

THE Arts
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LAST CHANCE

**An Artist and His Friends
Take On Bin Laden**



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES ESBER

James Esber. In "You, Me and Everyone Else," of Pierogi through Dec. 31, the artist had friends do variations on the theme of Bin Laden, including, above, Darina Karpoz, and top, from left, Andrés García Peña, Bruce Pearson and Brooke Pickett.

James Esber, like most of us, apparently has a thing about Osama bin Laden, our era's most notorious figure. In "You, Me and Everyone Else," Mr. Esber's current show at Pierogi, the cornerstone of the Williamsburg, Brooklyn, gallery scene, Mr. bin Laden's familiar beard-and-turban-framed features stare out of scores of drawings that line the walls. They recur in shifting textures, shades and ratios of black and dark red (or sanguine) — but the basic image never flinches.

The ensemble of about 100 triple-hung tracing-paper works resembles a chorus of leering, vaguely Michelangeloesque Old Testament prophets, although they also slant toward political cartoons. It is also a dizzying, slightly hallucinatory, one-venue repêchage gallery.

Each drawing is a collaboration between Mr. Esber and someone he knows: one of around 100 friends and relatives, older and younger, artists and nonartists. All were invited to make a tracing of a photograph of a drawing of Mr. bin Laden that Mr. Esber had made in 2005. Each participant received a portfolio containing the photocopy, a piece of tracing paper and a tiny paint set with red and black ink and even a small cup.

Three generations of Mr. Esber's family are represented on the walls, from his father, James Esber Sr., a retired firefighter, through his sister and two brothers, to his young son, Abraham, 7, who is one of several participants too young to remember 9/11. Mr. Esber's wife, the painter Jane Fine, has contributed, as have about 50 other artists, including Alastair Worth, Tom Backlund, Diana Cooper and Alexander Ross.

Several people identified on the exhibition checklist as architects, writers and photographers have also taken part, along with a smattering of art dealers and curators and a librarian, a dentist, a hair stylist, a lawyer, a chemistry teacher and an anesthetist (that's James Wagner, the art blogger and co-editor of the online art zine *Continued on Page 5*



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In "Execution," a 2009 canvas, James Esber makes reference to a famous Vietnam War-era photograph of the street execution of a Vietcong prisoner, conflating the shooter and victim.

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From First Arts Page

In the gallery's press statement Mr. Esber said he wanted to eliminate "the distinction between skilled and unskilled hands," so that "personal touch becomes paramount." He has succeeded. The variety is astounding but not surprising. It suggests that each person, whether a professional artist or not, has a "voice" as well as quite a few ideas about the nature of drawing. It only takes the proper context to bring them out.

Mr. Esber gave his collaborators plenty to work with in the form of a bluntly drawn, heavily lined image enriched by historical details. The famous bin Laden beard harbors a steep, winding road and some of the treacherous terrain that makes Afghanistan the ideal terrorist refuge, as several contributors, including the artist Bruce Pearson, emphasize. Some participants were inspired by the subject's cheek and forehead — the ellipse for the brain that hatched the plot — into tiny dar-

like shapes that evoke the planes heading for the World Trade Center on 9/11. The two colors are used in tremendously varying ratios, although only Andrés García Peña, an artist-gondolier, decided to shade the image from red to black, top to bottom, while David J. Brown, a former museum curator, alternated the colors in vertical stripes, like an American flag.

In one of the most distinctive works the artist Darina Karpoz traced Mr. Esber's drawing with a crazed assortment of often supple line patterns that look as if a breeze might scatter them. The work is titled "This Is Not a Portrait," after Magritte's "This Is Not a Pipe." Just as the Magritte is not a pipe, but a painting of a pipe, Mr. Esber's project is not a portrait of Mr. bin Laden, it is a meditation on drawing and individuality. Each image is in a way a self-portrait of its maker, just as the totality is a kind of group portrait of an Esberian community.

There's more to this exhibition than "This Is Not a Portrait," although the interest in current events, or history, rarely wavers. The exposure of bin Laden faces break now and then for several fuzzy-looking low-reliefs made of little pasts of Plastiline in pale, graded tones of blue, green or dark pink. They depict people who have been in the news but — un-

like Mr. bin Laden — only fleetingly, thrust there by circumstances beyond their control.

In one the face that comes into focus (courtesy of, after you read the title on the checklist) belongs to Capt. Cheney B. Sulzberger, whose successful emergency landing of an airliner in the Hudson River made him a national hero. In another it's Falcon Henne, the 6-year-old Colorado boy whose parents falsely reported his back to us who first seems to be the artist at work, until you realize that his extended hand hold not a paintbrush, but a gun. It is titled "Execution," which snaps things into focus. Suddenly the ghost of the famous Vietnam War photograph of a street execution of a Vietcong prisoner rises to the surface. The figure is a hybrid: both the Vietnamese officer and his prisoner reified into one. The giveaway is that plaid shirt worn by the victim, which is as much a part of the collective memory as any other detail. It has been transposed to the shooter and is now worn backward. The executioner and his quarry are one.

This conflation adds but one further twist to Mr. Esber's perverse yet affirmative show, in which Mr. bin Laden image has been, as it were, executed so many times.

**Individual visions
of one of the era's
most famous faces.**

An Artist and His Friends Take on Bin Laden
By **ROBERTA SMITH**

James Esber, like most of us, apparently has a thing about Osama bin Laden, our era's most notorious figure. In "You, Me and Everyone Else," Mr. Esber's current show at Pierogi, the cornerstone of the Williamsburg, Brooklyn, gallery scene, Mr. bin Laden's familiar beard-and-turban-framed features stare out of scores of drawings that line the walls. They recur in shifting textures, shades and ratios of black and dark red (or sanguine) — but the basic image never flinches.

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toward political cartoons. It is also a dizzying, slightly hallucinatory, one-rogue rogue's gallery.

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Three generations of Mr. Esber's family are represented on the walls, from his father, James Esber Sr., a retired firefighter, through his sister and two brothers, to his young son, Abraham, 7, who is one of several participants too young to remember 9/11. Mr. Esber's wife, the painter Jane Fine, has contributed, as have about 50 other artists, including Alexi Worth, Tom Burckhardt, Diana Cooper and Alexander Ross.

Several people identified on the exhibition checklist as architects, writers and photographers have also taken part, along with a smattering of art dealers and curators and a librarian, a dentist, a hair stylist, a lawyer, a chemistry teacher and an aesthete (that's James Wagner, the art blogger and co-editor of the online art zine ArtCat).

In the gallery's press statement Mr. Esber said he wanted to eliminate "the distinction between skilled and unskilled hands," so that "personal touch becomes paramount." He has succeeded. The variety is astounding but not surprising. It suggests that each person, whether a professional artist or not, has a "touch" as well as quite a few ideas about the nature of drawing. It only takes the proper context to bring them out.

Mr. Esber gave his collaborators plenty to work with in the form of a bluntly drawn, heavily lined image enriched by historical details. The famous bin Laden beard harbors a steep, winding road and some of the treacherous terrain that makes Afghanistan the ideal terrorist redoubt, as several contributors, including the artist Bruce Pearson, emphasize. Some participants were inspired to sharpen random marks on the subject's cheek and forehead — the edifice for the brain that hatched the plot — into tiny dartlike shapes that evoke the planes heading for the World Trade Center on 9/11. The two colors are used in tremendously varying ratios, although only Andrés García-Peña, an artist-gondolier, decided to shade the image from red to black, top to bottom, while David J. Brown, a former museum curator, alternated the colors in vertical stripes, like an American flag.

In one of the most distinctive works the artist Darina Karpov traced Mr. Esber's drawing with a crazed assortment of often superfine patterns that look as if a breeze might scatter them. The work is titled "This Is Not a Portrait," after Magritte's "This Is Not a Pipe." Just as the Magritte is not a pipe, but a painting of a pipe, Mr. Esber's project is not a portrait of Mr. bin Laden, it's a meditation on drawing and individuality. Each image is in a way a self-portrait of its maker, just as the totality is a kind of group portrait of an Esberian community.

There's more to this exhibition than "This Is Not a Portrait," although the interest in current events, or history, rarely wavers. The expanses of bin Laden faces break now and then for several fuzzy-looking low reliefs made of little pats of Plasticine in pale, gradated tones of blue, green or dark pink. They depict people who have been in the news but — unlike Mr. bin Laden — only fleetingly, thrust there by circumstances beyond their control.

In one the face that comes into focus (sort of, after you read the title on the checklist) belongs to Capt. Chesley B. Sullenberger, whose successful emergency landing of an airliner in the Hudson River made him a national hero. In another it's [Falcon Heene](#), the 6-year-old Colorado boy whose parents falsely reported had taken off in a [homemade gas balloon](#).

The Plasticine portraits make a near conceptual counterpoint, but they're not, in themselves, as engaging as the other art Mr. Esber has made in this material, or as the acrylic-on-canvas pieces that also interrupt the flow of bin Ladens. Rendered in bright colors, with juicy, carefully thatched strokes and forms that are often hollowed out by large holes or patched with an extra piece of canvas, these works take a longer view.

One image of hollowed-out forms suggests a slouching, destabilized Statue of Liberty and is indeed titled "S.O.L." Another presents the words of the military alphabet in hot pink in an immense, fortresslike pile that is framed by the stretched-out silhouette of an American G.I. carrying a machine gun.

Perhaps most intriguing is the lush image of a figure with his back to us who first seems to be the artist at work, until you realize that his extended hand hold not a paintbrush, but a gun. It is titled "Execution," which snaps things into focus. Suddenly the ghost of the famous Vietnam War [photograph of a street execution of a Vietcong prisoner](#) rises to the surface. The figure is a hybrid: both the Vietnamese officer and his prisoner rolled into one. The giveaway is that plaid shirt worn by the victim, which is as much a part of the collective memory as any other detail, has been transposed to the shooter and is now worn backward. The executioner and his quarry are one.

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"You, Me and Everyone Else" is on view through Dec. 31 at Pierogi, 177 North Ninth Street, Williamsburg, Brooklyn; (718) 599-2144 or pierogi2000.com.