

# ARTFORUM

## Lisa Ross

FOTOGRAFISKA

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Lisa Ross's large-scale photographs of found shrines nestled among the sand dunes of the Taklamakan Desert in the Chinese region of Xinjiang waver between landscapes and portraits of their absent creators. Made from branches and fabric remnants, baby cribs and ladders, the subjects could be boundary markers for imaginary kingdoms, the skeletons of temporary shelters, or sculptural armatures. Impossibly bright scraps of cloth fly like pennants or hang in huge bouquets, leaning into the constant wind that has abraded all wooden surfaces smooth. The shrines' incongruous presences in the starkness of the desert evokes site-specific or even ephemeral Land art like Andy Goldsworthy's, while the glowing backlight and lush color palette of these works is absolutely cinematic.

As science-fictional or fanciful images, they are compelling—but as cultural documents, tragic. These shrines, called *mazars*, are the physical traces of offerings and prayers for protection created by the Muslim Uyghurs native to Xinjiang. Ross shot these photographs over ten years of travel through the region, beginning just after 9/11 and the explosion of rhetoric about Islamic terrorism that has powerfully affected Xinjiang civic life. While Ross explicitly avoids politicizing, for a viewer with any familiarity with the recent social instability of Western China and the deteriorating relations between the Uyghurs and the Han Chinese, the lonely images have an air of dystopia, even apocalypse. As a counterpoint, *Pilgrimage (Tractor)*, 2009, a single-channel video of Uyghur pilgrims quietly assembling around the shrine, offers a suggestion of aesthetic oasis, if not armistice.



Lisa Ross, *Fertility*, 2006, archival pigment prints on cotton paper, 42 x 28".

— Monica Westin

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