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Behind the Dunes

[Nick Holdstock](#) 16 January 2014

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In 2002 the photographer Lisa Ross was taken to the edge of the Taklamakan Desert in western China by her driver. She did not know why, but there was a path in the sand, and so she followed it, over the dunes:

Colours began to reveal themselves. In the distance I could see what looked like wooden cribs or rafts, cresting on dry land, animated by coloured flags beating in the wind. As I neared the markers, there seemed to be animals with arms and legs stuck atop tall wooden posts.

It was her first glimpse of a *mazâr*, a holy site at the tomb of a local saint. Her new book, [Living Shrines of Uyghur China](#), and an exhibition of her photographs at the [Kashya Hildebrand Gallery](#) (until 31

January), are the result of a ten-year project documenting devotional practices at *mazâr* across Xinjiang. As well as the wooden poles and flags, there are smaller, more intimate offerings: women leave handmade dolls, or model cribs, to ask for help conceiving. Pilgrims visit the shrines throughout the year, but the largest gatherings are the festivals on saints' birthdays. In recent years many of these have been banned or heavily policed by the authorities. They have also been criticised by some Muslims for encouraging the veneration of beings other than Allah.

There are no human figures in Ross's images. The shrines are testament to the persistence of the overlapping faiths in the region – including Sufi, shamanic and Zoroastrian influences – but the absence of people makes the shrines seem almost organic and independent, literally 'living'. In *Unrevealed, Site 3 (Ladder on Horizon)* (top), the poles look like spines that have burst from the earth. In *Fertility* (below), the long branches wrapped in cloth resemble bones glimpsed through tattered clothes.



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