1 NO ETHICS WITHOUT THINGS

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3 ABSTRACT

4 Just as recognition and pursuit of the human good take place in language and
5 action, so too do they unfold in encounter with the material and visual. The
6 ethical crises, projects, and striving we see in everyday religious life are
7 worked out not just in the intersubjective play and politics of language but
8 also in encounter with, in dwelling with, material and visual substances and
9 forms. This essay considers the material conditions that make possible the
10 “ethical pleasures” sought by Indonesian painter A. D. Pirous in making and
11 displaying contemporary works of “Islamic art,” most especially works that
12 make “visual recitation” of passages from the Qur’an.

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14 KEY WORDS: *anthropology of art, anthropology of ethics, material culture,*
15 *Islam, A. D. Pirous, Indonesia*
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19 To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is
20 between those who have it in common.

21 —Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958, 52)
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23 1. Prefatory Remarks

24 Roughly twenty-five years ago, I began an ethnographic collaboration
25 with Indonesian painter Abdul Djalil Pirous (b. 1933, Meulaboh, Aceh) in
26 order to explore the cultural politics of “contemporary Islamic art” in
27 Southeast Asia. That collaboration continues until today. For many years,
28 my focus was on the political and cultural forces that had summoned Pir-
29 ous forward as an artist-citizen in Indonesia as that newly independent
30 country came onto the world stage. In time, those forces led him to look to
31 Islam afresh and see in it powerful aesthetic and ethical possibilities. My
32 book, *Picturing Islam: Art and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld* (George
33 2010), tells the story of how Pirous took up the venture of making
34 “Islamic art” amid the currents of national and global communication. It

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1 is about him finding cultural, political, and ethical location as a postcolo-
2 nial Muslim artist.

3 Pirous was no stranger to me. We had been friends since 1985, and
4 from the start of our project, he has encouraged me to develop a feel for
5 his paintings, and to learn from them. “Good paintings,” he once said to
6 me, “are always full of surprises.” Paintings thus call on us to be recep-
7 tive to them. What possibilities do they disclose to us? How might they
8 change our sensibilities? What might they show us about dwelling in the
9 world? What predicaments do they pose? These, I think, are questions
10 that belong to the field of “visual ethics” or that will help us conjure it as
11 a fruitful category for reflection and study.

12 “Visual ethics” is not a term that I used in *Picturing Islam*, but served
13 as a rubric for a symposium about the book, visual culture, and religious
14 ethics at the 2011 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion.
15 My treatment of ethics in the book stemmed in part from my reading of
16 work by Judith Butler (2005), Michel Foucault (1997, 2005), and Paul Ric-
17 oeur (1992), and offered at best a glancing consideration of “Islamic
18 ethics” or religious ethics, more generally. More crucially, I drew from my
19 friendship and conversations with Pirous to reflect on the ethical disposi-
20 tions that led him to make abstract paintings featuring Qur’anic verse.
21 For Pirous, making these works has been an ethical venture in several
22 respects: It has to do with fashioning an “expressing self” in relationship
23 with others; with being useful, and showing goodness and responsibility
24 toward others in everyday conduct (*ihsan*); with cultivating Islamic values
25 and dispositions found in in the Qur’an; and with giving himself and
26 others something he calls “ethical pleasure” (about which, more below). In
27 this light, the ethical—in its various modalities—may be found in the con-
28 tent of a painting (Qur’anic verse); in the relationship between the artist
29 and his audience as mediated by a painting; and in the artist’s effort to
30 align his art and the way that he has lived with God’s will.

31 My aim as an ethnographer and friend in that project was to grasp
32 the understandings and ideals guiding Pirous’s work—a task we might
33 call descriptive ethics. It was not my goal to suggest a normative or pre-
34 scriptive framework for ethics in the making of art, nor was it to criti-
35 cally interrogate “Islamic ethics.” In this essay, I would like to push on
36 to ground that is new for me—understanding some of the material and
37 visual conditions for ethical life, especially as they may be manifest in
38 works of art. Pirous and some of my other Indonesian friends use the
39 word *penghayatan* to talk about their commitment to life and life forms.
40 The word suggests to me an ethics of recognition and receptivity, not
41 just to people around us, but aimed toward and engaged with the objects
42 and images that suffuse our world. As we draft our ideas about or for a
43 “visual ethics,” we may wish to acknowledge how ethics rests upon our
44 material and visual condition.

2. Ethics, Language, and Things in Everyday Life

In his introductory essay to *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action*, Michael Lambek reminds us that ethics is intrinsic to everyday speech and activity, and forms an ineluctable part of the human condition (Lambek 2010a, 1; see also Lambek 2010b, 39, 42, 61–63). As Veena Das puts it elsewhere in that same volume, “Everyday life is the site in which the life of the other is engaged” (Das 2010, 376). Although both Lambek and Das point to the embeddedness of ethics in everyday life, they differ in some degree about what we might call the visibility of ordinary ethical sensibilities. Lambek stresses the tacit quality of ordinary ethics, the way ethics goes unremarked and “without calling undue attention to itself” in the foundations of the everyday (2010a, 2). Ethics is more readily discernible, he says: “(1) in respect to its breaches; (2) with regard to ethical problems or issues in which the right thing to do is unknown or hotly contested; (3) in prophetic movements of social and ethical renewal; and (4) among priestly classes attempting to rationalize and educate” (Lambek 2010a, 2). Moments of failure, conflict, religious instruction, or social renewal—however ordinary those moments might be—bring ethics into view. Das, by way of contrast, thinks of everyday life as a site of ethical striving, a site where uncertainty, rather than agreed-upon virtues or ideas of the common good, is basic to ethical sensibilities and projects that achieve or arrive at a newness, at a “coming into being” (Das 2010, 376–78, 396–97). What I take away from Das is that ordinary ethics is not just about the taken-for-granted foundations for the everyday here and now (per Lambek), but also about perseverance, “nextness,” and possibilities for the “otherwise” (compare Kompri-dis 2006; Povinelli 2011). Ethics, among other things, is about disclosure and bringing life possibilities into view.

I did not have the essays by Lambek and Das at hand when I was writing *Picturing Islam*, but recruit them here to take some first steps in answering—or perhaps merely echoing—the question I pose at the end of that book: “Will we see ethics differently if we look to pictures as the fulcrum of ethical relationships?” (George 2010, 145). As I suggested in my prefatory remarks, my question was prompted by my friendship and ethnographic collaboration with Pirous, and his desire to bring his art into accord with his understanding and experience of Islam—a form of ethical labor in which Pirous sought congruence between his art and the way that he lived. Pirous’s own ideas about the ethical aspects of his work do not exhaust all those ethical dimensions worthy of ethnographic or philosophical concern. What I cannot stress enough is how his ethical venture also and unavoidably involves material things, specifically, the paintings and prints he has made. A material world does not figure strongly in the conceptualizations of “ordinary ethics” put forward by

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Lambek, Das, or the other co-contributors to Lambek's volume. Their emphasis on language and action largely overlooks how ethics may be tethered to things and thinginess. Things, of course, are quite ordinary—our everyday worlds are suffused with them, as Hannah Arendt noted in *The Human Condition* (1958)—and I would argue that we cannot have a sufficient account of ordinary ethics until we admit materiality into our reckonings.¹

A similar case ought to be made for the place of the visual, or visual culture, in our depiction and study of everyday ethics. In her introduction to this focus issue, Elizabeth Bucar reminds us that the visual is fundamental to human experience. We are, she says, “visualizing, picturing, and seeing creatures” (2016, xx). It is not just things that suffuse our world, but images and visual culture more broadly.² Indeed, “to live in any culture whatsoever,” writes W. J. T. Mitchell, “is to live in a visual culture” (2005, 349). No society, no religion, is without visual culture, and so we should expect everyday ethics and ethical life to be caught up in the visual, no less than they are caught up in language and action, the realm of human practice of central concern in *Ordinary Ethics*.

Just as recognition and pursuit of the human good take place in language and action, so to do they unfold in encounter with the material and visual. Ethical crises and projects of the sort mentioned by Lambek, and the vulnerability and ethical striving so thoughtfully explored by Das, are worked out not just in the intersubjective play and politics of language but also in encounter with, in dwelling with, material and visual substances and forms.³ This suggests to me that we must acknowledge that our reflexivity, our conscience, and our pursuit of the good depend upon the material and the visual no less than they do upon speech. Conscience may be experienced and understood as an internal voice that summons us to this or that path of action (see, for example, Simmel 1950, 254). Yet we should ask: Must conscience be imagined (and sequestered) as inner speech only?⁴ Might our conscience also turn on the look of images or the touch of things, our being drawn to things? Might conscience not also find external expression and intelligibility in our relationship with the

¹ Among the co-contributors to Lambek's volume, Webb Keane has been pioneering the study of materiality, agency, and religion. His chapter in that volume directs attention to the objective materials of semiotic forms (Keane 2010, 78), and so suggests ways for scholars to bring the materiality of things and the objectified forms of language together in a sweeping theoretical approach to ethics.

² See Pinney 2006 for a splendid review of approaches to the problem of the visual.

³ See, for example, my essay on lifewriting and art works for an exploration of ethics, conscience, and their intermingling with verbal and material forms (George 2012b).

⁴ Compare, for example, how Indonesian—borrowing from Arabic—renders conscience as *hati nurani*, the “luminous, enlightened heart,” or as a “heart so enlightened that it may see what is invisible to the eyes.”

1 material and visual world? Might conscience also incline us to see, or look
 2 in particular ways? Could it be that the objects and images around us
 3 give us ethical direction? Or make us vulnerable?

4 The thinginess of visual culture and the visibility of material culture
 5 feature prominently in the work of David Morgan (1998, 2005, 2008,
 6 2010), who places emphasis on the way objects and images mediate reli-
 7 gious belief, practice, and experience, especially with respect to feeling
 8 and bodily sensation. Morgan's work is part of a groundswell of interest
 9 in the fields of anthropology and religious studies about materiality.⁵
 10 (Even a partial account of that groundswell goes well beyond the scope
 11 of this essay.) Signal studies in the "material turn" commonly take up
 12 problems of subjectivity, agency, power, circulation, affect, and the medi-
 13 ation of ideas and experience. Although these studies seldom put explicit
 14 or sustained focus on ethics, we may nonetheless plumb them for ways
 15 to relate the material to the ethical.

16 3. On "Bundling" and the "Stickiness" of Things

17 Among the prominent voices in the "material turn," Webb Keane has
 18 argued that "materiality is the precondition for the social circulation and
 19 temporal persistence of [religious] experiences and ideas" (2008, 230),
 20 and a precondition for "ethical consciousness" (2010, 78). Of special bene-
 21 fit to me is his notion of "bundling" (Keane 2006, 200–1; 2008, 230)—the
 22 ways in which material things combine an indefinite number of proper-
 23 ties and qualities that in turn give things an inherently open-ended and
 24 vulnerable character.⁶ Keane uses examples in which the flammability of
 25 a thing's constituent materials—the cloth of a flag, the wood of a venerated
 26 Chinese ancestral tablet—make the thing in question vulnerable to
 27 contempt and desecration: a flag is burnt in protest, a tablet is used as
 28 cooking fuel. What interests me here is that Keane has helped explicate
 29 why an ordinary ethics—or the ordinary ethics we call religious ethics—
 30 commonly take the vulnerability of things as a source of concern. The
 31 bundled properties of an object introduce contingencies that might sub-
 32 vert or derail its purpose or intended use. By the same token, the vulner-
 33 ability and open-endedness which material bundling makes possible

⁵ Morgan views visual culture studies as a subfield of material culture (2008, 229).

⁶ "Bundling" is also key to the workings of D. W. Winnicott's "transitional objects" (1971)—the fuzziness and warmth of a blanket or teddy bear are a common example. The material properties of the transitional object "gives the child an experience of a meaningful connection within their inner world with an object that is recognized as being, in some sense, not them and offers an early experience of a form of subjectivity beyond the self" (Lynch 2010, 46).

1 leave room for reflexive disclosure, surprise, and a change of sensibilities
2 among those who dwell with the thing.

3 While a thing is, in part, a bundling of properties that inhere in it, a
4 thing is also, as Sara Ahmed would say, “sticky”—“what it picks up on
5 its surface ‘shows’ where it has traveled and what it has come into con-
6 tact with” (2006, 40). Things take shape, arrive before us, and come into
7 reach through labor, encounter, and the way we turn toward them. No
8 less sticky is the affect that turns us toward things, and that brings us
9 into intimate contact with them. Describing the stickiness of happiness,
10 Ahmed observes how happiness not only attaches to a thing and brings
11 it near, but also “sticks” to whatever is around the object, including the
12 conditions under which the thing took shape and appeared within our
13 lifeworld (2010, 32–33). Things—happy things, Ahmed calls them—carry
14 the promise of happiness; happiness is presumed to follow or be sent
15 forth from the object. It is as though happiness is in the aim of a thing.
16 “We arrive at some things *because* they point us toward happiness,”
17 writes Ahmed (2010, 40). “When we feel pleasure from such objects,” she
18 says, “we are aligned; we are facing the right way” (2010, 37).

19 Were I to rewrite *Picturing Islam* as a bolder summons to the study of
20 “visual ethics,” I might begin by saying that there is no ethics without
21 things, rather than ending the book, as I did, asking if pictures matter to
22 ethical life. Without forsaking an ethnographic and analytic grasp of the
23 cultural and political forces that so deeply etched Pirous’s lifeworld and
24 ethico-aesthetic sensibilities—Islam, nationalism, modernism, globaliza-
25 tion, and authoritarian rule to name some of the key ones—I might
26 include an appreciation for material “bundling” and “stickiness” to help
27 make me more receptive to my friend’s strivings, and to the ethical prob-
28 lems and debates he has had to confront as a Muslim artist-citizen in
29 postcolonial Indonesia. And too, I might engage more probingly than I did
30 in *Picturing Islam* with Pirous’s interest in “ethical pleasure.” Neither Pir-
31 ous nor I think of ethical pleasure as an “Islamic principle,” but I think
32 he might agree with me in thinking of ethical pleasure as an artifact of a
33 contemporary practical Islam that informs Muslim lifeworlds and Muslim
34 encounters with works of art. A more sustained look, then, into ethical
35 pleasure as I came to learn about it in the company of an Indonesian
36 painter might guide us toward a richer, more pluralistic understanding of
37 visual ethics and its material entailments and predicaments.

38 4. “Ethical Pleasures” and the Work of Religious Art

39 One of the reasons I want to dwell on ethical pleasure is my convic-
40 tion that we should call into question popular views that expect Muslims
41 everywhere around the globe to adhere to a uniform ethico-aesthetic sen-
42 sibility mandated by a pleasureless, inflexible, and iconoclastic religious

1 creed (George 2009, 2012a). We need to turn our scholarship against uni-
 2 versalist notions of a timeless “Islamic aesthetics” to discover the ever-
 3 changing ways that art has mingled with religion and ethics in Muslim
 4 communities (compare Flood 2002). More important for the discussion
 5 here is how Pirous’s ideas about ethical pleasure came to orient his artis-
 6 tic and religious strivings even as these threw him into religious debates
 7 about the ethics of making art. Bundling and stickiness played a part in
 8 the aims and predicaments of this venture—indeed, in the very feel of
 9 pleasure—and so may demonstrate some of the ways visual ethics
 10 involves material and affective dimensions and not simply visual ones.

11 “Ethical pleasure” first came up in my conversations with Pirous as
 12 we discussed a series of turning points in his work in the early 1970s
 13 after he had established himself as a rising star in the Indonesian art
 14 scene. Up until that time, Pirous worked without any interest in Islamic
 15 themes or iconographies; abstraction, spontaneity, and self-expression
 16 were his driving visual pursuits. A visit to the standing collection of
 17 Islamic art at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in the winter
 18 of 1970 changed all that. Looking at the objects on display—calligra-
 19 phies, manuscripts, ceramics, and fabrics—and finding in them a simi-
 20 larity to the everyday arts of his childhood in his ethnic homeland in
 21 Aceh, Pirous was overcome by a visceral and wholly unexpected thrill of
 22 recognition. Returning to the studio after that moment of recognition
 23 and surprise, Pirous began a life-and-art-changing painterly exploration
 24 of iconographies that would convey his ethno-religious belonging and
 25 that would distinguish him as an “authentic” Indonesian artist, rather
 26 than as a Third World abstractionist working in imitation of modernist
 27 styles associated with Europe and the United States. This new direction
 28 in his work also coincided with his first experimentations with acrylic
 29 paints, and with his two-year training in graphic arts at the Rochester
 30 Institute of Technology. The feel of new material (acrylics do not behave
 31 the way oils do), the textured, antique look of inked plates, and the disci-
 32 pline needed for graphic work coincided with a new expressive vision
 33 aimed at capturing ethno-religious sensibilities in his art.

34 Paintings in his solo show in Jakarta in 1972 and in the 1974 Indone-
 35 sian Biennale featured what he calls “expressive calligraphy” (*kaligrafi*
 36 *ekspresif*) worked up in oils, acrylics, and modeling paste. The paintings
 37 displayed disfigured “Arabic” letters on what looked to be surfaces
 38 weathered by time. Some of the paintings included legible Arabic charac-
 39 ters put together randomly and with the purpose of thwarting viewers
 40 from reading beyond the figure of the character. In other works, the let-
 41 ters were deformed beyond legibility but still kept some resemblance to
 42 Arabic, as in *White Writing* (Figure 1). Pirous explained to me that he
 43 was not interested in content, but in the expressive potential of calligra-
 44 phy as a pictorial form:

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FIGURE 1. *White Writing*. A. D. Pirous. 1972. 100 × 180 cm, marble paste, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Yayasan Serambi Pirous.

I did not want to be held back by the dynamic of calligraphic writing, or the form of calligraphy because I still reckoned that it inevitably would be read. But I could be free if I just painted characters by themselves. Some were curved, some upright, some to the left, some to the right, with periods, inside of curves that were very expressive. That gave me more freedom, and also gave me a kind of satisfaction in the dynamic of the lines themselves. I didn't feel it necessary to keep it so that the writing could be read. It was very clear that they came from Arabic. There clearly were *ha*, *ka*, *la*, *mim*, and so on. But I didn't feel it necessary to combine them into a sentence. I was building an atmosphere, an atmosphere. I also sensed that atmosphere in the Qur'an, how a sura came into being, how a sura was brought down as *wahyu*, divine revelation. With Arabic writing, we have a specific icon, a specific world, something spiritual, meditative, and contemplative. I took this up with the idea of not being wrapped up in the word, but rather, of being wrapped up in the unexpressed word. I didn't want to say anything, but wanted to create a certain feeling, an expressiveness.

Here, I think, is a good example of Pirous at play with the stickiness of material things. These "expressive" calligraphic forms were recognizably "Arabic." "Sticking" to them was the whole of Qur'anic revelation; an orthography that brought believers closer to Allah (see George 2009). He does not say so, but my long friendship with Pirous persuades me

1 that he felt a pleasure in aligning or directing his self-expression to an
 2 ambience of divine revelation, to awareness of God's care and closeness.
 3 The venture, the pleasure, felt "right" or "rightly guided." Or perhaps I
 4 should say there was pleasure, a happiness, in being "rightly guided," in
 5 being close to God.

6 We may have hints of this pleasure in the physical composition of the
 7 paintings themselves. The expressive calligraphic orthography and calli-
 8 graphic objects (plaques, tombstones, and fragments of manuscripts)
 9 were built up in modeling paste on expanses of base canvas painted in
 10 acrylic monochrome. The calligraphy and calligraphic objects occupy the
 11 front-most visual plane of the work, and show the touch of the artist's
 12 hand. The monochrome acrylic field, by way of contrast, almost lacks the
 13 signs of expressive painterly touch in the manner of color field painting,
 14 and so frees the color from representational tasks. Some of the paintings'
 15 titles—*White Writing*, *Red Writing*, and *Blue Calligraphy*, for example—
 16 suggest ways that color and its light supply spiritual and visual moods
 17 for presentation or disclosure of the expressive calligraphic forms, as
 18 though each was a color of divine revelation and magnificence. The
 19 immersive experience of bringing calligraphic forms into being in a bath
 20 of color and light perhaps made the creative work, the creative labor,
 21 seem like revelation itself. There is, too, a striving here to draw the
 22 viewer into the happiness and revelation disclosed by the painting.

23 The problematic "legibility" of these forms opened the artist up to criti-
 24 cism. As I have explored elsewhere (George 2009), many Muslims, and
 25 Muslim clerics in particular, feel a custodial ethic toward the Qur'an
 26 regarding its recitation, its visual-material reproduction as a text, its safe-
 27 keeping, and its handling as a textual object. "Expressive calligraphy"
 28 seemed to some Indonesian clerics who attended the shows a wrongly pur-
 29 sued deformation of divine orthography; it was "incorrect" in light of a
 30 Qur'anic standard, and theologically suspect. One should not play with
 31 divine inscription. For others, the effect of looking upon images of some-
 32 thing that was "written" and "Arabic," and yet unreadable was disturbing.
 33 Responses like these propelled Pirous away from self-expression and self-
 34 absorption toward greater restraint and ethical concern:

35 When I exhibited, people began to talk. "What are you writing? What are
 36 you saying?" "Oh, this painting is very close to the treasure of Islam!" "If
 37 this is Arabic writing, maybe this is Sura Al-Fatihah (Q. 1, The Prologue)
 38 and this is Sura Al-Falaq (Q. 113, The Rising Day)." I thought about it a
 39 long time. Those comments pushed me into thinking about art and mes-
 40 sage. In the beginning, the aesthetic in my works of art didn't know com-
 41 promise with meaning. Through the visual someone could feel meaning
 42 within the abstraction. But think how happy people would be, think about
 43 their sense of belonging to works of art like this—the aim of which is to
 44 approach Islamic concerns—think how much fuller it would be, if they

could look and read, “Oh, this statement is about Sura Al-Ikhlās (Q. 112, Pure Faith)” and so forth. I said to myself, “If I do Sura Al-Ikhlās the way it is bound together in the Qur’an, it will restrict me in a way that will be extremely awkward for my expressive work.” I saw this as a limit that I didn’t want. And then suddenly I woke up. Me, what is my life all about? What is a good person? A good person is someone who is useful to others. If I give them something they want, I will be useful. And so I decided to be useful. This is the concept of *khairuqum an-fa’aqum linnas*—a person useful to others. So I sacrificed myself, putting a limit on my free expression, but I came back to values that I could explore more frequently and more meaningfully in the Qur’an. I planted in the paintings concepts and philosophical values that would make them more enjoyable. *Aesthetic pleasure and ethical pleasure together.*

The paintings in these shows thus occasioned criticism that prompted Pirous to reflect on his own aspirations and artistic subjectivity while seeking receptivity and acceptance from gallery-goers. They occasioned exercises in painterly conscience—in the sense of a “knowing through dwelling with.” Being useful to others through paintings comported well with his conscience, with his pursuit of *ihsan*—the idea and aim of showing one’s goodness and responsibility to others. At the same time, the paintings offered material mediation and extension of his conscience at work.

His first calculated step toward being useful to others was to make the calligraphy in his paintings legible, always using the written figures to quote (to “visually recite,” I like to say) Qur’anic verse, or Jawi “translations” of Qur’anic verse. (“Jawi” is the term for Malay-Indonesian when written in Arabic orthography.) Let me use one of my favorites from Pirous’s many Qur’anic works, *For the Sparkling Morning Light* (Figure 2). The cracked, magenta tablet in the center of the painting displays a verse from Q. 93 *Ad-Duha* (“The Early Hours of Morning”) in Qur’anic Arabic and turquoise.⁷ The first few *ayat* reassure the faithful in the face of adversity:

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

By the morning’s bright light

By the night when it is still

Your Lord has not abandoned you and does not hate you

What comes after will be better for you than what came before. (Q. 93: 1–4)

The painted *sura* goes on to admonish believer-viewers to keep recounting Allah’s many favors and blessings.

⁷ “Pirous” (*pirus*) is the Arabic, Persian, and Indonesian-Malay word for turquoise. Thus there is in the painting a “sticky bundling” of signifying color (turquoise), a name, painterly calligraphic touch, and visual recitation of Qur’anic message in divine orthography.

FIGURE 2. *For the Sparkling Morning Light*. A. D. Pirous. 1982. 160 × 200 cm, fiberglass, gold leaf, acrylic on panel and canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Yayasan Serambi Pirous.

The doubling of pleasure in the disclosure of a painting no doubt goes beyond what Pirous conveyed to me. But we might begin with his account of ethical pleasure and the way he contrasts it with aesthetic pleasure. Pirous seems to suggest that ethical pleasure derives from the material recitation of Qur'anic verse *in anticipation* of its being recognized and read (or recited) by others. He did not attribute an ethics to the “aesthetic pleasure” in viewing a painting. Ethics, in his view, involves time and reflection in the way that taking in a painting does not. As he once remarked to me, “You know, you grasp a painting as a whole. In a single moment you either like it or you don't. It doesn't need time. But for the verse here, you need time for that, for reflection. That's why I say there is aesthetic pleasure and ethical fulfillment in my paintings.” Ethics arises from reading and spiritual reflection (*tafakkur*) on Qur'anic verse. In Pirous's account, ethics is about giving religious or spiritual *content* to a painting, and has little to do with the aim or pleasures of artistic *form*. Ethical pleasure, in this framework, is about aligning oneself with, and taking pleasure in, Qur'anic recitation and reflection. Indeed, Pirous has often talked about his paintings as spiritual notes (*catatan spiritual*) aimed at cultivation of self and inner being (*batin*). The paintings aim for happiness and contentment, even as they disclose or point to the happiness that is the Qur'an (the recitation of the divine message).

Here I should confess that I sometimes saw the Qur'anic calligraphy as a source of austerity, didacticism, and constraint, rather than as a form sticky with joy or awe. So did others. The didactic intent (and content) in Pirous's Qur'anic paintings led some to see the venture not so much as “art” but as *da'wah*—the preaching of Islam, a matter that in the minds

1 of many should be left to religious authorities, not painters (see George
 2 2009). Pirous, in this perspective, could be charged with usurping the role
 3 of Islamic authorities. Pirous routinely had to fend off such charges for
 4 years, and consistently denied interest in practicing *da'wah* through his
 5 paintings. There were worldly cultural, political, and religious circumstan-
 6 ces that Pirous had to contend with to be sure, and these may have
 7 inclined him to dissociate his work from *da'wah*. Alienating the *ulama* or
 8 the *ummah* more generally surely had its risks. Indeed, saying as he
 9 often did, "These paintings are just my spiritual notes," might have been
 10 intended to reassure others than he did not have usurping ambitions. At
 11 the same time, the ethical gesture most inherent in *da'wah* is that of
 12 summons or invitation to others, a gentle beckoning to the faith. As I look
 13 at things now, that gentle summons to others lends itself importantly to
 14 the ethical pleasure of his paintings. It is as if he is saying, "Join in this
 15 happiness, this mindfulness of God (*dzikir*)."

16 What I have long overlooked by putting undue weight on the way Pir-
 17 ous would contrast aesthetic and ethical pleasure is the way he was
 18 always talking about *bundling* them in his art. Not only a doubled pleas-
 19 ure, but a "sticky bundling" of divine revelation with the play of pain-
 20 terly materials and vision. This bundling did not have happy or uniform
 21 effects for all. Clerics would occasionally object that this was no way to
 22 handle Qur'anic verse. As the Indonesian Minister for Religious Affairs
 23 bellowed to the press in 1992, "The Qur'an should not be sacrificed for
 24 art!" It was not just religious authorities who were disturbed by the bun-
 25 dling. One of Pirous's colleagues in the Indonesian art scene complained,
 26 "Why are you ruining these paintings with this writing?"—a remark that
 27 stubbornly refused to acknowledge the Qur'anic verse as anything more
 28 than a formal graphic presence that disturbed or marred painterly
 29 vision. Still another artist accused Pirous of "selling" the Qur'an by fea-
 30 turing it in work that could be bought and sold.

31 We hear in these objections and complaints concern about a normative
 32 ethics for the material interpenetration or bundling of art and faith. This is
 33 not an issue of categories alone—that is, what counts for art and what
 34 counts for religion—but goes to the ethics of handling sticky, bundled *mate-*
 35 *rials*.⁸ Does handling a Qur'anic painting require ablutions (*wudu*) on the
 36 part of Muslims? Do the sensory effects of the painting that emanate from
 37 color, form and so on, overpower the Qur'anic verse in visual recitation?

⁸ I do not have the space to make a fuller argument, but it seems to me that keeping cat-
 egories "separate" or "pure" is never done in the abstract, but always in the messy, sticky
 materiality or objectivity of the world. It is only in material expression that categories
 become vulnerable to the polluting effects of other categories. By the same token, it is only
 in the messiness of material expression that categorical play (as in metaphor) offers disclo-
 sure of possibilities, a striving for otherness or nextness.

But perhaps of most concern to religious authorities, were the integrity and “accuracy” of the Qur’anic recitation in the painting. From early on, Pirous was subject to their authority, and had to grapple with a normative custodial ethics for presenting Qur’anic verse. His paintings always present Qur’anic passages in full, legible calligraphic form, without blemish or flaw. Yet the material vulnerability of the paintings left him open to criticism. On several occasions, clerics saw in splashes of paint errant use of the diacritics needed for Arabic writing. On other occasions, the calligraphic figures—built up as they were in modeling paste—suffered chips and cracks during shipping or installation. Damaged figures sometimes raised complaint from religious authorities, and Pirous had to keep the paintings touched up and in good repair (George 2009, 2010).

The bundling and stickiness of material properties in Pirous’s Qur’anic paintings may leave them vulnerable, but that same bundling and stickiness also matter to the aspirational character or intent of the works. By this I mean there is in (or behind) these paintings a striving to discipline, to work through, and to discover visual possibilities, surprises, and pleasures in the bundling and stickiness of the material. This creative striving is not an aesthetic venture alone, but an ethical one as well. For example, one may discover goodness and ethical pleasure in using visual materials to praise or glorify God—the religious gesture known to Muslims as *tasbih*. The eye-catching radiance of gold leaf, the intensity of saturated colors, the texture of surfaces, and the harmony and proportionality of space and line, all serve the ethical aim of *tasbih*, adorning the Qur’anic message and glorifying God’s magnificence.⁹ There is in Pirous’s approach to the play of sticky, bundled materials a gesture of “good conduct” toward the divine message.

5. Conscience Requires a Visual and Material World

Pirous has always been happy to learn that someone felt pleasurable cool and calm in the presence of his paintings. This, I think, is one of the ethico-affective aims of his work—to produce a pleasurable mindfulness of the divine by way of the gentle appeal or summons of a painting. If conscience is about dwelling with others in goodness, it seems to me that we might think about Pirous’s paintings as “works of conscience”—they invite us to live, act, and see together in pursuing goodness and pleasure, perhaps even in pursuing “truth.” That aspiration or aim, relying as it does on the stickiness and bundling of a painting’s material properties in its striving, is always at risk

⁹ Capturing or pointing to that divine magnificence without the use of Qur’anic calligraphy, says Pirous, is much harder than doing it with calligraphy. That is to say, without the bundling of “sticky” calligraphy, the ethico-aesthetic project of making a spiritual painting requires, in Pirous’s view, far more work and creative vision.

1 of being undone or derailed, or of being construed as an uncomfortable chal-
 2 lenge to hierarchies of religious authority and value, on the one hand, and
 3 to the hierarchies and ideologies of artistic value, on the other.

4 There is no normative ethics for works of art with respect to their dis-
 5 closures or affective aims. To take but another example from Indonesia's
 6 art world, there is the strident work of Arahmaiani, who aims to shock
 7 and critique the sensibilities of Muslim viewers and participants. In her
 8 performance of "Breaking Words," she wrote "Allah" on white ceramic
 9 plates in Arabic, invited audience members to write on them as well, and
 10 then smashed them against the wall. (Langenbach 2007). This iconoclas-
 11 tic gesture took advantage of the bundled material properties of ceramics
 12 and inks, as well as the stickiness of Arabic orthography, to shake partici-
 13 pants loose from attachments that, in Arahmaiani's view, border on the
 14 fetishistic. For at least several viewers, the smashing of the plates was a
 15 humiliating and hurtful blow to God and to their affective attachments to
 16 God through material form. Complaints were lodged with the police. If
 17 Pirous's work aims at "ethical pleasure," perhaps we may say that Ara-
 18 hmaiani's strives for "ethical hurt" (not harm) or "ethical unease." Ara-
 19 hmaiani, too, is an artist of conscience, no less than Pirous. As Ahmed
 20 reminds us, "different people are made happy by different things [and so]
 21 object choices are not equivalent" (2010, 44). Ahmed goes on to "question
 22 what is appealing in the appeal to happiness" and does so with the pur-
 23 pose of keeping histories of injustice (done in the aura of happiness) from
 24 disappearing (2010, 50). Her aim is expose "unhappy effects," to reim-
 25 agine what may count as the good life, and to find alternative models of the
 26 good in "those who are prepared to kill some forms of joy," even at the risk
 27 of living with the consequent unhappiness of others.

28 Allow me to push this essay to a close, then, despite my wish to linger
 29 further on the issues and arguments I have raised. A visual ethics is not
 30 so much about conveying ethical values supplied by this or that religion
 31 or this or that ideology in visual form, but rather, about pictorial-
 32 material space and substance as a site of ethical and affective encounter,
 33 aspiration, possibility, and dissent. Bundling and stickiness are the con-
 34 dition of that space and substance, and so seem to me a fundamental
 35 concern in the pursuit of ethical aims and direction. Conscience must
 36 contend with the bundled and the sticky even as it exploits them, dis-
 37 closing itself to the world as it discloses a vision of one even better.¹⁰

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