

Desert Flowers

When photographer **Lisa Ross** went on one of her eight trips to China's Xinjiang Province, to shoot holy sites and shrines, a local woman made a request through Ross's translator, "Please bring these photographs home and tell people what is happening."

trust anyone," the translator replied, adding that, as a foreigner traveling alone, it was important not to get involved with politics.

"My work had to be carefully and respectfully done," Ross says today

Access to this remote autonomous region has been

In the photographs, Ross captures shrines and burial sites—"gardens" and "gates" that sprout out of the desert in vivid color, in the form of dried sticks, ladders, and fences decorated with bright scarves. She describes these as apolitical pictures that not only document the religious

remembrances to the elements. "There is a relation to Earthworks and how people relate to their landscape and how it will change over time," she says, but "I don't really draw an analogy to **Robert Smithson.**"

Ross does, however, see parallels between the shrines



Black Garden (An Offering), 2009, from Lisa Ross's photographic series of Uyghur shrines in Xinjiang Province, China.

Xinjiang, which has been under Chinese rule since 1949, is home to the Turkic minority group known as the Uyghurs; many are Sufi Muslims who have maintained their religious customs despite government clamp-downs, and some have fought for independence. Ross responded politely but the translator altered her words, which were relayed back to Ross as roughly "I just care about my artwork." "Why would you say that?" Ross asked. "You can't really

notoriously difficult, given the long-standing conflicts between the Uyghur separatists and the Chinese government. However, with the help of French historian **Alexandre Papas** and Uyghur anthropologist **Rahile Dawut**, Ross has been able to make trips there over the course of a decade.

The exhibition "Living Shrines of Uyghur China," at New York's Rubin Museum of Art through July 8, features the photographer's contemplative landscape and still lifes from her journeys.

practices of Sufi Uyghurs, but also demonstrate how human creations can illuminate even the most forbidding environments.

Ross was first drawn to the vast deserts of Xinjiang, China's largest and northwesternmost province, after reading about the area. "It sounded like a completely new experience visually," Ross says. "I wanted to go see images I hadn't seen."

There are no people in her photos, only suggestions of a culture that has left fragile

and **Christo and Jeanne-Claude's** *The Gates*, installed in New York's Central Park in 2005. She notes that Christo and Jeanne-Claude's orange banners mounted on poles resembled the colorful markers that the Uyghurs have made for centuries.

"I can't remember which I saw first," Ross says. "It was kind of an incredible relationship to me between what artists do and what happens in these holy sites as an expression of faith."

—Ali Pechman