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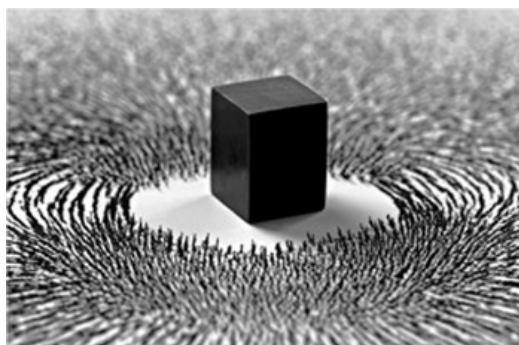
SAUDI ARABIA

SAUDI ARTIST AHMED MATER SUES SWATCH GROUP OVER INFRINGEMENT

BY KEVIN JONES



An advertisement for Omega's Seamaster Aqua Terra 15'000 gauss watch, which is at the center of controversy due to alleged copyright issues with the Saudi artist Ahmed Mater. Photo credit: Omega Aqua Terra Samaster via Le Figaro.



AHMED MATER, *Magnetism (Photograuve) II* (detail), 2012, four photograuve etching prints signed and numbered in special cloth covered solander conservation box, 62 × 81 cm. Photo credit: Ahmed Mater and EOA Projects via Le Figaro.

On February 15, 35-year-old Saudi artist Ahmed Mater accused Swiss watchmaker Omega of copying one of his most well known works without his permission. According to French trade magazine *Le Quotidien de l'art*, the artist sued the Swatch Group, Omega's parent company, in Paris's high court. The artist has been unavailable for comment on the evolution of this suit.

Part of Mater's "Magnetism" series (2012), the work in question shows a black cube-shaped magnet, referencing the Kaaba in Mecca, a sacred site for Islam, surrounded by swirls of anthropomorphic iron filings. According to Omega, the litigious image, which is used in an advertisement for its Aqua Terra collection, constitutes standard imagery to illustrate the watch's anti-magnetic functionality.

While the watchmaker downplays the use of Mater's work to marketing ends, the consumerist re-purposing of such a religiously charged image could have severe consequences for the artist. Replacing the sacred Kaaba with a luxury watch could be interpreted as blasphemous in Saudi Arabia, where Mater currently lives and works. One of the more prominent contemporary artists from Saudi Arabia, Mater is also a doctor. The disputed work mixes scientific and religious references, as the principle of magnetism is equated with the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca and worshipping of the Kaaba.

Information in legal documents, as revealed by *Le Quotidien de l'art*, indicate that Omega had contacted the artist to request using the photograph. No contract was signed, nor was any authorization to modify the image granted. Mater allegedly was willing to allow use of his images on the condition that Omega purchase two works from the "Magnetism" series and donate them to a museum. The watchmaker did not meet this condition.

Mater's suit comes shortly after the surfacing of another infringement battle involving artist Richard Prince. Accused of unauthorized use of a work by photographer Donald Graham posted on the social networking service Instagram, Prince and his gallery, Gagosian Gallery, received cease-and-desist letters allegedly asking them to stop distributing and exhibiting work containing unlawfully appropriated images by Graham.

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