

Portraits of a Changing City



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The first solo Saudi art exhibition in Washington D.C. offers an alternative view of Mecca

BY [Roshanak Taghavi](#)

The entrance into “Symbolic Cities” initiates you into artist Ahmed Mater’s vision for the future of Saudi Arabia.

On view at the Smithsonian’s esteemed Sackler Gallery in Washington D.C., Mater’s exhibit of installations and photographs is the first solo exhibition for a Saudi artist in the United States.

The artist documents the convergence between tradition, urbanization and modernity as some of Saudi Arabia’s greatest cities develop and expand in line with the Kingdom’s burgeoning economy.

Mater, who trained as a medical doctor before dedicating himself to art full-time, tells *Newsweek Middle East* he’s “especially interested” in documenting the privatization

of Saudi Arabia's public goods and open spaces, as the government expands and reconstructs its cities to accommodate new businesses and tourists.

Through his art, Mater hopes to foster critical thinking among Mecca's residents and encourage them to play a role in determining how their city changes.

Mecca should be developed in a way that reflects the humanity of its local inhabitants: natives, the generations of Burmese residents who have come to consider the city as their home, and the many guest workers who live there, according to Mater.

"People think Mecca is only a place where people come for pilgrimage, but Mecca is important as a living city as well," he says. "Now the public space is being squeezed."

Many of Mater's photos are taken at twilight, when the city is on the verge of surrendering to darkness, and some are taken from new vantage points like construction cranes, mountaintops and helicopters, portraying an outsider's experience of Mecca versus that of the local inhabitants.

In "Symbolic Cities," Mater layers the old with the new, setting the devotion of pilgrims seeking spiritual growth against the rapid urbanization he believes is diluting that growth, as the city transforms to accommodate them.

This layering is most evident in *Nature Morte*, which reveals a stellar \$3,000 a night view of the Kabah, the most sacred site of worship for Muslims around the world, from the luxurious confines of the five-star Fairmont's Mecca Royal Clock Tower Hotel.

Will our eye become stuck in the shallow vision of ripe fruit inside an expensive hotel room, or will we appreciate the sacredness that lies beyond it, in the Kabah?

"Mecca is a city based on values of similarity and equality and justice. People come to remember they are human beings. [But in this image], you can see the Kabah from the five-star hotel, and it is too much," he says.

Mater's photo of a construction worker named *Jabril* most embodies the message he seeks to convey.

Jabril, whose name alludes to Angel Gabriel, stands suspended in the air gripping a golden crescent that will adorn the Makkah Royal Clock Tower, a hotel built where an 18th century Ottoman citadel once stood.

Mater likens *Jabril* to the iconic American photo *Lunch Atop a Skyscraper*, depicting ironworkers seated atop a steel beam 69 floors above the Rockefeller Center's RCA Building in New York. That photo came to symbolize the American working class during the era of Great Depression in the U.S.

If Mecca continues along its current business-oriented model of transformation, it may one day be unable to accommodate its residents because there will no longer be space for them.

The way Mecca is changing might be good for tourism, but won't be sustainable for its inhabitants, the artist says.

"*Jabril* is hanging on the crescent ... like an angel bringing awareness to the city, warning about the public space, and warning about the body and how it's suffering from all the commercialism and materialism," says Mater.

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