

A Prayer for Mecca

Read the original piece by Joobin Bekhrad on The Financial Times.

Towering cranes, blinding lights. Overhead, a looming skyscraper/clock tower, the emerald glow of its dials sanctified by the name of Allah and a crescent-topped spire. Below, droves of pilgrims in purest white circumambulating the Kaaba — and, in the streets beyond, a proliferation of Burger Kings and other fast-food outlets. Such is Islam's holiest of holies, as seen through the lens of Ahmed Mater. In *Mecca Journeys*, Mater's new solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, the Saudi Arabian artist documents and laments the city's headlong development. "My project has become a prayer for Mecca, a eulogy for a place erased and lost," he says. Modernisation may be essential to cope with surging numbers of pilgrims, but it carries a cost.

In the photographs and videos here, made since 2012, it's almost difficult to make out the Kaaba, set in what (but for the minarets) could pass for a sports stadium. The Royal Hotel dominates the skyline with its supersize Saudi version of London's Big Ben — but the eye is also drawn by the cranes: a bristling sea of

them, bent on constructing buildings bigger, better and brighter, in the superlative spirit that has gripped the Persian Gulf's Arab states for the past couple of decades. The scale of the endeavour is underlined by the scale of Mater's prints, which in some cases are more than two metres by three metres. Elsewhere in the city, Mater's pictures tell a more downbeat story. A seemingly abandoned petrol station is festooned with coloured lightbulbs that only emphasise its forlornness. On a rubbish-strewn street, antiquated air-conditioning units jut out of windows and unsightly wires criss-cross above. In one picture, two elderly men eat a takeaway meal on the floor in a cramped dwelling; in others, children make their way to school amid beat-up cars and crumbling walls, and an elderly woman hawks her modest wares on an unassuming street.

Mater does not neglect the hajj, the pilgrimage that Muslims are expected to make to Mecca at least once in a lifetime. In "Road to Mecca", a pair of videos made this year, he shows the locales and characters a pilgrim might encounter. Highway signs distinguish between the routes to be taken by Muslims and non-Muslims; an itinerant musician thumps away on frame drum strapped to his chest; and pilgrims hurl stones at pillars to symbolise their rejection of the devil. Given that the heart of Mecca is still off-limits to all but bona fide Muslims — as it was when Victorian explorers such as Sir Richard Burton risked all for a glimpse of the Kaaba — it's a fascinating window on the faith for those outside its sphere. Other works look at the conditions of the migrant construction workers who have been making Mecca's transformation possible. In the video sequence, "Leaves Fall in All Seasons" (2013), the artist presents a fly-on-the-wall view of their daily lives, with some of the footage having been shot by the workers themselves on their mobile phones.

Although they appear to be overworked, underpaid and subject to unforgiving and dangerous working conditions, they somehow manage to keep their spirits up. One clip shows a group of workers laughing as they joke about and impersonate a manager who they say will spend his riches partying in Jeddah that

evening. They are also astonishingly resistant to vertigo: a short 2013 film entitled “King Kong” features footage from atop the crescent crowning the Royal Hotel, captured by a cameraman seemingly inured to the giddy altitude. If a single thread runs through this exhibition, it is Mater’s juxtaposition of the huge sweep of Mecca’s redevelopment with the lives of those caught up in it. There is surely an implicit critique here. If the hajj is a time when Muslims, regardless of rank, are reminded of their common humanity, how does that square with the inequalities of wealth implied in these images?

Yet Mater, who was born in 1979, is not opposed to change in Mecca; in fact, he is quick to acknowledge the need for many of the developments that have been taking place, as pilgrims’ numbers have grown. Ideally, though, he would prefer to see more of a balance between tradition and modernity. “The future can be imagined,” he says, “but it cannot be crafted [or] built without reference to what has come before.” With many of the Arab world’s most historically and culturally significant sites having been hit by war and terrorism in recent years, preserving the true character of what is left — particularly in the case of Islam’s holiest city — may be more important than ever.

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