

We met around 12 o'clock at a café nearby. For some reason, I'd imagined her to be the teacher/ethnographer type, probably in her late forties. Not quite. I can't remember which street corner she emerged from but there she was; "Are you Su?", short hair, full of life, and for all I knew, there was no way to know how old she might be...

It is impossible to remember every minute of our day. We barely remember anything about the previous day. They say, later, years just merge into each other, and all we have is a couple of memories buried somewhere in the past. But I will not go into all that now. I would rather tell you my impressions from meeting Lisa Ross and her work, while they are still fresh.

### "Traces of Devotion"

Lisa Ross' pictures which were on view at Nelson Hancock Gallery from March 31 until May 8<sup>th</sup> are from Xinjiang region of the People's Republic of China. ( For us, this would correspond to what was then called "Eastern Turkistan" in our dusty geography books). Having lost its majority status in the region to Chinese since 1950s, there live many people of Turkic origin; Kazhak, Uyghur, Kyrgyz, Uzbek... Despite the strict provisions of the Chinese Government, Uyghurs from this area are allowed to visit Taklamakan Desert to worship and "pay their dues" to the holy imams of Sufi origin. We are not so familiar with this type of mezar as opposed to our mezar which are plain burial sights, except for a couple built for revered local imams. As to what ceremonies and sights can be seen during the procession leading up to these burial sights, I've had the chance to see it through Lisa's yet unpublished work from this project. Charcoaled meat and bread made on "sac", child tightrope walkers, people giving alms to fakirs... Once ascended to the sites, locals pray and make offerings to the imams. As to tying pieces of fabric all around the mezar, it is reminiscent of our tradition of tying a piece of cloth to anything surrounding the holy sites.

Why isn't there a single person in these photographs? This is a conscious decision made by the artist. Lisa showed me on her computer many other pictures that had people in them, also taken during the same journey. Her decision to exclude those pictures is driven by two main fears. Firstly, there is a high chance for the present Western audience to relate these images to highly stereotyped image of Muslims which would cause a misreading of the whole project. Secondly, considering how strict the Chinese Government is when it comes to disclosing information about the lives of people in the region, these pictures could make things worse for the Uyghurs in the long run. Both very reasonable fears, I say.

To set these fears aside, I think the fact that Lisa's pictures do not have any people in them creates a wonderful, unexpected impression on us. Let us look at these images one more time. How tall are these sticks, you think? How big are these mezar? We haven't got a clue because there is no information in these photographs that would provide our brains with what it needs to be able to tell the size of something. When first pictures of Egyptian pyramids were taken, people found out that unless the photographer placed a

person in front of the pyramid, there was no way to tell how big the pyramids were in real life from the photographs. This lack of relativity, the question of not knowing how big something is, opens new doors for us. We cannot see these sites conventionally; before we can form even an opinion of them, we must see them as they are. "To see something as it is", how many photographs can do that today? Not very many.

When I was small I played this game where I repeated the same word 200-300 times to myself until it lost all meaning. Our eyes do the same thing everyday by looking and sizing and looking and recording. Their only duty is to "identify". This a pretty boring job to do full-time, if you think about it. There is a memory about André Kertesz. A couple nights before he dies, he wakes up at night to get a glass of water. On his way to the kitchen, he trips over something and falls to the floor. Not having enough strength to get up, he falls asleep right there. When he wakes up the next morning, still lying on the floor, he thinks to himself, filled with excitement "Oh my! Where am I? What strange and beautiful angles! I must be in heaven!". With the desert, mezar, wooden sticks and colorful fabrics, Lisa has given us a chance to purify the way we see.