

**Kenneth M. George. *Picturing Islam: Art and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 164 pp.**

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Building on over two decades of conversation and friendship between the author and renowned Indonesian Muslim artist A. D. Pirous, this beautifully crafted book is a work of ethnographic depth and subtlety. In it, we see the complexity and intimacy of the fieldwork encounter playing out over a long time span, affording us a view of how time transforms both persons and things. Kenneth George's intimate analysis of Pirous and his paintings simultaneously provides a unique perspective on three larger spheres that summon Pirous in various and contradictory ways: the Muslim faith, the Indonesian nation-state, and the global art market.

Born in 1932 in the volatile province of Aceh, Pirous is the age of the hypothetical seventy-year-old described by Benedict Anderson in his edited volume *Violence and the State in Suharto's Indonesia*.<sup>1</sup> Pirous saw and lived through Dutch police-state authoritarianism, World War II and the Japanese military occupation, the anticolonial struggle, regional armed rebellions and CIA-instigated civil war, the killing of somewhere between 600,000 and two million alleged communists, anti-Chinese pogroms, the slaughter of East Timorese, and the religious violence and vigilantism that followed the bloody collapse of Soeharto's New Order rule. Yet violence appears in much of *Picturing Islam* as a quiet, persistently tugging undertow rather than a central force. It is present from the start in, for example, the abusive words of Pirous's Dutch art teacher. Pirous's later realization that the broader art community viewed Indonesian artists as derivative and inauthentic practitioners of a genre that originated and reached its fullest expression in the West also motivates Pirous's turn to Islamic art. Yet it is not until we reach the final chapter that violence assumes center stage. As the record of New Order corruption and atrocities in Pirous's homeland and beyond came to light after Soeharto's downfall, Pirous expressed an anguished subjectivity in canvases that appeared charred and wounded, and that summoned audiences to demand justice rather than the spiritual reflection that had dominated his earlier religious art. Looking back to earlier chapters of the book and Pirous's life, we see more clearly the currents of violence that were there all along. But we can also appreciate George's decision to stick closely to the art genres and social experiences as they were then lived from Pirous's perspective rather than giving violence a starring role. Indeed, violence's relatively subtle and muted appearance through most of the book feels ethnographically consistent with how Pirous experienced, narrated, and often suppressed this quotidian and sometimes explosive facet of life in twentieth-century Indonesia.

A related accomplishment of *Picturing Islam* is George's ability to depict how Pirous not only suffered under but also benefited from an authoritarian state, and found himself implicated and complicit in its support. George manages to honor his interlocutor and their deep friendship while still writing critically about how Pirous

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Violence and the State in Suharto's Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2001), Introduction, p. 9.

become entangled in disturbing and only half-acknowledged social practices and political agendas. In doing so, George helps shed light on how millions of Indonesians who, for the most part, were not engaged in active resistance to authoritarian rule, gave shape and meaning to their ethical projects and commitments. With his painting *The Sun after September 1965*, Pirous celebrated Soeharto's ascent, which at the time meant his own liberation from the leftist artistic circles that prescribed social realism with increasing force and insistence in the early 1960s. Many leftist artists, meanwhile, were being killed and imprisoned, or going into hiding, as Soeharto took charge of the country. In his later contributions to an illuminated national Qur'an, Pirous used designs from (Christian-majority) East Timor among the supporting motifs, consistent with the New Order regime's tendency to incorporate and depoliticize cultural difference. The depth of the revulsion Pirous expressed towards the New Order in some of his works from the post-Soeharto era, it seems, emerged in part out of his own experience as victim, accomplice, and beneficiary of the regime, and from what George calls its "predatory reciprocities."

*Picturing Islam* also contributes to the material turn in anthropology and the humanities and social sciences more broadly by developing the concept of "companionable objects." Companionable objects are bound up in the lifeworlds of subjects, deeply emblematic and revealing of subjectivity or, in George's words, the sense of being a "who" and a "what." George follows Pirous in "dwelling" with these objects. He attends to their relations to broader genres as well as Pirous's personal biography and memories (e.g., his mother's making embroidered textiles and his brother's cartoons), and he also attends to their material qualities and implications (e.g., the turn to acrylic paint coinciding with a new understanding of painterly subjectivity). In doing so, George brings a warmth and humanity to the investigation of materiality that is not always present in some of the otherwise very interesting and innovative work in anthropology that is indebted to science studies. In developing his notion of "companionable objects," George may have been inspired by a counterpart emic term—"spiritual notes"—as Pirous labels the works that he has held onto in his private collection. George portrays the evolution of Pirous's concept with care and precision, reading both with and against the grain of Pirous's own explanation to show how the concept confers vital meaning upon his ethical work and reflection, while also sheltering him from potential critics.

*Picturing Islam* should be a welcome addition to the bookshelves and course texts of anthropologists, historians, art historians, and Southeast Asianists more broadly for its approach to the intertwining of individual biography and national history; careful treatment of religion as lived practice; demonstration of the oppositions and surprising affinities between abstract modernist and Islamic spiritual art principles; and interweaving of ethics, lifeworld, and subjectivity.