



TRANSNATIONAL



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Robert Knight

introduction by Rebecca Bengal

EVERYTHING THAT RISES

Rebecca Bengal

In the center of the gallery a collection of wooden church pews and prayer rugs are triangulated around an illuminated sculpture. Here, displayed on a pedestal, are a trio of symbols representing Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, layered and compressed in sculpted neon tubes: a bold yellow crucifix, a bright blue Star of David, an emerald green crescent. The trinity of icons mash up against each other, overlap in a multicolored glow, yet each retains its individual character, distinctly recognizable. This is the core of “Transnational,” Robert Knight’s exhibition at SUNY Cortland’s Dowd Gallery: a visual crossroads of three major world faiths which, for all their deep differences, share certain mutual tenets of theological belief and consider some of the same sites their Holy Land.

Reflecting that neon glow, on walls around the room, are photographs Knight has made over the last five years, the culmination of an artistic investigation into the shifting nature of sacred spaces and the role of immigration and religion in creating community.

Since 2013, Knight and his 4 x 5 camera and audio recorder have ventured into mosques, churches, synagogues, and other houses of worship throughout central New York State, where he lives and works, and around the world. As with previous bodies of work, the photographer was guided initially by both a desire to get to know his new home through his art and by his children’s changing perspective on their world, in this case his daughter’s curiosity about Judaism. Through the resulting

project—the making of the film *In God’s House* with his colleague Brent Plate—Knight became inspired to undertake a deeper inquest into the nature of spiritual community, especially what that means for new arrivals in a place like Utica, New York, famously dubbed “the city that loves refugees” by the U.N., but situated within a pre-election America suddenly in the grips of appalling anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Much like multidisciplinary artist Taryn Simon’s visual cataloging of subjects as diverse as public mourning and seized contraband, as well as her photographic consideration of outward surfaces and inner worlds of historically significant geographies, Knight’s approach is at once taxonomic, documentary, and conceptual.

For *Every Mosque Between JFK and Syracuse, NY*, a handmade accordion-style book, Knight envisions the journey of a Muslim person newly arrived to the United States. The title and format refer, of course, to Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, but rather than follow a single street, Knight imagines an actual route one might take from the airport to Syracuse, taking into account all the mosques (or, as he points out, "potential communities") on the way. Like the artists Doug Rickard and Mishka Henner, he employs the readily available surveillance technology of Google Street View to collect images of exteriors of American mosques in situ. The scenes randomly captured by Google—a rainbow in the sky above a mosque in Schenectady; a Halal meat delivery truck that partially obscures an Islamic center in Astoria; a group of girls in hijab hanging outside another community center—are wonderful

accidents, tiny reveals of the way the communities function in the larger world.

In "Transnational," and in these pages, the exteriors of the mosques are shown in juxtaposition with Knight's forays inside churches and mosques at worship, travels to sacred spaces throughout central New York and Europe. The rooms to which Knight is granted access are stunning spaces, some filled to capacity, some hallowed in their relative emptiness. One can almost hear the creak in the wooden chairs in the sparsely attended Sunday Mass at Saint-Germain-des-Pres, the oldest church in Paris, where a tiny congregation gathers under the skyward-reaching arches of its blue-lit ceilings. But these spaces are never truly bare—as a photographer, Knight is equally concerned with depicting the coexistence of past, present, and future. The fantastically decorative, stenciled walls of the Grand

Mosque in Rome are shown in deep contrast to the modern, dressed-down costume of those in supplication to Allah, a sea of blue jeans underneath an ornate system of ceilings and chandeliers. The intentional long exposure of his 4 x 5 camera creates a beautifully haunting blur, representing the decades and centuries of people who have passed through these places and those who will come after.

For these are photographs as much about the transitory nature of humans forced into migration as they are about the resilience of place, the physical and intangible markers we leave in the structures we build and transform with our presence. The signs become embedded in the landscape, in our own personal histories. "That thing we call a place is the intersection of many changing forces passing through, whirling around, mixing, dissolving, and exploding in a fixed location," the essayist

Rebecca Solnit posits in her book *Unfathomable City: a New Orleans Atlas*, which creates a map not only of geography, but of “ecology, democracy, culture, storytelling, urban design, individual life histories and collective endeavors.” “To understand a place,” Solnit continues, “is to engage with braided narratives and *sui generis* explorations.”

Such is the awareness that guides Knight’s photography and field recordings of hymns sung in the vastly morphing spaces of the world. An Episcopal church in Utica, New York, is transformed into a Buddhist temple by a new-comer community of Vietnamese Americans. Elsewhere in Utica, a Methodist church is remade into a mosque for a group of newly arrived Bosnians in the early 2000s. But these shifts are occurring in Europe as well, Knight discovers. He photographs a thriving Turkish mosque in Amsterdam

that began life in the 1920s as a Catholic church, and a mosque in an East London neighborhood that since the 1600s has been refuge for French Huguenots, then Orthodox Jews, and currently the Bangladeshi Muslims who he photographs in prayer, frozen in the entrancing, otherworldly blur of his open shutter. At Chiesa San Michele, a former seventeenth-century Catholic church in Rome now home to an Orthodox Christian Eritrean community, he finds himself in the midst of an *a cappella* call and response wedding ceremony; in Turkey, to meet with a muezzin to discuss his photographs, Knight and his children witness a young student receive a lesson in the multiplicity of ways to sing a particular verse of the Koran.

“Transnational” arrives at a particularly charged historical moment, months after a presidential immigration ban against majority

Muslim countries, in an era when hate crimes are enacted against Muslim immigrants and Muslim citizens in this country, and when religious and spiritual ceremony frequently becomes a part of public demonstration and protest. In a time when prayer has become a political act, it is difficult to view Knight’s photographs of men and women of all faiths coming together—kneeling in the vulnerable position of prayer, engaged in a ritual, sacred act, empowered by their numbers and by the words they sing and chant—and remain unmoved.

Standing in the gallery with these photographs and recordings, one’s gaze naturally is drawn back to the installation in the center of the room. Think of it not simply as an intersection, streets that briefly meet and move on in their separate ways, Knight seems to suggest, but as a convergence, a possible community.

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Selections from *Every Mosque Between JFK and Syracuse, NY*, 2017
Handmade accordion book with letterpress covers and vellum slipcase
8.5 x 9 x 5 in. (8.5 in. x 60.75 ft. fully opened)

All images courtesy of the artist and Gallery Kayafas, Boston

ROBERT KNIGHT: TRANSNATIONAL

Transnational is a multimedia project examining the role of religious spaces in our communities, both locally near Knight's hometown in central NY, as well as globally. The project began in 2013 with a documentary film examining immigration through four religious communities in the Utica area. At the same time, Knight made photographs and audio recordings of religious services, with a specific focus on spaces that represent a state of transition in some way. In 2015, Knight continued making photographs of religious services during a sabbatical in Europe, while also documenting exterior facades of mosques and synagogues in Berlin, where minority religions often operate at the margins of society. Most recently, Knight produced an artist's book comprised of images from Google Street View of every mosque from JFK airport to Syracuse, NY, representing a potential path that refugees and recent immigrants might take upon arrival in the US and the communities where they might settle.

Robert Knight is associate professor of art at Hamilton College. He received an MFA in photography from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design and a BA in architecture and economics from Yale University. Knight's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, and is included in the permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

