

Clashes of Civilization

- Charles Reeve -

Get out your guns. The enemies are here, implacable and murderous. Fortunately, we've been expecting the bastards for over a decade. After all, Samuel Huntington published his article *The Clash of Civilizations* in 1993 (and a book of the same title in 1996), and pundits and policymakers ever since have heeded his ominous prediction: "The clashes of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future."

This fatal tension, for Huntington, stems from globalization's erosion of the nation-state's sanctity—a decline that he feels will cause us to structure our allegiances around civilizations, "the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species." We won't merge into one happy global family, though, because "real" and "basic" differences (encompassing "history, language, culture, tradition and, most importantly, religion") divide civilizations.

So far, so even-handed. All civilizations behave this way; therefore, no one's to blame. However, if the difficulty Huntington articulates at his most taciturn is that other civilizations don't share the West's view of democracy and liberalism as universally desirable, then he exposes the roots of his concern when he states bluntly, "Islam has bloody borders."

It's all too familiar. While President Bush may want to believe his current rhetoric about spreading democracy, the fact that he initially called the "War on Terror" a crusade—and that he dismissed the statesman Colin Powell while retaining the intractable hawk Donald Rumsfeld—shows his true bellicosity.

However, the content of the "Clash of Civilizations" ideology interests me less than its form because—coincidentally or not—it has become a template for how people in the United

States view politics globally, nationally and regionally. Every issue presents the specter of a death match. Thus, a showdown with Osama bin Laden coupled with an attempt to ban gay marriage secured Bush's second term, even though the face-off turned out to be with Saddam Hussein and gay marriage's much-feared threat to family values is fiction.



Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi, *Clash of Civilizations*, 2002 Billboard installation

Courtesy of the artists and Admit One Gallery

Nor do only fear-exploiting cynics invoke this view. The widespread media analysis of this country as split in half by the Presidential election suggested that all Californians voted Democrat and all Texans voted Republican. Not surprisingly, this perspective also pervades the art world.

Regardless of whether a group seeks to exploit, analyze or heal this rift, the assumption remains that the future of politics will be clashes of civilizations, both within and beyond national boundaries. Yet even Huntington understood that a wise policy would seek to defuse these clashes: "For the relevant future," he concluded, "there will be no universal civilization, but instead a world of different civilizations, each of which will have to learn to coexist with the others."

I don't claim that the art I've assembled agrees with what I've said or illustrates my point. Rather, for me, the attraction of these works is that they question the adequacy, as strategy or analysis, of viewing the world as a series of irresolvable "us versus them" scenarios.