



PROJECTS IN THE MAKING... KAMROOZ ARAM: TRIAL BY FIRE

Kamrooz Aram's recent exhibition of paintings and drawings, "Night Visions and Revolutionary Dreams" at New York's Oliver Kamm/5BE gallery, invoked a drug-induced trip, an ecstatic revelation delivered from the heavens or a bleary-eyed night playing video games. In the painting *Mystical Visions Undetected by Night Vision Strengthen the Faith of the Believers and Make their Enemies Scatter* (2007), four angels descend from a constellation-filled sky as heavily plumed birds look on and flowers burn in cold blue flames far below. The eerie light washing over the entire work recalls the high contrast of military night vision devices. Is this an ambush with tracer fire and napalm or a religious epiphany? Bathed in swirling clouds and murky green, the painting is an elegant summary of a world where the rhetoric of religion and warfare commingle indeterminately.

Born in Shiraz, Iran, in 1978, Aram was eight when he moved to the US with his family to escape the Iran-Iraq War. Like many children of his generation, Aram grew up playing video games on Nintendo and Sega home entertainment systems. In the scrolling landscapes of early game design, the player was often restricted to moving forwards and backwards. These landscapes established rules of composition that Aram has since applied to his own art, as in the 100-foot long mural *Super Celebration Desert Operation Testing Station* (2006), commissioned by MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts. The painting, which covers the wall of the museum's theater mezzanine corridor, depicts planes emerging from soil that resembles desert camouflage. Aram incorporated existing fire alarms into the work as blazes of orange and yellow. The artist says, "I often think of the use of landscape in early video games like *Super Mario Bros.* or *Sonic the Hedgehog*...or more appropriately [the jungle-themed shoot'em up] *Contra*. In these games, the landscape is a flattened cross-section of the planet, stretching from underground to above the clouds."

Speaking of the mural, he continues, "For the first time I was able to work with the 'whole' image, that is, the view of the entire 'level' in the game, rather than just what you see on the screen."

Similarly, for the 2006 Busan Biennale, Aram painted a mural that wrapped around the walls of a small gallery. It featured a sky rendered in gradations of purplish blue, recalling the limited color palette of 8-bit technology, with the earth presented in cross section. Inspired by airport meditation rooms, the piece offers quiet repose through its balanced composition of clouds and plants. Aram also placed plush cushions in the room for visitors wishing to linger there. Based not upon real flowers but rather floral motifs from pricey Persian carpets that the artist photographed in New York home furnishing stores, Aram's plants borrow from two disparate traditions—textiles and decorative arts of the Middle East and the pixelated fire flowers of *Super Mario*.

In his meticulous drawings Aram pulls together seemingly divergent histories, equating the puffy Afro hairdos that symbolize the American black power movement of the 1960s with the dark turbans of revolutionary mullahs. The iconic heads float in space, often among starburst formations, spouting fiery tendrils of color that make an ironic nod towards Persian miniature painting. For the artist, the two radical archetypes share common strategies and goals. They incorporate Islam into their struggle to gain power and a voice for marginalized communities.

Through painting, Aram energizes his position as an artist of Iranian descent practicing from within the historically male-dominated, teleological Western canon. His works complicate that history through their appropriation of high and low culture, the flattened perspectives of both video games and the miniature tradition. Aram sets his stakes high, as he said in a previous interview, "For me, the challenge is to provide material for a multitude of readings." ■ CHRISTOPHER Y. LEW

■ Kamrooz Aram — *Mystical Visions Undetected by Night Vision Strengthen the Faith of the Believers and Make their Enemies Scatter* (2007) Oil and stickers on canvas, 94 x 120 in. Courtesy the artist and Oliver Kamm/5BE Gallery, New York.