



***Living Shrines:  
Uyghur Manifestations of Faith,  
Saints and Islam in Western China***  
Photographs and Video by Lisa Ross  
Curated by Jolaine Frizzell

**4<sup>th</sup> April – 21<sup>st</sup> June 2014**

In *Living Shrines*, artist Lisa Ross brings into focus a Uyghur religious tradition with its desert shrines to Sufi saints and Muslim pilgrimage sites. For ten years, she worked in and around the Taklamakan Desert of China's far northwest in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region photographing these ephemeral markers of faith. Ross followed a wide-ranging network of Islamic pilgrimage sites honouring saints, most of whom were active in Sufi orders that date back as far as the 10<sup>th</sup> century. These sites, known as *mazârs*, are not only devotional but also encompass personal prayers and are home to various offerings, including the remains of sacrificial animals or dolls left by women praying for children. Sufis believe the earth of the *mazârs* is suffused with faith. Sacred markers reach skyward and express individual invocations, honour saints, or denote burials. It is believed that saints, in a state of eternal sleep, help the deceased transition into the afterlife by functioning as conduits to Allah for the living and the dead.

Ross's photographic work unveils the meditative and spiritual power of the Uyghur landscape, as well as a sense of the sacred with which it is imbued; this power manifests itself in the incandescent glow of the various religious sites, as if they had been lit by another sun. The unassuming photographs communicate a pervasive quiet and stillness, leaving a haunting impression on the viewer. Drawing from the experience of the devotional pilgrimage, Ross rarely includes the human figure, allowing for a direct and intimate viewing of these holy monuments. Without the presence of a body, there is no explicit demarcation of scale: the viewer's relationship to the landscape and space is thus uninterrupted and remains open with possibility. Classically composed, these luminous works employ simplicity and austerity to invoke ideas of spirituality, eternity, and transcendence. In these monumental portraits, Ross calls our attention to the great force of nature, cultural histories, and the endurance of faith.

Collaborating with Uyghur folklorist Rahile Dawut and French historian Alexandre Papas, Ross returned several times to the area and witnessed much alteration in the religious landscape throughout her journeys to Xinjiang, ending with her last visit in 2011. Beth Citron, assistant curator at the Rubin Museum of Art writes, "Like the religious pilgrim, but coming from a much greater distance, the artist travelled to and through these sites, on a deliberate journey invested with its own set of rites, relationships, and the creation of meaning. Ross has captured the critical decade in which the social and political context around these *mazârs* changed, making both their continuance and these images all the more meaningful." *Living Shrines* becomes an important archive of collective memory, histories of faith, and the perseverance of a culture facing great change.

The book *Living Shrines of Uyghur China – Photographs* by Lisa Ross, published in 2013 by the Monacelli Press accompanies the exhibition with essays by Beth Citron, Rahila Dawut and Alexandre Papas.



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