

**Audi Mission Viejo**

Southern California's Volume Audi Dealer  
(949) 218-5050  
[www.audimv.com](http://www.audimv.com)

**Orange County Real Estate**

Free Orange County home search. Satellite maps, 150K home photos!  
[www.ZipRealty.com](http://www.ZipRealty.com)

**Orthodontics for All**

Children and Adult Orthodontics Invisalign, 949 551-6555 Irvine  
[www.orthodonticsforall.com](http://www.orthodonticsforall.com)

**GOT FEEDBACK?**  
TELL US WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT OUR NEW LOOK!

Ads by Goooooogle

Advertise on this site



Search   
ADVANCED SEARCH

**Get Stuff!**

Place a FREE AD

all categories

Find

HOME NEWS COLUMNS MUSIC FILM ARTS FOOD CALENDAR

REAL ESTATE AUTOS JOBS ADULT

ARTS

**SANDOW BIRK GOES TO HELL**

*'Divine Comedy' may have started with Dante, but Birk's made the circles of heaven and hell his own*

BY REBECCA SCHOENKOPF

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2006 - 12:00 AM



Artwork by Sandow Birk

Sandow Birk's name gets dropped a lot in Southern California. People want to be around one of those guys for whom everything seems to come easy: his Guggenheim and Fulbright fellowships; his jet-setting to Rio, Morocco and Paris; his girlfriend who actually looks like Salma Hayek, but with more delicate features, which is wrong in so many ways.

He's boyish, he's handsome (the drag queens in Silver Lake call him "Mandow," with their patented drag queen purr), and he's a bloody genius. When he gets a MacArthur genius grant—and you know it's coming—I will not be happy for him, not even at all.

You can smell the envy at one of Birk's exhibit openings. It smells of sulphur.

\* \* \*

"In Smog and Thunder: The Great War of the Californias," which opened in 2000, was the then-36-year-old Birk's second solo show at the Laguna Art Museum. More than 80 works were crammed in, including inspirational posters begging Angelinos to unite and soliciting war bonds and "Porno Wanted for Our Men in Camp," while Birk's text commemorated the deeds of such heroes as Captain Chun Yeong Chang's tireless battalion of 11-year-old computer programmers and recounted such trenchant details as the gas stations along Interstate 5 running out of beer and Fritos during the South's drive on San Fran, while the cash machines ran out of twenties. Then there was the battle for Nob Hill—"sparsely defended by a tenacious band of lesbians and Hispanic maids, whom the Southerners overran after a fierce struggle." To go with his big fake canvases "by unschooled artists of the period" and his models of ships exploding, Birk wrote a history, even providing the art criticism: incorporated into his didactic wall texts were such analyses as this one for *Rendezvous at Twin Peaks*: "Seemingly added as an afterthought, the clumsy and stunted characters in this stiffly academic painting have been likened to cardboard cutouts. . . . Despite the painting's flaws, it is interesting to note the unusual depiction of a supply-line taco truck, representing a reality of warfare rarely depicted in more heroic images."

The history of the war included both personal accounts—a bitter General Gomez ceded the Valley to the Northern invaders, sneering, "Let the bastards burn"; hemp farmers in Big Sur mistook the invading Southerners for DEA agents—and all kinds of "flankings" and "strategic maneuvers" and "maritime assaults" and other boy things like that. Two artists I knew vowed never to set brush to canvas again.

\* \* \*

But for a while after, Birk struggled for a proper second act. Local artists were quietly gleeful when his very beautiful "Prisonation" series—PoMo appropriations of Hudson River School painters, with verdant landscapes containing all the state's prisons, unthreatening in the distance—didn't get much traction. Although his painting—which had been sort of clumsy and flat—had improved in skill and technique, the



go



Wednesday



Thursday



Friday

Event or Venue  Go

- any category -

FEBRUARY

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	1

Click a date to search for events on that day.  
advanced search >>



Ads by Goooooogle

**Message By Anita**

Orange County Massage Full body massage by top OC CMT Pro  
[www.MessageByAnita.com](http://www.MessageByAnita.com)

**Orange County Jobs**

Thousands of job postings, articles & resources to find a Job in LA  
[www.mycareersite.com](http://www.mycareersite.com)

**Get PreApproved Online**

California Purchase Loan, 0 Down, No Points, Orange County Offices  
[www.harborsidefinancial.net](http://www.harborsidefinancial.net)

**Orange County New Homes**

Find Your New Home - View Floor Plans & Elevations - Request Info!  
[www.khov.com](http://www.khov.com)

**Pardee Homes**

series was subtle and would never be the blockbuster "In Smog and Thunder" had been. It was seen as desperately latching onto a theme—any theme—without being willing to go on the line with any true feeling or statement. It also lacked the layer upon layer of imaginative detail with which "In Smog and Thunder" had depressed so many.

Then came "Dante's Inferno," a project for which his buddy Marcus Sanders adapted the Italian text into surf-speak and for which Birk provided dozens of small, black-and-white illustrations based on the etchings of Gustave Dore. While his Post-Modern appropriations of earlier artists were back in force, along with his fascination with the consumer detritus of 7-Elevens and strip malls, the work was a little bit boring and still not as imaginative as "In Smog and Thunder." That, after all, had come wholly from his own beautiful mind, like Athena sprung from Zeus, and didn't require an earlier source to make his story for him.

His fellows were pleased.

\* \* \*

But now the teeth-gnashing and hair-tearing have begun again—and with even more reason.

I'm sorry to report that the elements of everything Birk has done up to now have coalesced into an even finer project. His painting is better and more full-bodied. His alternate universe is just as imaginative and with just as much sly detail. "Sandow Birk's Divine Comedy" may have started with Dante, but Birk's made the circles of heaven and hell his own.

Organized by the San Jose Museum of Art, "Divine Comedy" is split between Cal State Fullerton's Main Gallery and its Santa Ana satellite, the Grand Central Art Center.

Large canvases explode like magma, huge, detailed depictions of the cityscapes—always cityscapes—that are stand-ins for paradise, purgatory and the inferno. There is no bucolic, pastoral heaven here; instead, it's John Winthrop's shining city on a hill. Heaven is impacted with traffic, and the multitudes of souls on their escalators and wandering through a Hong Kong-like neonorama make you feel infinitesimally small and soulless yourself. It's even still kind of grimy.

The Hollywood sign reads "Purgatorio," and you look from behind it down into a chasm of flame and liquor stores, with Virgil by your side. The Minotaur Lamb Shack offers shawarma. Those big canvases, bloody with color and appropriated from images by Brueghels and others, enslave your interest so that you are willing to make the effort of going around each of the small etching-like drawings, with their thick black-and-white hatch marks, that made up Birk's original tomes. (*Purgatorio*, *Paradiso* and *Inferno* each came in a separate large edition.)

And once you actually make that effort, they're amazing. The Three Graces are bikini babes prancing along in front of barbed wire. Beatrice—a juicy Latina with rolls of back fat—guides our hero onto a subway car. Men carry washers and dryers on their backs up flights of stairs as if Sisyphus was having to move from one first-month's-free apartment to the next. They're wonderful—and they're not even the worst part.

The worst part is the movie.

\* \* \*



Artwork by Sandow Birk

With his girlfriend, Elyse Pignolet, and other collaborators including puppeteer Paul Zaloom, Birk has been making a full-length feature of his trip to hell and heaven. In one room at Grand Central are the sets from his movie, art-directed by Pignolet. They're three-dimensional, fashioned from paper and quite small, like Satan's dollhouses. There's a porn palace—the Garden of Eden—with hookers outside begging you to take a bite of the forbidden fruit, one kneeling, orally pleasuring a man who appears to be Oliver Hardy. There's a subway car filled with graffiti for the scenes between Beatrice and our hero. There's a river, churning with lost souls, across which our hero travels

while the waves move back and forth like those old Vaudeville sets. There's an airport metal detector, where the goons from the TSA advance thuggishly on a hapless old man. There's the shawarma shack in 3-D, while on one wall, the long trailer for the movie runs on a loop. People



Artwork by Sandow Birk

Building quality new homes in Orange County, California.

[www.PardeeHomes.com](http://www.PardeeHomes.com)

Advertise on this site

**Why aren't there any Mexicans on "Star Trek"?**

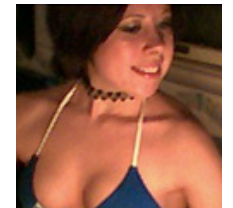
**!ASK A MEXICAN!**



**OCWEEKLY**

**OCWEEKLY.COM**

**PERSONALS**



deenis

Why you should get to know me: "Because I already know I'll hate you, and I'm daring you to prove me wrong."

**see more personals**

stood mesmerized at the recent opening, not willing to miss a minute, as the paper dolls that starred in the film journeyed along their harrowing way.

With James Cromwell (once known as Farmer Hoggett) voicing Virgil, Hollywood pretty boy Dermot Mulroney as the hoodied Dante/Birk standin, and a haunting, hipsterish score, the film goes so much farther in telling the tale than even the bitchen illustrations did. It's *Team America: World Police* with paper dolls instead of puppets—and maybe less vomit—enacting Dante's required reading that few of us have read.

Birk and his friends are still working on the full-length film, but even now that shooting's finished there are still problems to be solved. Birk sent me this note two days ago: "We [the four of us principal players in making the film] have been engaged in a weeklong debate/argument/discussion about the project. Faithful to Dante's original, we have a scene in which Dante meets Mohammed and Ali in Hell, punished there for the sin of 'causing strife' through the shiia/sunni split that occurred after their deaths. In our film, we have cast Mohammed as an angry taxi cab driver who is incensed to find himself in Hell, condemned by Dante, and that he is stereotyped as a cab driver. He goes off on a very funny rant in which he explains that all the strife from the Muslim community has been caused by his followers, not him." Birk and Pignolet are adamant that they remain true to Dante's text; the others are understandably afraid of fatwas. I, of course, agree with Birk and Pignolet; it's so easy to do when it's not my fatwa on the line.

\* \* \*

The controversy, naturally, will probably draw even more attention than Birk's already got—and if you didn't know it, Birk's got a lot. He'll win the jury prize at all his festivals and be richer and more famous than he is now. The MacArthur genius folks will get his number and give him a jingle. And the envy will seep from our pores like fat on an Atkins dieter.

Go ahead. Go see his show. You won't be happy for him, not even a little.

'Sandow Birk's Divine Comedy' at Cal State Fullerton, Main Gallery, 800 N. State College Blvd., Fullerton, (714) 278-3262. Open Mon.-Thurs., noon-4 p.m.; Sat., noon-2 p.m. Through March 9; also on display at Grand Central Art Center, 125 N. Broadway, Santa Ana, (714) 567-7233. Open Tues.-Thurs. & Sun., 11 a.m.-4 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Through March 20.

## PREVIOUSLY IN ARTS

### ***KING OF 'KINGS'***

Thursday, February 16, 2006 - 12:00 am

### ***URBAN DECAY***

Thursday, February 9, 2006 - 3:00 pm

### ***SATISFYINGLY OPAQUE***

Thursday, February 9, 2006 - 3:00 pm

***MORE»***

## ALSO BY REBECCA SCHOENKOPF

### ***THIS WEEK IN AMAZING EXHIBITS***

Thursday, February 9, 2006 - 3:00 pm

### ***YOU MAKE US FEEL***

Thursday, February 9, 2006 - 12:00 am

### ***COMMIE GIRL***

Thursday, February 2, 2006 - 3:00 pm

***MORE»***

HOME | NEWS | COLUMNS | MUSIC | FILM | ARTS | FOOD  
 ABOUT OC WEEKLY | ADVERTISING INFO | AD SPECS | PRIVACY POLICY | JOBS AT OC WEEKLY | FEEDBACK  
 LA WEEKLY | VILLAGE VOICE | SEATTLE WEEKLY | MINNEAPOLIS CITY PAGES | NASHVILLE SCENE

© Copyright 2006 OC Weekly LP