

# How Ahmed Mater Reveals the Humanity of Mecca

Read the original article on The Village Voice.

Siddhartha Mitter encounters Mater's work through Mecca Journeys, and finds a powerful connection between the human body, and the city as the embodiment of the Muslim community.



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as a body.”

**Ahmed Mater**

“It’s a beautiful way to think about the city,” says Mater, who has mixed documentary and conceptual methods to think about Mecca for the past decade. Mecca Journeys, an illuminating exhibition of his video, sculpture, and large-format photography at the Brooklyn Museum, has been extended to June.

Mater, 38, is a prominent figure in a Saudi art scene that is gaining visibility. Raised in Abha, near the Yemen border, he lives in Jeddah, the busy port and commercial hub that serves as a gateway to Mecca. “Being Saudi, from a Muslim family, Mecca was always the center of our life,” Mater says. But he is also trained as a physician, with a specialty in community health, and the principles of that discipline inform his art. “The way my eye works is to look to the city as a body.”

Today, digital culture has made Mecca easier to experience vicariously, thanks to the pilgrims’ Facebook posts and Instagram stories. But the Mecca that Mater documents is different. His concern is with the city, its year-round population of close to two million, its old and new neighborhoods, and the endless building frenzy that is constantly pressuring its environment and altering its shape.

Mater’s Mecca is also a vast construction site. There are fields of cranes, areas marked for demolition,

decrepit old quarters overshadowed by soaring new edifices. The pressure to expand Mecca's visitor capacity means the past is under constant threat, as everything from working-class neighborhoods to sites with historical and religious meaning falls prey to real estate development. Looking down on the Kaaba, the black cube that pilgrims clad in simple whites circumambulate in an ancient act of devotion, is the huge, unlovely Abraj al-Bait, a complex of skyscrapers housing luxury apartments, malls, and an enormous hotel.

Atop the central building's massive clock tower, 120 floors high, is a huge crescent mounted on a pillar base. In the heart-stopping highlight of *Leaves Fall in All Seasons*, a video that Mater made out of footage that construction workers filmed for him, we find ourselves on girders high up as the crescent is about to be mounted. A worker harnesses himself to the piece; the crane hoists him up, a tiny figure clinging to a giant sculpture as it dangles in the dusty haze.

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