk's place, and in a metaphoric sense that of Bassiouni himself.

A personal photographic and metaphysical diary  
**Religion can manifest itself in different ways, and the two projects Bassiouni has worked on so far illustrate this. It can be experienced collectively in a social context, but also at an individual level. If New Dutch Views was a stand-offish acquaintance with the Dutch Islamic landscape, Prayer Rug Selfies is an intimate portrait of its maker. It is a vulnerable 'behind the scenes' glimpse of his personal life, in which the stage is a prayer rug.**

Apart from a personal photographic diary, the series can also be seen as a metaphysical photographic diary. The choice to record the metaphysical through photography is a challenging one. Ever since its invention in the nineteenth century, photography has been the technical medium of choice to capture reality. It is also capable of exposing something that is invisible to the naked eye, but there nonetheless, for example bacteria, the surface of the moon or the minute details of plants. All firmly rooted in reason, scientific faith and realism. Nineteenth century photographs that tried to capture the supernatural, ghosts and auras all turned out to be the result of manipulation and photoshop avant la lettre.

Nowadays a large part of the photographic spectrum can be regarded as visual bulimia. With slick and soulless marketing photographs and seductive Instagram images we are encouraged to keep up our consumption levels. There are but a few contemporary photographers who use photographs as a gateway to a metaphysical level. When used wisely, however, a photograph can transport us to another world where introspection, quiet and deepening take over. Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto is an example of this. His serene black and white photos of Seascapes, Lighting Fields and Theatres explore time, memory and metaphysics. His artistic career abounds with references to religion. Also, Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky's polaroids, in which he shows the beauty and mystery of daily life, are subtle and intimate worlds of truth.

In addition, the combination of depiction and Islam is a complicated issue. Like Judaism and Protestantism, Islam is an iconoclastic religion which does not tolerate depicting God. God is one and unique, there is no likeness, and even in the imagination God is indivisible. In the past artists from these religious backgrounds have used roundabout ways to express their religious ideas. Kandinsky, Mondrian and Rothko used paint, brush, canvas and imagination to express an internal and personal interpretation of religious experience.

Prayer Rug Selfies is a choice to connect to higher meaning and the invisible through the realism of a technical device. It is the imprint of a moment, the trace of a religious act of worship. It is the translation of a performative act that can be disseminated through its material manifestation as a photograph,

regardless of place and time. Through its transformation from religious act into chemicals on paper the photographs hover somewhere between matter and mind. Individual awareness disappears, and yet universal feelings of transcendence are evoked.

The quiet and intimate Prayer Rug Selfies stemming from daily muslim life contrast with the often violent and sensational photographs of 'Islam' we are familiar with from the media. Although Bassiouni's work stems from a simple concept, the result offers a humanistic depiction of Islam in the West.

In Times of Covid

The exhibition at Dürst Britt & Mayhew shows a selection of Prayer Rug Selfies that was made during the Covid crisis. A time in which more and more people realize the world is spinning too fast, propelled by our desire for more and our unscrupulous exploitation of nature and the less fortunate. In retrospect a quotation from the aforementioned Tarkovsky seems appropriate:

**"It seems to me that the individual stands today at a crossroads, faced with the choice of whether to pursue the existence of a blind consumer, subject to the implacable march of new technology and the endless multiplication of material goods, or whether to seek out a way that will lead to spiritual responsibility, which ultimately might mean not only his personal salvation but also the saving of society at large: in other words, to turn to God. He has to solve this dilemma for himself, for only he can discover his own sane spiritual life. Solving it may take him closer to the state in which he can be responsible for society."** (Tarkovsky, *Sculpting Time. The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art* p. 218, University of Texas Press, 1989.)

**Prayer Rug Selfies might be a remedy against a dormant sense of social discomfort. By non-believers it could be understood as an antidote against an overdose of superficiality, as a form of elegant yet intentional and resolute rebellion.**

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Kim Knoppers is an art historian, curator and writer. For Foam in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, she has curated solo exhibitions by contemporary photographers like Melanie Bonajo, Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, Anne de Vries, Taiyo Onorato & Nico Krebs and group exhibitions like Re: Search: Alumni of the Rijksakademie (2012), Collectivism – Artists' Collectives and Their Quest for Value (2017) and Back to the Future. The 19th Century in the 21st Century (2018). She is a lecturer at the MA Photography at ECAL in Lausanne, Switzerland, where she initiated and developed the course Do Not Disturb – Curating in Progress. She regularly contributes to Foam Magazine and enjoys writing for catalogues and artist books.