

Ahmed Mater: Antenna

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UCCA Edge, in collaboration with the Saudi Ministry of Culture, represented by the Visual Arts Commission, presents “Ahmed Mater: Antenna” between March 8, 2025, and June 8, 2025, the first large-scale, institutional solo exhibition of a Saudi contemporary artist in China. One of the most celebrated Saudi artists who has contributed significantly to the development of the Kingdom’s rich contemporary art scene and Visual Arts eco-system, artist Ahmed Mater examines and explores the social, cultural, and economic impact of the Kingdom’s evolving landscape on the individual, community, society, and the world through his practice across multiple media including photography, film, sculpture, and performance.

Exhibition Period:

2025.3.8 – 2025.6.8

Location:

UCCA Edge

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SHANGHAI, China—From March 8, 2025, to June 8, 2025, UCCA Edge, in collaboration with the Saudi Ministry of Culture represented by the Visual Arts Commission, presents “Ahmed Mater: Antenna,” a comprehensive retrospective exhibition of the renowned Saudi artist Ahmed Mater (b. 1979, Tabuk, Saudi Arabia; lives and works in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia), the first large-scale institutional solo exhibition by a contemporary Saudi artist in China. Featuring over 100 artworks from Mater’s career to date, including the artist’s major series and milestones, this exhibition offers a comprehensive overview of his visionary artistic practice, formal and thematic explorations, and documentary reflections at the forefront of Saudi Arabia’s vibrant visual arts ecosystem in parallel to the rapidly evolving social and historical developments of his native land. A series of dialogues and public programs will accompany “Ahmed Mater: Antenna” during the exhibition period to introduce audiences to aspects of contemporary Saudi culture.

This exhibition is presented as part of the official celebrations surrounding the Saudi Chinese Cultural Year 2025. This year also marks the 35th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and the People’s Republic of China. It follows on UCCA’s continued involvement in the Saudi art scene that began with its work on the first Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale in 2021. Curated by UCCA Director Philip Tinari, “Ahmed Mater: Antenna” is presented by the Saudi Visual Arts Commission, one of 11 sector specific commissions under the Ministry of Culture. It is offered in a spirit of engagement and collaboration, and in the hope of creating new connections between audiences in Shanghai and contemporary art and culture in Saudi Arabia.

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Born in 1979, a pivotal year in modern Saudi history, Mater grew up in Abha in southern Saudi Arabia and would later become part of the first wave of Saudi artists to exhibit overseas in the early 2000s. For over the past four decades, he has been documenting the seismic social and economic changes in Saudi Arabia as part of his artistic journey. With an archival urge to collect and categorize, Mater combines a Pop sensitivity to iconic source material, as encapsulated by his expansive body of work on view completed from the late 1990s to the present, including photography, installation, sculpture, video, painting, found objects, and designs for an upcoming large-scale land art intervention in northwestern Saudi Arabia's AlUla. Central to the thematic explorations in Mater's practice are notions of duality and ambiguity between tradition, natural sites and resources, change, individual experiences and collective forces, audiences and their frame of reference. Taking its title from Mater's symbolically significant installation work *Green Antenna* (2010), this exhibition is also organized to reflect Mater's preoccupation with the curiosity of connection and the possibilities of receiving and transmitting vital information, both for himself and on behalf of a wider community, within and outside of Saudi Arabia.

"Ahmed Mater: Antenna" begins in the 2/F galleries with a series of early career works that presage Mater's future creative concerns. Before becoming an artist, Mater was trained as a physician and the influence of medicine is clearly visible in his early works. The "**X-Ray**" series (2003–2004), created while he was still practicing medicine, marked the beginning of his emergence as an artist blending Islamic cultural elements into his own abstract painting experimentations. In *Empty Land* (2012), Mater presents aerial views of infrastructures on print, representing the volatility of the abundance and decline of the oil economy in the region throughout the years. Debuted at the Venice Biennale in 2009, the long-running "**Magnetism**" series (2009–2024) is a major installation that uses the physical law of magnetic attraction as a visual metaphor to symbolize the pull of the Ka'aba and the Meccan pilgrimage for Muslims, foregrounding the dynamics relationship between attraction and repulsion, collectivism and personal space, and other unseen forces that shape human behavior. This series also includes a photographs and installation that takes the form of a book.

As Mater has once written, "Instead of making art for public spaces, I use public spaces to inform my art." The 3/F galleries highlight Mater's methods of examining the various facets of Mecca as a site that exists between the timeless and the ever-changing, the symbolic and the physical. The video *Leaves Fall in All Season* (2013) and the photographic "**Desert of Pharan**" series (2012–2015) reflect on the collective and the individual experience of Mecca through

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observing and documenting its pilgrims' progression, commercial developments, and the evolving landscape and environment of the holy site. Mater began the large-scale project in the 2010s by collecting an array of old windows and over a hundred used objects from the city, each artifact a fragment of history and memory. The project eventually evolved to include a series of photographs and films, bearing witness to the city's ambitious expansion.

Drawing viewers closer to the imageries and materiality of the forces that have shaped Saudi Arabia from his perspective, the 4/F galleries present two of Mater's most renowned and ambitious body of work to date, as well as photographic series that grapple with the impact of historical influences and modern developments on individual perception. Deepening from Mater's early exploration of the relationship between traditional Islamic culture and modern science, the "Illuminations" series (2013–2025) integrates elements of Islamic book craftsmanship and industrial engineering structures in a suite of works on paper. The photographic installations *Desert Meeting* (2021), *Lightning Land* (2017), and *Fault Mirage* (2016) activate archival images from pivotal moments in Saudi history. Last but not least is the works and studies in preview of the monumental *Ashab Al-Lal*, a massive site-specific land art installation commissioned for the Wadi AlFann (Valley of the Arts) in AlUla, a symbol of knowledge exchange and cultural dialogue.

Together, spanning the personal to the sweeping and monumental, Mater's work offers a richly diverse visual lexicon to consider the epochal moments and cultural fabric, that through his work, characterize Saudi Arabia today. "Ahmed Mater: Antenna" invites viewers to re-examine the forgotten and overlooked historical details behind Saudi's oil-driven development narrative, to revisit Mecca as a liminal space suspended between realities, and to reimagine the desert landscape as a space for the transmission of knowledge. In doing so, this exhibition is also offered in a spirit of engagement and collaboration fostering exchange between audiences in Shanghai and contemporary art and culture and Saudi Arabia.

About the Artist

Ahmed Mater, (b. 1979, Tabuk, Saudi Arabia; lives and works in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia), is one of the most celebrated Saudi artists documenting and reflecting on contemporary society in Saudi Arabia. Forging an ongoing, complex mapping of the Kingdom, his practice explores collective memories to discover untold stories. The historical, geographical, and topical breadth of his research-led inquiries are sharpened by the incisive actions of his conceptual works.

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Physician turned artist, Mater's life has been lived poised at intersections, tracing fracturing fault lines of vying systems: past, present, and future; tradition and innovation. Using photography, film, sculpture, and performance, he maps, documents, and analyses these changes, examining the psychological impact on the individual, the community, and the world.

Mater's solo exhibitions include "Symbolic Cities: The Work of Ahmed Mater" (Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institute, USA, 2016), as well as impactful solo presentations at the Brooklyn Museum, New York (2017); King Abdullah Economic City, Saudi Arabia (2018); Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Italy (2017); Alserkal Avenue, Dubai (2017); and the Sharjah Art Foundation (2013), among others.

Mater's work has been featured in prestigious group exhibitions at renowned institutions including the British Museum, London (2006, 2012); Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2011); Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris (2012); and the Guggenheim, New York (2016). He has also participated in major biennials, including the Sharjah Biennial (2007, 2013), Cairo Biennial (2008), Venice Biennale (2009, 2011), and Kochi Muziris Biennale, India (2012).

His art is part of significant international collections, including The British Museum, London; Victoria & Albert Museum, London; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California; and The Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Public Programs

On the exhibition's opening weekend, UCCA will present a special conversation among artist Ahmed Mater, UCCA Director and exhibition curator Philip Tinari, and historian Wen Shuang, who specializes in modern China and the Arab world. The event will feature an artist talk by Mater and an in-depth conversation among the three speakers, exploring Mater's artistic practice, the contemporary art landscape in Saudi Arabia, and its cultural context to delve into the growing significance of Saudi contemporary art within the broader narrative of global art history.

On the following weekend, UCCA Director Philip Tinari will offer insights into the curatorial vision behind the exhibition by leading a special guided tour. Through Ahmed Mater's works, audiences have the opportunity to gain a deeper, more profound understanding of the historical and cultural landscape of contemporary Saudi Arabia, as well as the intersections of past, present, and future in addition to tradition and innovation, and heritage and globalization

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in his art. Throughout the exhibition period, workshops will further explore Saudi culinary culture. For the latest event information, please visit UCCA's official website and social media such as the official UCCA WeChat account.

About the Saudi Ministry of Culture

Saudi Arabia has a vast history of arts and culture. The Ministry of Culture is developing Saudi Arabia's cultural economy and enriching the daily lives of citizens, residents, and visitors.

Overseeing 11 sector-specific commissions, the Ministry works towards the support of and preservation of a vibrant culture that is true to its past and looks to the future by cherishing heritage and unleashing new and inspiring forms of expression for all. Find the Ministry of Culture on social media: X @MOCSaudi (Arabic); @MOCSaudi_En (English) | Instagram @mocsaudi

About the Saudi Visual Arts Commission

The Visual Arts Commission is one of 11 sector-specific commissions under the Ministry of Culture. Founded in 2020, it is leading the development of the visual arts sector in Saudi Arabia.

The Commission is working to nurture the talent of art enthusiasts, practitioners, and professionals in the Kingdom, and support the production and exhibition of artwork in all its forms, locally and internationally.

To learn more about the Visual Arts Commission, please visit <https://visualarts.moc.gov.sa/en> and the commission's page on X @MOCVisualArts

About UCCA

UCCA Center for Contemporary Art works to bring the best in art to ever wider audiences, promoting global dialogue and cultural exchange. Opened in 2007, its Beijing flagship is registered as a non-profit museum, occupying over 10,000 square meters of regenerated factory space at the heart of the 798 Art District. UCCA also operates UCCA Dune in Beidaihe, UCCA Edge in Shanghai, and UCCA Clay in Yixing. In addition to its exhibitions, public programs, and research initiatives, UCCA includes a charitable foundation (UCCA Foundation), a comprehensive children's art education program (UCCA Kids), and a platform for new artistic collaborations (UCCA Lab). Consistently ranked as China's leading art institution, UCCA has pioneered an integrated operating model distinct in the world.

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About UCCA Edge

Situated along the Suzhou Creek in Shanghai's Jing'an District, UCCA Edge occupies 5,500 square meters on the three podium levels of the EDGE tower. Designed by New York-based architects SO – IL, the museum includes 1,700 square meters of gallery space, a wraparound outdoor terrace, and public spaces including a lobby and an auditorium. Opened in 2021, UCCA Edge mounts exhibitions of leading Chinese and international artists. Located just north of People's Square and directly above the Qufu Lu station of the Shanghai Metro in a bustling revitalized neighborhood, UCCA Edge has become an essential art destination and an integral part of Shanghai's vibrant cultural fabric.

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