



# GALLERIA CONTINUA

SAN GIMIGNANO BEIJING **LES MOULINS** HABANA

46, rue de la Ferté-Gaucher, 77169 Boissy-le-Châtel, France  
 Tel. +33 (0)1 64 20 39 50 / lemoulin@galleriacontinua.fr / www.galleriacontinua.com  
 Open from Wednesdays to Sundays from noon to 6pm and by appointment.

## AHMED MATER

### *Stand in the Pathway and See*

Exhibition from 14.10.2018 until 02.06.2019

Galleria Continua is pleased to exhibit for the first time at Les Moulins a solo exhibition by artist Ahmed Mater. Entitled *Stand in the Pathway and See*, the exhibition presents a set of works from an important project started by the artist in 2008, comprising photographs, video and installation.

For several years now, the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia has been the scene of spectacular urban redevelopment. This holy city is something of an open-air construction site, where crowds of locals and pilgrims rub shoulders with cranes, excavators, bulldozers and other construction equipment. Through this process of destruction and construction, a new urban centre is gradually emerging around the heart of the Muslim world, the Al-Haram Mosque. The Al Haram Mosque, or Great Mosque of Mecca, houses the Kaaba towards which prayers are directed and at which millions of pilgrims converge every year during the *haji*, or fifth pillar of Islam. The mosque itself is undergoing a profound transformation: part of the old building is being gradually demolished to make room for an immense structure, the largest Muslim shrine in the world. Still under construction, the sacred site is overshadowed by the seven skyscrapers of a gigantic hotel complex, completed in 2012 and whose highest tower, the *Makkah Clock Royal Tower*, rises to 601 meters.

As a Saudi artist, trained in medicine, Ahmed Mater observes and records the city's relentless and rapid evolution in a body of work that he calls *Desert of Pharan*, in reference to the desert where Mecca was founded, as described in the Scriptures. The relation to the spiritual is thus central to this work, particularly from a sociological

as well as a political point of view. Indeed, in the eyes of millions of people, as in the eyes of Saudi Arabia's political and religious authorities, the city of Mecca is considered exclusively through a religious prism, its restructuring being undertaken alongside the management of the colossal flows of pilgrims. Through his daily work questioning these transformations, Mater points out that Mecca can no longer be considered a city as such - with its inhabitants, its schools, its local businesses, its history. Rather, it is the contemporary, pragmatic management of the religion of Islam and its image throughout the world that guides the decisions of the authorities.

As proof of this pragmatism, Mater shows how little it is considered of the ancient architectural heritage of the city, its history, its geography. This is no longer important to the agenda of reconstruction, and many ancient artefacts have now completely disappeared, razed by equipment to make way for the new Mecca. Perhaps the most telling example of this is the large complex of the clock tower for which the Ajyad Ottoman Fortress and the mountain on which it stood have been obliterated. What was once a cosmopolitan place is becoming a city dedicated to the mass influx of Muslim pilgrims and businessmen.

But Ahmed Mater also questions the way in which Saudi Arabia asserts itself as a religious power, focusing the organization of the city exclusively around the Kaaba and in this way seeking to symbolically demonstrate the power of the Wahhabi doctrine; all the more important at a time when the Muslim world is riddled with dissent.

*The Desert of Pharan* series is a kind of inventory, made up of images gathered during journeys on foot and

by car, all converging towards the Al-Haram Mosque - even flying over it by helicopter. Walking the streets of the city, from the smallest alleys to the most important arteries, the artist also manages to pass over to the other side of building sites by linking with the site workers and discovering the social reality of their working conditions. Mater's photographs are printed in large format, which allows the viewer to appreciate the grain but also to confront the important notion of scale, in the context of the massive transformation of the city. Wide views of the city and its building sites, tighter frames on certain details, like a hotel room overlooking the Kaaba, give us a glimpse of the magnitude of what is happening. This notion of scale is also projected through Mater's video works through which it becomes possible to understand the size of the city by being immersed in it with the artist, from its outer peripheries into its center. The viewer then confronts the life of the place, its noises, its movements, its crowd, until being suspended over the building site of the Al-Haram Mosque.

Among the works that make up this unprecedented show at Les Moulins, Ahmed Mater offers a striking installation. *Mecca Windows* unfolds on the walls of the large exhibition space, revealing a mosaic of shapes and colors, made up of windows. This vast quantity of windows of variable dimensions, worn - almost dilapidated - were found by the artist on the building sites of houses that were being destroyed. This assembly of windows urgently demonstrates what is disappearing irremediably: the face of the city, its forms, its colors. The new Mecca emerging from the earth is a city of globalization, with skyscrapers of glass and steel and bitumen paths; the polar opposite of the ancient city whose ragged windows give us a human testimony, traces of everyday life now lost forever.

Mater's installation is put into context by the works of *Desert of Pharan*, showing the human dimension of the city, or at least what remains of it. Between this sensitive installation and his photographs and video works, Mater presents a striking contrast, leaving the viewer taken aback while at the same time calling into question the seemingly unstoppable progress of a globalized world where symbols of power dominate.

Ahmed Mater was born in 1979 in Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. He studied at King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia. Today Mater uses photography, video, performance and installation in a politically engaged work which in its recent development presents an unofficial story of Saudi sociopolitical life within a global context. He lives and works in Abha and Jeddah.

Among the recent personal exhibitions he had were *Mecca Journeys*, Brooklyn Museum, New York, USA (2018) ; *Mitochondria : Powerhouses*, Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Italy (2017) ; *Symbolic Cities*, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian, Washington D.C., USA (2016) ; *100 Found objects*, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE (2013). He participated in several group exhibitions, among which : *Cities of Conviction*, Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, Salt Lake City, USA (2017) ; *Continua Sphères ENSEMBLE*, Le CENTQUATRE-PARIS, Paris, France (2017) ; *Epicenter X*, Arab American National Museum, Detroit, USA (2017) ; *But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise*, Guggenheim, New York, USA (2016) ; *Common Grounds*, Museum Villa Stuck, Munich, Germany (2015) ; *A-History*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France (2014) ; *Arab Contemporary: Architecture, Culture and Identity*, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark (2013).