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Hidden Memorials: These secret tributes find power in the fragile.

by Jeff Weinstein

MAY 11, 2009 TAGS: PHOTOGRAPHY, CHINA, BURIALS, MEMORY ADD A COMMENT

When we are dead, seek not our tomb in the earth, but find it in the hearts of men.
-- Epitaph for Sufi poet and teacher Rumi

All photographs, no matter how pleasing, are incomplete. Who is that face; where is that space; what exactly is happening? Photos without captions are like gravestones without names and dates, because they generalize memories. Still, the best of them will hold our eyes and communicate a state of feeling, sense or intelligence that jumps over ordinary label information.



Ten large color prints at New York's [Daneyal Mahmood Gallery](#) show what at first appear to be clusters of bent branches struggling to survive in a bed of beige sand. Yet those bright-hued swatches hanging from them aren't leaves, but fabric and fringe that look to have been grabbed from high winds and trapped.

As I study the pictures, I see that wooden cribs surround some of the plants, and in another a useless ladder leads to a jumble of laundry "flags." It soon emerges that these haphazard growths are, in fact, carefully constructed, and as their bright strangeness reveals itself, I become convinced that they must be important markers, each invested with aesthetic choice and some kind of human weight.

Yes, there is no doubt that these delicate, resilient forms are the most fragile of memorials, signifying life beyond death.

A few years ago, New York-based artist Lisa Ross set off with historian Alexandre Papas to trace the "cult" of Sufi saints in the Taklamakan desert of Xinjiang, in western China. Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam, encourages a life that walks or dances away from what's material and familiar. In this remote part of Asia, pilgrimages to the mazars, or shrines, of saints have for centuries connected the threatened community of Sufis to their tradition -- and it is these mazars, vital though ephemeral, that Ross sought to record.

Some are stark gates, to be passed through. Others comprise just a few branches and a tuft of broom (to sweep away evil) that show where a local person is buried -- the closer to a saint, the better. Carved wooden ornaments, sheepskins and sewn amulet-pillows are attached to and fall from these shrines in a slow procession of decay and renewal.

None of this additional information is obvious, yet I believe that the photographer discovered how the sites somehow explain themselves -- that a portion of their evocative, communal power could be captured by her lens. There's really no other way to account for the mesmerizing spell of these straight-on, *National Geographic* images, the manner in which their "what's this?" oddity becomes natural to view.

What possible purpose can photographs of venerated sites serve? The Chinese government strictly limits Sufi

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worship -- one of the reasons Ross will not identify shrine locations -- so documenting evidence of ongoing belief becomes an act of defiant support.

The photos also make an unusual art-world statement in that neither beauty nor meaning is their motive, their excuse for being made. They gather their strength somewhere else, quietly, from bones in the sand.

Images Courtesy of Daneyal Mahmood Gallery, Reproduction Prohibited

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Jeff Weinstein writes about culture and gay issues for www.artsjournal.com/outthere.

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