

# Art in Review

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

Published: April 21, 2006

## Lisa Ross: Traces of Devotion

Nelson Hancock Gallery

111 Front Street, No. 204, Dumbo, Brooklyn

Through May 8



Nelson Hancock Gallery

A photograph by Lisa Ross of a Sufi burial site in western China.

Nelson Hancock Gallery is fairly new. It has been in business for just a year and could not observe its first anniversary with a more beautiful and auspicious show than this one of photographs by Lisa Ross.

Although based in New York, Ms. Ross traveled far for these pictures, to the Taklamakan Desert in Xinjiang, the region in western China. The area is home to the Uighurs, a Turkic-speaking people who largely practice Sufism, a mystical, pacifistic form of Islam.

Sufi devotion focuses on generations of saints, "friends of God," and specifically on their burial sites. Such graves dot the Taklamakan, indicated by the most fragile of markers: dried branches staked vertically in the ground or piled up to serve as prayer huts. What makes the markers visually distinctive is the way they are ornamented by visiting pilgrims with amulets, dolls and ribbon-like strips of bright-colored cloth, brilliant against a landscape of unbroken sand-brown.

An awareness of transience lies at the heart of all devotion, and it finds an apt emblem in these grave markers, bent and tattered by the wind. Ms. Ross's photographs hint at a less elemental source of destruction, too. The Chinese government, intent on making the area accessible to the rest of the country, is building new roads. And as they pave the desert, they suppress the religious traditions that have, against all odds, flourished there. Politics is its own functionalist faith, a powerfully coercive one. In time, and not much time, it could transform Ms. Ross's exquisite anthropological images of living monuments into documents of relics. HOLLAND COTTER