

Saudi Artist Hoists Flag at Standing Rock

Hrag Vartanian interviews Ahmed Mater, read the original interview via [Hyperallergic](#)



Hoisted on a hill near what is known as the “Art Tent” in the Oceti Sakowin Camp at Standing Rock, North Dakota, are five black flags. From a distance they look almost funerary, while upon closer inspection you realize the fabric is printed with artist [Ahmed Mater](#)’s distinctive designs from his 2010 *Evolution of Man* series that morphs from a silhouette of a

gas pump to an X-ray image of a person holding a gun to their head.

Flapping in the wind, the images are particularly well placed considering the focus of the protest at the camp, the Dakota Access Pipeline. Mater is from Saudi Arabia, a country that has felt the brunt of economic and environmental changes brought on by the oil industry. The inclusion of the flags on this contested landscape raised a lot of questions for me and I asked the artist why he chose to travel to North Dakota and what connections he was trying to make with his installation.

Hrag Vartanian: Why did you feel it was necessary to go to North Dakota?

Ahmed Mater: The protest at Standing Rock, which started very small with just a couple of brave individuals standing up to the power of a huge corporation, is now a chance to focus the world's attention on a number of urgent global issues — that of environmental protection and the rights of indigenous peoples and cultures worldwide. We urgently need to work together, across nations and religions, to find alternatives to unregulated capitalism and imperialism.

As an artist, brought up in the south of Saudi Arabia, I empathized with the struggle of the Lakota Nation against the impact of oil development, and I wanted to go and see for myself and, if possible, contribute to spreading this story and building momentum through my platform as an artist.

HV: How did you learn about it?

AM: I read about it online and then CULTURUNNERS founder, Stephen Stapleton, put me in direct contact with stories and people on the ground in North

Dakota. The whole project came through my ongoing collaboration with CULTURUNNERS and their team.

This year, artists, including Khaled Jarrar, Khaled Al Baih, and myself, have traveled directly to contested communities and investigated issues related to the US presidential elections. CULTURUNNERS has a new model for the artist/organisation collaboration – a platform that has allowed me to make a film for the Guardian and share my artwork with new audiences.

HV: Why did you choose this flag project and what does it represent to you?

AM: Evolution of Man is an artwork and a statement. I wanted it to be visible in the “real” world. It is addressing the front line of the issue, not just in galleries, museums, or specialist media. It was a very organic process to turn these works into flags, and install them among the hundreds of other flags which represent over 300 nations at the Standing Rock Camp.

HV: What was your impression of the Standing Rock protests?

AM: It is like David and Goliath. The spirit of brave people and oppressed people against the might of corporate and military power. It’s inspiring and urgent in the new Trump Era we are about to enter.

HV: What do you think the role of art in these kinds of situations is?

AM: Art is not just a passive statement, art can be change.

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