

At The Saatchi Gallery, Muslims Make Demands

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Recently there was a brouhaha in Great Britain over two paintings that had been on display at the Saatchi Gallery. They were both by the pseudonymous artist who goes by the name SKU. Thy paintings overlaid Arabic script on images of a nude woman, and included the Qur'anic verse that constitutes the shahada, or Profession of Faith, which is one of the five pillars of Islam. These paintings were, according to The Times of London, apparently meant to depict the conflict between America and Islamic extremists.

However, the inclusion of the Islamic declaration of faith, known as the shahada, in the painting prompted complaints from Muslim visitors who demanded that the paintings be removed. One suspects that SKU wanted to cause a stir, so useful these days for an artist's career, and that's exactly what he got.

No one was making those Muslim visitors look at those paintings; no one was forcing them to visit the privately-owned Saatchi Gallery. But the Muslims held firm. The painter, SKU, proposed a supposed "compromise": the paintings would not be removed, but would instead be covered with grey sheets. In that way, present and absent at the same time, the paintings would still attract attention and discussion – with some people perhaps lifting the sheets for a view, or asking museum officials about the reason for their being covered, and what was being kept from view,, and why, which would focus more attention on those paintings, among visitors and in the media – which has already carried many stories about these otherwise unprepossessing works – than they might otherwise have received.

The Muslims grandly conceded to let the paintings remain, as long as they were covered. What makes this tale of craven self-censorship even more disturbing is that the Saatchi Gallery has always sought to be "edgy" and "out there." Charles Saatchi has been proud of defying all attempts to censor the display of any of his paintings. The show exhibiting part of his collection at the Royal Academy of Art in 1997 contained a painting of Myra Hindley, who took part in the the torture and killing of five children between the ages of 10 and 17, the infamous "Moors murders." Hindley and her partner Ian Brady were described by the trial judge as "two sadistic killers of the utmost depravity." Many people condemned Saatchi's showing of the painting; some even resigned in protest from the Royal Academy. But Saatchi kept the painting in the show.

Charles Saatchi's collection also included "The Holy Virgin Mary'" by Chris Ofili., which is a painting of the mother of Christ set atop two huge slabs of elephant dung. It created a storm of predictable protest when shown in London in 1997 and again when it was shown at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999. Christian groups called for the painting to be removed because

it was “offensive to religious viewers.” ‘Saatchi didn’t budge. Nor did he suggest a compromise like that accepted by the Muslims, of leaving the painting in place but covering it with a sheet.

The question remains: why was Charles Saatchi so willing to cover up the two paintings by SKU that offended Muslims, but unwilling to consider doing the same for much more offensive works, the portrait of serial killer Myra Hindley and Chris Ofili’s “The Holy Virgin Mary”?

Islam, among all the world’s religions, is the one we are most afraid to defy. We treat it with kid gloves. You must not make fun of the faith, ridicule any of its beliefs, mock Muhammad, or, as SKU did, mix Qur’anic verses with non-Islamic material deemed offensive to Muslim sensibilities.. But if it’s a question of offending Christians, why go right ahead – put the Virgin Mary on slabs of elephant dung. Or show Andres Serrano’s photograph of a small crucifix immersed in a vial of his own urine, and that “Piss Christ” will be considered a serious art work and continue to be on display for hundreds of thousands of viewers, despite howls of protests from Christian groups. Only after 24 years of being shown was “Piss Christ” finally put out of its miserable existence by a Catholic group in Avignon whose members tore up the photograph.

This unequal treatment of art works deemed to blaspheme Islam or Christianity is a result not of respect for Islam but of fear of Muslims. We know what they are capable of: the murders of Charlie Hebdo’s cartoonists; the killing of the documentary film maker Theo van Gogh for his movie describing the mistreatment of women in Islam; the attempts to murder Swedish cartoonist Lars Wilks; the threats to kill British Pakistani writer Salman Rushdie. But no one wants to admit to that fear, so they feign respect.

The gallery ought to have stuck to its guns. It should have told the Muslims who demanded the removal of SKU’s paintings

that Charles Saatchi had in the past shown paintings that offended Christians, such as that by Chris Ofili of the Virgin Mary (propped upon elephant dung), and continued to do so despite protests; that these SKU paintings may have offended some Muslim sensibilities but were meant to raise questions about clashing identities, and they did not constitute hate speech; that freedom of expression, artistic as well as political, was a central value of British and Western civilization; finally, that those living in the West and enjoying its freedoms had an obligation to respect the values of that civilization.

The Saatchi Gallery can still remove those sheets that now cover SKU's two paintings. It could also post a sign at the gallery's entrance, warning that 'Some Muslim visitors may be offended by the two paintings of SKU, and we suggest they not look at them.' That would provide a salutary shock. Muslims used to having their demands met would be put on notice that they had gone too far. Non-Muslims used to yielding to those demands would have their own spines stiffened as a result. Both are consummations devoutly to be wished.

First published in [*Jihad Watch*](#).