



**SYMBOLIC CITIES** THE WORK OF AHMED MATER

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## INTRODUCTION

From the artificial glow of the sculpture *Antenna* to a drummer's crescendo in the video *Ghost*, Ahmed Mater shares his experience of a society in profound transformation. Mater was born in 1979 in the rugged Aseer region of southwestern Saudi Arabia. Trained initially as a medical doctor focused on community health, he has keenly observed Saudi Arabia and the dramatic socioeconomic changes that are shaping it. Now based in Jeddah, Mater experiments with a range of mediums in his search to understand the country's rapid transition from an agrarian way of life to a powerful oil-based economy.

Mater has turned increasingly to photography and video since 2010. Flying above abandoned desert sites and roaming the streets of Saudi Arabia's most populous cities, he invites us to contemplate the country's changing landscape from multiple vantage points. Collectively, Mater's images reflect his concern that a sense of place, history, and community are being lost.



## ANTENNA

“Standing on the dusty rooftop of my family’s traditional house in the southwest corner of Saudi Arabia, I would lift a battered TV antenna as far as I could toward the evening sky. Moving it slowly across the mountainous horizon, I searched for a signal from beyond the Yemeni border or across the Red Sea toward Sudan. My father and brothers would shout up from the sitting room below, as music filled the house and dancing figures appeared on the TV screen, filling the evening air with voices from another world.

“Like many of my generation in Saudi Arabia, I was seeking ideas, music, poetry—a glimpse of a different kind of life. This spirit of creative exploration, curiosity, and reaching out to communicate across the borders surrounding me have defined my journey as an artist.”

All quotes by Ahmed Mater unless noted otherwise.

2010  
Cold cathode lighting  
Courtesy of the artist and Athr



## THE EMPTY LAND

Mater's first experience with photography was shooting x-rays while working in a hospital. His proficiency in the medium grew, leading to his first major photographic series, the Empty Land, inspired by nineteenth-century descriptions of the American West. Here, an image of an oasis is surrounded by aerial views of silent streets, military bases, abandoned public projects, and discarded oil barrels. With this large grid of parched landscapes void of human presence, Mater suggests that the drive for development and progress is "leaving behind a scarred and empty land where not just material things like buildings and cars are abandoned, but also traditional values and a connection to the land."

2012

Fifteen color photographs  
Courtesy of the artist and Athr

## DESERT OF PHARAN

“Like few cities on earth, Makkah [Mecca] seems to buckle under the weight of its own symbolism. It is a hallowed site revered by millions and a point of perpetual immigration. In recent years, it has begun to be recast, reworked, and ultimately reconfigured.”

In 2011, Mater began photographing Mecca, in western Saudi Arabia, for a series titled Desert of Pharan, referring to the ancient name for the area around the holy city. For more than a millennium, Mecca has hosted Muslims performing the hajj, the obligatory pilgrimage centered on the Kaaba, a cube-like building in the middle of the Masjid al-Haram (Great Mosque).

Earlier images of Mecca often depicted the Kaaba surrounded by the low colonnades of the Great Mosque's main sanctuary and nestled in the folds of a mountainous terrain. Today, as Mater's images show, Mecca is witnessing the largest transformation in its history. The Kaaba now stands at the center of a brightly lit construction zone as workers erect a massive extension of the mosque and other amenities to accommodate a growing influx of pilgrims. The gleaming Makkah Royal Clock Tower complex, with its luxury hotels, shopping mall, residences, and prayer room, dominates the horizon.



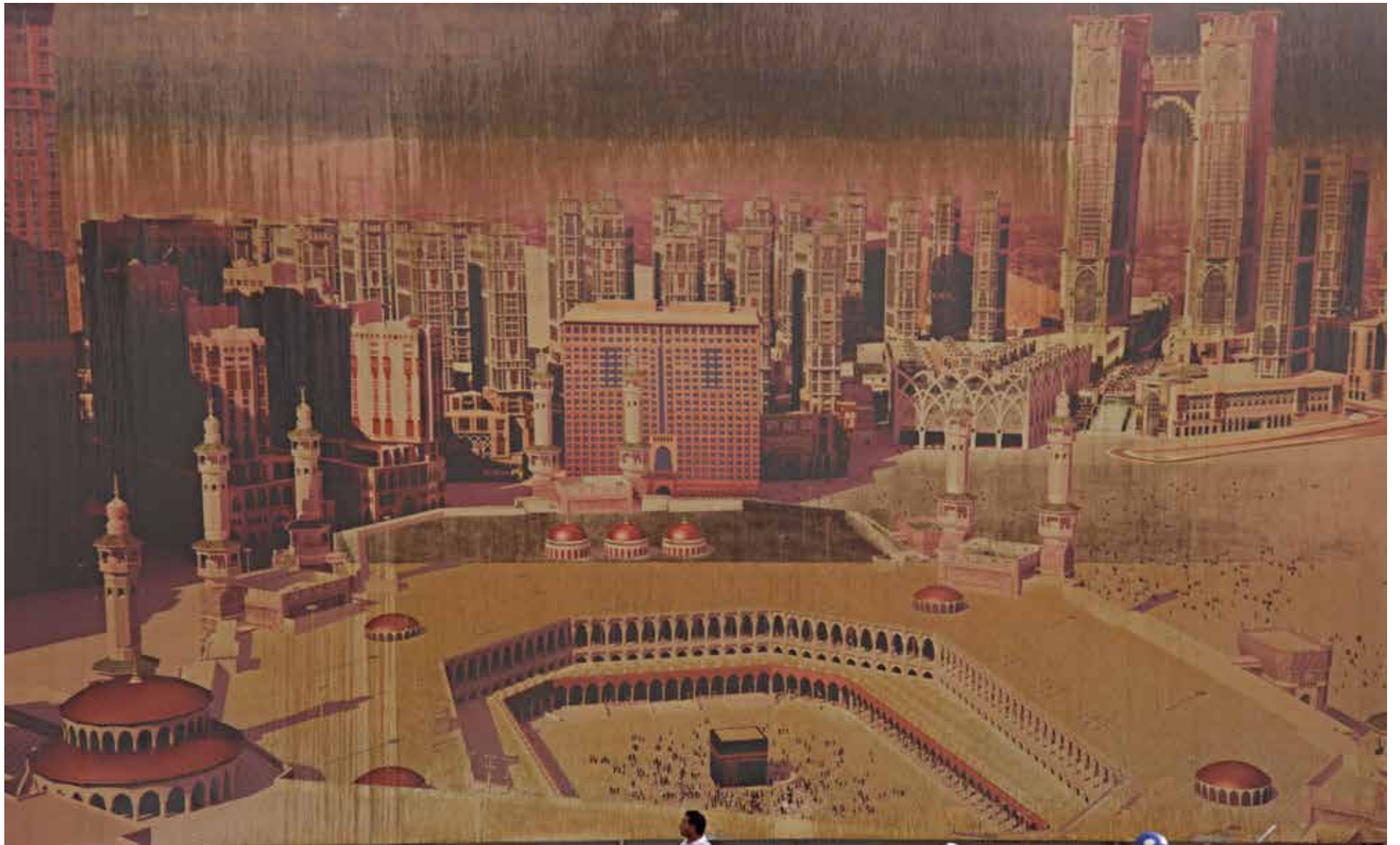
### PELT HIM!

The murmur of crowds and the continuous rhythm of pebbles striking a wall gently draw us into Mecca, one of the most restricted yet highly visited cities in the world. At several different points during the hajj, pilgrims perform this stone-throwing ritual, symbolizing stoning the devil or casting away temptations.

2011–13

Digital video with sound on monitor, two minutes

Courtesy of the artist and Athr



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## BETWEEN DREAM AND REALITY

Besides the millions of pilgrims that visit annually, Mecca is home to more than a million inhabitants, making it the third most populous city in Saudi Arabia. It also has a long history as a site for domestic trade. Observing one of the many billboards of the older city that mask construction sites, Mater considers Mecca as a living city that is constantly re-envisioned:

“Dreams surround it . . . in the belief that Utopia can be created here. Yet time and again, as with every age of renovation, we live within a reality of drills, demolition, and destruction.”

2011–13

Color photograph  
Courtesy of the artist

on the cover

## FROM THE REAL TO THE SYMBOLIC CITY

This expansive view captures the extraordinarily dense population and traditional architecture that have characterized Mecca for centuries. Pushed to the outskirts, the old quarter disappears into a horizon obscured by heavy, gray haze, where the iconic clock tower looms like a beacon over the city under construction.

2012

Color photograph  
Purchase—Friends of the Freer and Sackler Galleries  
S2014.5



## JABRIL

In this scene from the video *Leaves Fall in All Seasons*—Mater's vision of Mecca through the eyes of immigrant construction workers—a lone figure perches on the golden crescent that will crown the clock tower. In Mater's story, Jabril precariously “sits between reality and the impossible cityscapes of the future.” The worker's mundane task becomes spectacular, as he glides through the air “like an angel bringing a warning.”

2011–13

Dye sublimation on aluminum  
Courtesy of the artist



### HUMAN HIGHWAY

Moving east to west, pilgrims reenact Abraham's hajj by throwing seven pebbles against each of three pillars, known collectively as *jamarat*. The area around the *jamarat* pillars, located in an encampment east of Mecca, has been redesigned repeatedly to facilitate pilgrims' progression during the stone-throwing ritual. Hovering high above the entrance to the first pillar, we can sense both the significance of this rite and the considerable risk posed by the overwhelming mass of people funneling in. Hundreds have died trying to make their way across Jamarat Bridge.

2011-13  
Color photograph  
Courtesy of the artist



### CONCRETE LAPIDATION

In an attempt to accommodate and protect the ever-increasing number of pilgrims, Jamarat Bridge has been expanded several times since its original construction in 1963. Over time, this humble site has grown into a complex network of covered spaces, multilevel walkways, and extended walls built to replace the original circular *jamarat* pillars.

2011-13  
Color photograph  
Courtesy of the artist



### NATURE MORTE

With the growing religious tourism industry, hotel rooms in the Makkah Royal Clock Tower complex have come to dominate the skyline above the Great Mosque's main sanctuary. Here, inside the quiet luxury of a private room, Mater's framing becomes a subtle commentary on how political and spatial changes are reinventing the center of the Islamic world.

2013  
Color photograph  
Purchase—Friends of the Freer and Sackler Galleries  
S2014.6



### ARTIFICIAL LIGHT CONSTRUCTION

Mater moved to Mecca for a year to begin work on his Desert of Pharan series. Along with the evolving urban plan and its inhabitants, he observed the conditions of the many immigrant workers. This interior view of a new sanctuary space, framed by an endless expanse of scaffolding, reinforces the extraordinary scale—and uniformity—of the changes taking place from the perspective of the workers rebuilding the city.

2011–13  
Color photograph  
Courtesy of the artist





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## GOLDEN HOUR

A vast field of cranes stands in the perpetual glow of construction lights as the massive expansion of the Great Mosque takes shape and much of Mecca's history is erased. This view is from the top of the crane used to build the minaret where Al-Shamia Mountain once overlooked the Kaaba. As mountains are flattened, concrete walls erected, and a global city of travelers grows, Mater questions how this utterly transformed landscape will affect the collective memory and identity of Mecca's inhabitants.

2011-13

Color photograph  
Private collection

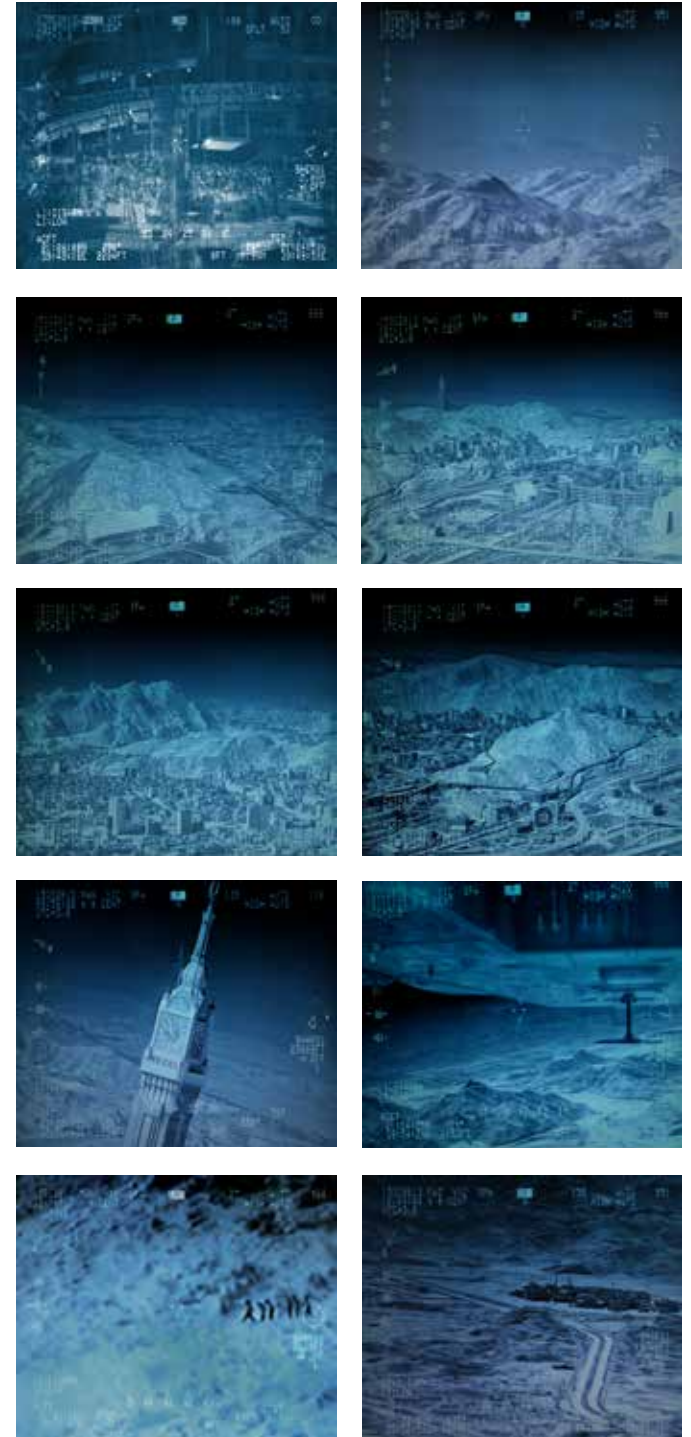
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## DISARM

Through the cold light of a military helicopter's night surveillance camera, Mater photographed Mecca, rendering it as an alien landscape with the clock tower slipping in and out of view. Like x-rays, the Disarm series offers latent images of "Makkah's future—a sprawling metropolis monitored from the skies, with an army whose mission it is to detect the undesired movement of illegal pilgrims navigating their way across the arid and inhospitable mountain terrain."

2013

Ten LED light boxes with negatives  
Courtesy of the artist





## GHOST

Heading southeast out of Mecca, Mater encountered ceremonial drummers at a traditional wedding. Following the ebb and flow of one drummer's trance-like state, Mater remembered ominous tales of jinn, the restless spirits that live in the desert near "the dead city of Jahura . . . midway between the borders of Hejaz and Oman. There the sounds of drumming and moaning are regularly heard at night by passing travelers, by whom they are of course attributed to jinns or ghosts, persons of weak intellect having even been known to lose their reason." (Harry St. John Philby, *Heart of Arabia: A Record of Travel & Exploration*, 1922)

2013

Digital video with sound, three minutes  
Courtesy of the artist and Athr

## ASHAB AL-LAL/FAULT MIRAGE: A THOUSAND LOST YEARS

In the desert the mirage is the traveller's book  
and without it, without the mirage  
he won't continue searching

Mahmoud Darwish (1942–2008)

Excerpt from "The Dice Player," in *Mural*,  
trans. John Berger and Rema Hammami, 2009.

Mater's exploration of Saudi Arabia has led him toward Riyadh and the roots of the social transformation that he is witnessing today. For the first chapter of this ongoing project, he drew on private photo archives to reflect on the forces that have shaped modern Saudi Arabia—the centralization of political and religious authority, the growth of the oil industry, and the extraordinary pace of urbanization.

Shifting to a more intimate scale, Mater reimagines life at different times in and around Riyadh and the Saudi Aramco compounds further east. These found images of long forgotten figures and distant moments hover over the enduring desert landscape, glowing like signals from another world.

following pages; from left to right, top to bottom:

**BEYOND THE LAST OASIS, AL MALAZ, PIPELINE  
CRISIS, CADILLAC, CRASH  
OLD POET, ROADBLOCK, TELEVISION**

2015

Nine wood slide viewers with color reversal film  
Courtesy of the artist and Athr



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artJameel

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