MOVING MONUMENTS

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A COSMOPOLITAN NOMAD: ADAM DE BOER

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Adam de Boer is an artist on the move. Or more aptly, he is an artist defined by his movement across cultures and geographies.

When I first met Adam, he was just finishing his B.A. in the College of Creative Studies at UC Santa Barbara. I had recently finished a Ph.D. in Art History at UCSB and was directing The Arts Fund, a community arts gallery. Though young, Adam was awarded our Individual Artist Award, competing with some of the finest artists in the area. As a result, I had the pleasure of offering Adam his first solo exhibition. At that point, his work represented an intriguing fusion of technical skill, art historical reference, and contemporary social commentary. He knew his art history as well as his materials and methods.
He painted irreverent scenes of student life, equal parts debauchery and angst, with reverence. The ambitious, large-scale oil paintings featured groups of students playing drinking games, couples clumsily fumbling at one another, fights in the streets of Isla Vista...I described the work at the time as, “an anthropology of college life.” He portrayed his friends and peers with honesty and courage, not shying away but also not exploiting their vulnerability. And all of this social commentary was delivered in a lushly painted, vividly realistic style reflecting a talent and commitment to craft rarely seen at such an age.

In the subsequent years, de Boer has pursued his career with focused determination and met with no small amount of success. But he has not just pursued artistic training and exhibition opportunities; he has pursued experiences to better understand himself and his world. He demonstrates a precocious cosmopolitanism, engaging with the specificity of the local while in dialogue with the universal and global. Through travel and residencies in diverse regions, from London to Bogotá, India to Java, from the West Coast to the East Coast, de Boer’s pathways around the globe have come to define his identity and his artwork. And now he is back in Santa Barbara for something of a homecoming. In describing his ambition for this exhibition, he stated that he wanted to present work that reflected “the tools, landscapes, and techniques I’ve learned since I moved away from California in 2006.”
In 2010, Adam de Boer made a voyage of self-discovery to Indonesia, visiting Bali, and then returning in 2011 to visit his father’s birthplace in Purwokerto, Central Java. De Boer sought to recreate a family history that was nearly lost after two generations of cultural adaptation and assimilation in the United States. While rediscovering the story of his family’s forced departure, he also discovered the arts of Java. In his own words, Adam remembers becoming “fascinated by Javanese design, furniture and folk art.” He “made a point to spend time with and learn the processes of traditional wood carvers and batik textile designers.”

The multi-talented Mexican modernist Miguel Covarrubias—painter, caricaturist, author, ethnographer, cartographer, filmmaker, set designer, and more—also visited Bali. In 1930, he spent three months exploring the island and learning about its language, culture, and customs. Through later visits and publications, Covarrubias became a leading expert on Balinese arts and traditions. The artwork and ethnographic documentation he produced introduced many Americans to the visual richness of Bali and even sparked something of a fashion craze when his illustrations of Indonesian dress and dance appeared in *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *Life*. A forthcoming exhibition and catalogue affirms the importance of Covarrubias as a transnational Modernist, in part, by demonstrating that his practice of moving between modern cities and more distant sites of ancient and traditional arts infused mid-century Modernism with a perspective that was at once deeply rooted in local experience and globally aware. Through his travels, Covarrubias unleashed a wave of creativity and cultural exploration, in his own work and in the work of others. In many ways, de Boer seems to be an artistic and spiritual heir.

De Boer, like Covarrubias, has an innate cultural sensitivity coupled with the nomad’s spirit and curiosity. For both, travel is a constitutive activity. Driven by a constant desire for new experiences, the result is in an ever-expanding visual vocabulary and cultural fluency. Considering the past eight years, it is clear that de Boer is voracious in his appetite for new experiences. With each experience, his visual language is enriched and expanded. He is eager to pursue new techniques, drawing from art history and localized cultural traditions and visual expressions. More than a tourist picking up a few styles and techniques as souvenirs, he is a participant-observer. Adam seeks a sincere engagement and understanding of any practice he adopts. While he has described his use of Javanese Batik and woodcarving as, “(mis)appropriated”, I believe he is doing something more significant than appropriation, which implies a superficial reuse.
He thinks carefully and respectfully about how he uses the imagery and materials he adopts, seeking to understand and elevate the vernacular without necessarily being limited by tradition. The inclusion of these materials locates and enriches his own art without limiting him to emulation.

Having developed proficiency with batik and fostered relationships with master wood-carvers, de Boer brings these techniques into his work seamlessly. He relates that he was critiqued in Colombia for continuing to use an Indonesian vocabulary, implying that it somehow only had meaning or function within its original local context. And yet, as deployed in the image of El Cristo Caido, forming one side of an internally illuminated screen, the batik is highly effective. Based upon a venerated sculpture of the fallen Christ at a popular hilltop sanctuary and pilgrimage destination in Bogotá, de Boer uses the batik almost like stained glass, even as one never quite escapes the kitsch factor of batik (much as one can never quite escape the incongruous blend of devotion and theme-park commercialism often found at such religious sites).

Kitsch, of course, has become a loaded term, but it is not one that de Boer hesitates to use. He’ll even admit to adding the glowing light to the Cristo Caido screen to pump up the kitsch factor. As he explains it, after years of deliberately ignoring the distinctions between art and craft, between high and low, he now feels a freedom to use materials and styles as best fit his expressive intent. In using batik, for example, he hopes the medium becomes invisible, or at least is incorporated so fluidly as to loose any sense of exoticism.

And why do this? Like Miguel Covarrubias, Adam de Boer fully understands the importance and power of communication, insisting upon being fully articulate. His artwork is as visually expressive as he is verbally eloquent. From my first experience with Adam’s work, I noticed this trait. He practices a kind of intense self-examination without devolving into self-indulgence or naval gazing. He is aware of a series of themes that reappear continually in his work—a fascination with spiritual rituals and group behavior, a curiosity about the fine line between iconography and idolatry, and an interest in identity and self-fashioning.
All of these emerge in a new work created for this exhibition, the polyp-tych, *Through the Discourse of Aloha*. In form, it faintly echoes traditional multi-panel altarpieces. In content, it is a summary of what Adam has been doing the past few years. From the left, it begins with a vertical tie-dye style batik cloth with a worn body board attached to the surface. Stenciled on the board in white, beneath a green marijuana leaf, is the phrase “If You Do Not Sin Then Jesus Died for Nuthing” (sic). Reportedly purchased from a not entirely coherent individual on Venice Beach for $5, Adam appreciates the sublime ridiculousness of the message and the misspelling of “nothing.” Set against his batik design, mandorla or mandala-like, the tablet could be a holy relic for an absurdist Californian church: Let he who is without sin be the first to get stoned.

At the center are two square panels, one a colorful sunset in Santa Barbara, the other a largely white-on-black line drawing that compresses a series of figures, flora, and objects into a swirl of forms. This latter work is inspired by Adam’s experience of surfing in Bali—it was a surf trip that first took him to Indonesia—and his memory of riding through waters filled with chicken bones and other debris. Both the central panels might be thought of as being primarily about place and origins, with Santa Barbara and Indonesia being formative in de Boer’s self-identity.

Finally, on the far right, another biographical image that vibrates back-and-forth between iconography and idolatry. The viewer sees an image of a figure in a frame, receding at sharp angle. Without context, it could be mistaken for a modernist interpretation of Christ. In actuality, it is based on a tile painting found in the California home of Adam’s Indonesian grandparents. Family legend held that the image represented an Indonesian “god” and was an important vestige of the family’s origins in Java. The generation that was raised in the United States, Adam’s father, had imbued it with familial and spiritual significance. Adam eventually inherited the tile and realized that in fact it was nothing more than a kitschy tiki painting purchased by his grandparents in Los Angeles in the 1960s. Now, through his alchemy, Adam has infused the tile with significance and made it something worthy of veneration.
Room Screen for Cristo Caido: (Pretending to Be Dead), recto
2014
batik on linen in polychrome carved wood artist frame,
interior LED illumination
61 x 95 x 15 in.
Through the Discourse of Aloha
2013
batik on linen, found painted body board
(4-panel polyptych) 84 x 365 in. when installed

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