



GALLERIA CONTINUA

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AHMED MATER

Mitochondria: powerhouses

Opening: Saturday 23 September 2017, Via del Castello 11, 6–9pm
Until 7 January 2018, Monday–Sunday, 10am–1pm / 2–7pm

religion > oil > money > power > faith > control > new cities > rentier economy > economic cities

Galleria Continua is pleased to present 'Mitochondria: Powerhouses', a new solo show by Ahmed Mater, one of the most significant cultural voices in the Middle East today.

In this exhibition, Ahmed Mater scrutinizes two systems structuring contemporary geopolitics – religion and natural resources. Through the prism of Saudi society, he shows each system to be massive in both physical and conceptual reach, braided with economics, social transformation and, ultimately, control. Mater finds these global socio-political systems to be governed and guided by concealed and unacknowledged forces. The sources are likened to mitochondria; invisible unless deliberately stained, these biological powerhouses are the location and the processor – supplying, converting and storing energy within the closed system of each cell. In the same way, Mater locates and exposes the unseen powerhouses that govern the 21st century.

In three chapters, the exhibition explores rentier and faith economies as well as Ekistics (the science of human settlements) to trace the contours of economic, environmental and socio-political fortunes. Strolls through Saudi Arabia's recent past, documentations of its present condition, and projections into its envisioned future become

catalysts for global considerations. The restless and relentless development of Makkah is a symbol of faith economies and their religious and urban concerns; the collision of Western capitalism and traditional life are ciphers of globalization; environmental catastrophe is found in an urgent look at the oil fields of the Gulf, at North Dakota and Standing Rock; and the summoning of futuristic new cities from the vast and empty expanse of the desert forge links in a global chain of ambitious trade-oriented development.

Invisible Hand shows how religion defines economies and how, at the same time, economies are forged by religion and revolve around it. The economic premise of Adam Smith is referenced, whereby markets tend to achieve a balance through the productive tension of individuals pursuing their own interests. Mater reveals this invisible guiding force to point to similarities present in contemporary religious structures, finding them at the root of many destinies: moral, social, geopolitical and financial. Manifest configurations of money and religion can be found in "faith economies"; Mater traces the outlines of urban topographies, demonstrating how unexpected physical manifestations of religion guide lifestyle. The most evident manifestation of all this are the religious "powerhouses", including Islam's most symbolic site, the Kaaba (literally, "the cube"), and the city of

Mecca, an extraordinarily powerful place in spiritual, financial and human terms. The religious tourism sector of the Kingdom, currently worth more than 5 billion dollars, is gearing up to welcome 30 million hajj and umrah pilgrims a year by 2025. Contemporary Saudi society has been shaped by the structuring forces of religion, a power emanating from faith but fixed by the force of money.

Rentier Economy addresses another power system, that of oil, and its dominant role in defining the world's geopolitical, commercial and environmental systems. While the Invisible Hand works identify the symptoms, Rentier Economy pushes us towards the concept of the "end". Healthy mitochondria play a crucial role in cell signalling, that is to say, in the processes that determine the ways in which cells exist and function in their environment. Small errors in mitochondrial function cause catastrophic consequences in the body, including invisible illnesses with devastating effects. In the current deeply entrenched global power circuit, where oil is ceaselessly converted into money and power, Mater identifies an environmental, social and economic malaise of catastrophic proportions.

The latent religious and economic destinies that inhabit and define social systems are brought together in the final chapter of the show. In Reconfiguring Cities the defective power systems explored in the previous chapters are opened up and synthesized in minimal terms. In explosive flashes of power we see how, in vast and desolate expanses, a new energy generates nothing > city > new structures of economic and social power. These are "economic cities", found all along the Gulf, which connect and create new international trade routes welcomed as beacons for the future. Mater imagines these creative enterprises, investigating what triggers them and the new power they will exercise in trade > economy > unbridled globalization. The artist points to these "beacon" cities as full-blown physical "powerhouses", the conquests of an economic power rendered manifest. The artist also suggests that, just as religion has moulded urban topographies, these new metropolises will redefine socio-economic systems as we know them today.

In this exhibition, specially conceived for Galleria Continua's spaces, Mater lays bare apparently closed and disparate urban and symbolic systems to demonstrate how the unseen catalysts in each are connected. Shared forces of control exert influence through locations (both physical presences and moments in time) and processes. Mater mines his own context, observing how these presences conclusively reconfigure contemporary Saudi Arabia. Through the prism of these localized documentations and experiences, he also traces their latent power, finding that it radiates within the Kingdom and beyond its borders. Here we find the traces of unseen, global fortunes that bind and shape the world through economic, environmental, trade, religious and neo-liberal systems.

Ahmed Mater was born in 1979, Tabuk, Saudi Arabia; he lives and works between Riyadh, Jeddah and Abha, Saudi Arabia. A physician turned artist, Ahmed Mater is one of the most significant cultural voices documenting and scrutinizing the realities of contemporary Saudi Arabia and its position and influence in urgent global narratives of faith, environment, socioeconomics and geopolitics. Forging an ongoing, complex mapping of the Kingdom, his practice synthesizes and documents collective memories to uncover and record unofficial histories. The temporal and physical breadth of his research-led inquiries are sharpened by the incisive gaze of his conceptual works. His practice embraces the paradoxes of science and faith, enmeshing the two to explore their connections and contradictions. Mater entwines expressive and politically engaged artistic aims with the scientific objectives of his medical training. Historic, religious, urban and social excavations mine and preserve disregarded and forgotten depths as he initiates expansive documentary ruminations and strolls.

Ahmed Mater has had solo exhibitions at King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia (2004); Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, London (2006); Artspace, Dubai (2009); the Vinyl Factory Gallery, London (2010); Sharjah Art Foundation (2013); the Smithsonian Institution's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Washington DC (2016). His work has been included in group exhibitions at the British Museum, London (2006 and 2012); Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2011); Institut du Monde Arab, Paris (2012); Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2013); Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, Qatar (2013); Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark (2013); Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City (2013); Ashkal Alwan, Beirut, Lebanon (2013); Biennale Jogja (2013); Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2014); New Museum, New York (2014); and Guggenheim, New York (2016). He participated in the Sharjah Biennial (2007 and 2013); the Cairo Biennial (2008); the Venice Biennale (2009 and 2011); and the Kochi Muziris Biennale, Kerala, India (2012). His work is part of major international collections, including the British Museum, London; Victoria & Albert Museum, London; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California; and Centre Pompidou, Paris.

For further information about the exhibition and for photographs:

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