

Mitochondria: Powerhouses

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A physician turned artist, Ahmed Mater is one of the most significant cultural voices documenting and scrutinizing the realities of contemporary Saudi Arabia and its position and influence in urgent global narratives of faith, environment, socioeconomics and geopolitics.

Elena Scarpa: Your first works such as the Illuminations series and Evolution of Man were strongly influenced by your background as a doctor – are the new works also still influenced by your previous occupation?

Ahmed Mater: I worked as a community doctor, which meant I had a responsibility for a range of conditions, patients, a need to be observant in many situations. I don't like to draw too tight a comparison as the professions and their processes are of course vastly different, but I really believe a lot of my outlook was honed through that training and experience. Both of the professions are shaped by the same urge to observe, monitor, analyse and synthesise symptoms and their causes (whether social or physical) – that's what motivated me then and it's what motivates me today.

Of course, works like Evolution of Man and Illuminations have medicine folded into them,

through the use of x-rays, and their subject matter. But this wasn't just a case of tentatively experimenting with the materials I had at hand when working as a doctor – I think x-rays are astonishing, for me they've always been something more than scientific or medical. Looking at an x-ray of your own chest is a fantastically provocative and unnerving experience. That's what these works are about in some ways – trying to get at the essence of that feeling. I was trying to resolve tension between different systems of knowledge – between science and religion, the apparently objective and the subjective, between faith and physical realities, or, as in *Evolution of Man*, the individual and the environment – it's about a social condition and an individual experience of that. Like so much of my thinking and my work, I am looking at vying systems, the binaries that shape and channel our lives, I think the stark x-ray exposure expresses that visually.

So, I guess it's a case of preoccupation, not occupation. Which is to say, instead of viewing my work as being influenced by my time as a doctor, it is probably more accurate to say my way of approaching the world led me first to my profession as a doctor, and then shaped my artistic outlook. My urge is always to gather information and to analyse, to consider the things which shape our current human condition – whether social, physical, faith-based, environmental – it's a perspective that informs my life and, in turn, the thinking behind all of my work.

ES: The exhibition at **Galleria Continua** analyses the development of Makkah as a symbol of faith-based economies, why do you think Islam's Holy City can be a symbol to study new cities around the world?

AM: I've spent a lot of time studying, absorbing and documenting Makkah. Relatively, it is experienced by so few, and it buckles under the weight of its own symbolism – it is both a real city and a symbolic city. More than being a symbol to study new cities around the world, Makkah itself exists in the realm of the symbolic, it is a symbol. It is also a prism through which we can consider urban and social concerns of

the 21st century.

There is an interesting contrast between what it is to Muslims and how it is perceived by an outsider – there's a very deep and intense symbolism for both. However, it is a city like any other, with all the same issues of any other urban environment. This intensity makes it a powerful lens through which we can observe the conflation of what I see as systems of power – urbanisation, religion, the commercial – they're all here, jostling, their clashing is fraught and their vying is literally reshaping the fabric of the place. 'Desert of Pharan' in particular maps the tension between public and private space in 21st century urban environments. This is ostensibly motivated by the demands of the hajj, but is also bound with commercial concerns and those of faith economies. I see these as being prevalent the world over. On the one hand, as populations boom, as space becomes a premium, the question of 'who profits?' is begged – how can the privatisation of our urban environments be reconciled with sustainable, equitable living? On the other hand, so called 'faith economies' wield immense, often unacknowledged, power. A 2016 report found faith to be worth \$1.2 trillion annually to the American purse – more than the combined revenues of the 10 biggest tech firms.

In many parts of the world today, I think there's an assumption made that we are ever-more secularised and that the control religion once exercised has been reduced immeasurably. I think this tide will be reversed in the 21st century – as populations shift, as we become more globalised, the might of 'religious structures' (which I view very differently from faith or spirituality) will be felt in our urban environments once more. Makkah is an intensification of these ideas and an important lens through which we can consider what these shifts mean.

ES: Evolution of Man was on display at Standing Rock; do you see any parallelism between the battle to stop the Dakota Pipeline and the impact of the oil industry in Saudi Arabia?

AM: The oil industry is not local. We might like to

narrow the environment into localities, into timeframes, but we cannot afford that mentality anymore. The fight of the Sioux Indians in Dakota is both specific and universal; the impact of a crippling addition to oil in the Middle East had and has very specific micro economic and social impacts, but, ultimately the macro effects decimate the whole world. Back in 2010 when I first made *Evolution of Man*, the chiasmus (the mirroring or criss-crossing seen in the work), was mimicking a destructive cycle that I observed around me – but there was still possibility to read it back and forth, to mutate, to change the narrative. As the Paris accord disintegrates, as lands are scared by pipelines, or as we see the effects play out in the obliteration of people’s homes from India to the Caribbean, my fear is that, very soon, we won’t have the option to shift the narrative, to change the perspective – soon, it may be a one-way road we are all walking down. Whether you’re in North Dakota or in the oil fields of Dhahran, this is not parallelism, this is one story now.

ES: This show, *Mitochondria: Powerhouses*, was conceived specifically for Galleria Continua’s spaces; how did your collaboration with the gallery start?

AM: The collaboration began with a friendship – Mario has visited Saudi a number of times and we first met there through mutual friends. The relationship with Continua grew when Antony Gormley visited Jeddah in 2014, during 21,39 – we gave a talk together on ‘Sculpture and the Collective Imagination’. It’s a subject that’s really essential to me and my thinking – I believe intensely in the possibilities of art for the public consciousness, the important, productive conversations that can coalesce around works when they are made accessible to a broad audience, when they are able to intervene in an open and clear way for everyone, not just art experts or the “art educated”. Of course, I admire Gormley’s work deeply for its capacity to intensely move a wide audience. It sidesteps the concerning barriers around some art presentation, which can prevent audiences from feeling engaged, as if it isn’t addressed to them. Anyone who encounters his work whether on a beach, on a

rooftop in an urban environment, or in a gallery setting is startled and arrested by the encounter, it speaks to them on a level that is pre- or non-academic (though, of course, it is the product of profoundly studied and deep outlook). That talk and meeting really spurred further dialogue between me and Mario; I see the gallery at San Gimignano as a testament to his belief in art presentation beyond the commercial – he is bold, the space itself so unconventional. As soon as he invited me to have an exhibition there, conceptual possibilities opened up for me. I knew I had an opportunity to present work that would not easily exist or be ‘contained’ within a normal white cube space.

Of course, there’s great theatre to the stage in San Gimignano and the work had to play to that, but there are more subtle possibilities too: the multiple levels of the gallery, with the mezzanine and the huge hall, the ability to draw parallels between bodies of work through these unusual sightlines. The procession of the rooms and smaller spaces, how that allows the story of the exhibition to unfurl. It was such a privilege to collaborate with the gallery, and important to me that mutual respect and shared interests lead to a friendship, which in turn helped realised this show.

In terms of its presentation in Italy – faith economies are an important idea in the show, and there are interesting parallels between Italy and Saudi Arabia in that way – to develop my thinking in this area and to present it here, to a public that has something of a shared context in terms of the massive weight of religious history and power, in a gallery as innovative and open to exploration and experimentation as Continua, was amazing.

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