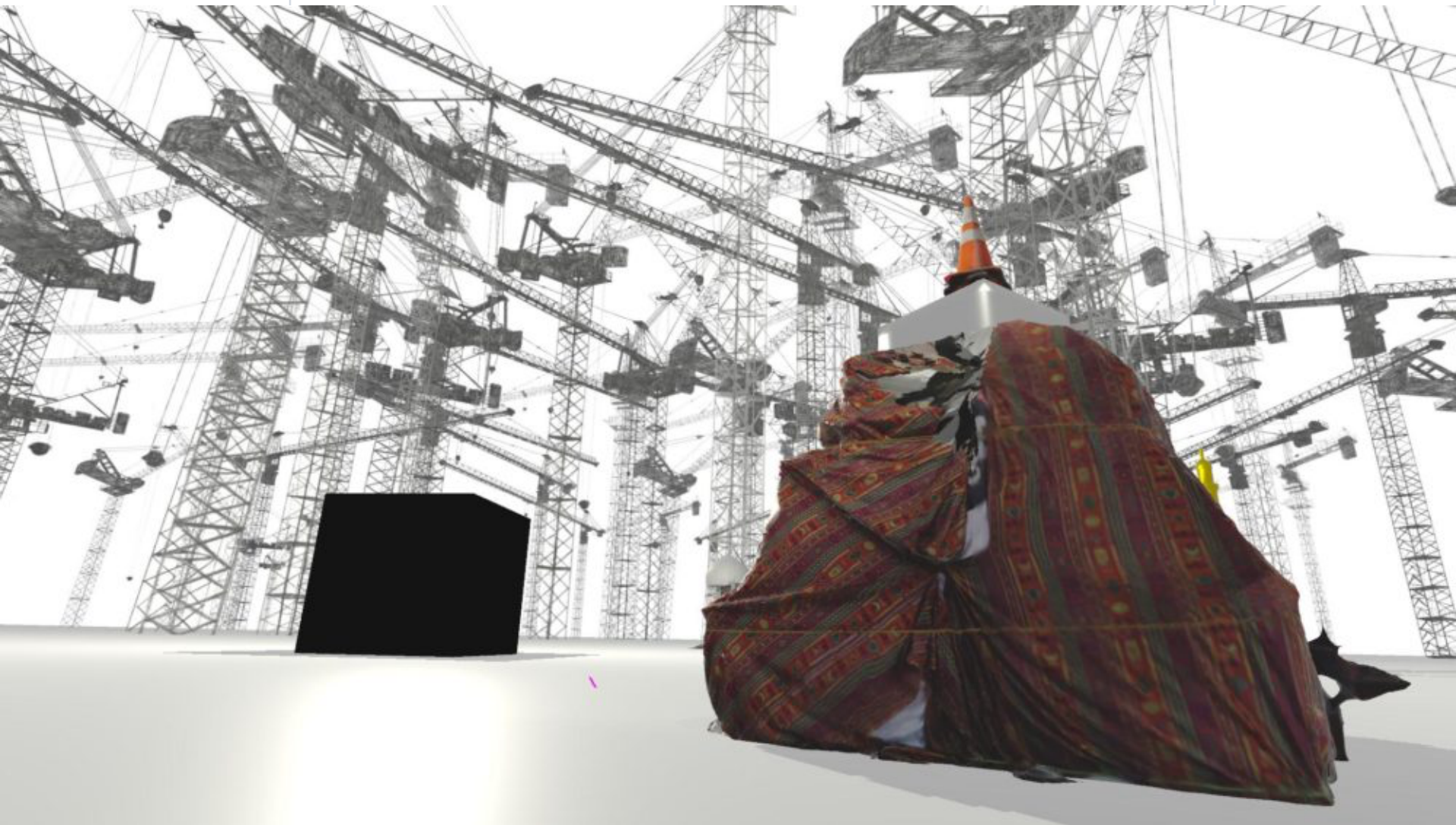


'The City Inside Us' Exhibition Takes On The Hidden Narrative Of Places In Transition

February 15, 2019

By [Pamela Reynolds](#) 



Asma Kasmi's virtual reality exhibition "Cranes and Cube," created in 2017. (Courtesy of the artist)

How many times do you need to return to a place to really understand it? And when you do return, again and again, what do you find?

These are the kinds of questions we ponder when we travel the world, or even just across town. Either way, we are amazed and dazed by the precipitous changes we see around us.

“[The City Inside Us](#),” a two-person exhibit on view at South Boston’s Distillery Gallery from Feb. 16 to March 17, takes on the theme of history, memory and place as artists [Jose Ferreira](#) and [Asma Kazmi](#) offer a sort of anthropological view of cities, spaces, and the people that populate them. Encompassing both virtual reality and photography, the exhibit offers visitors fragments of an enigmatic puzzle revolving around changing topography and what it has to say about who we are and what we value.



Jose Ferreira's work in "The City Inside Us" exhibit.
(Courtesy of the artist)

Ferreira offers portraits of people juxtaposed with a photo of a building fragment interspersed with text passages. The portraits, measuring about 24-by-36 inches, are the sort of standard issue mug shots you might encounter on any passport, although some of the people photographed keep their eyes closed. These are people Ferreira has met during his time in Hawaii, where he is an assistant professor of art at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. They seem disparate and odd when set next to the photograph of a statue, and strange as well when

shown along with narrative text describing the flora and fauna of Hawaii, or the work life and consumption habits of unidentified characters. Who are these people and what is the connection?

As someone who was born in Mozambique and who grew up in South Africa, Ferreira says he brings his own memories and history to everything he encounters. His photography is meant to acknowledge his own biases and emphasize that there is always much more than meets the eye. He has included text — something between a story and song lyrics — meant to poetically allude to the unseen.

“There are hidden narratives within these things that we are looking at that we may not be seeing,” he says.

Hawaii is particularly interesting in this regard, he says. While most of us are familiar with the islands as a tropical holiday paradise, Hawaii has a complex history involving European exploration, settlement by American Christian missionaries who would attempt to convert the indigenous populace, as well as waves of immigration from Japan, China and the Philippines.

“Underneath that, there's just a lot more to the place,” says Ferreira. “Obviously, a lot of places are like that — not just in the U.S., but globally. There's a sub-narrative to the main narrative. There's a history underlying so much, and I'm fascinated by that. It's like an emotional geography.”



Jose Ferreira's portraits in "The City Inside Us" exhibit. (Courtesy of the artist)

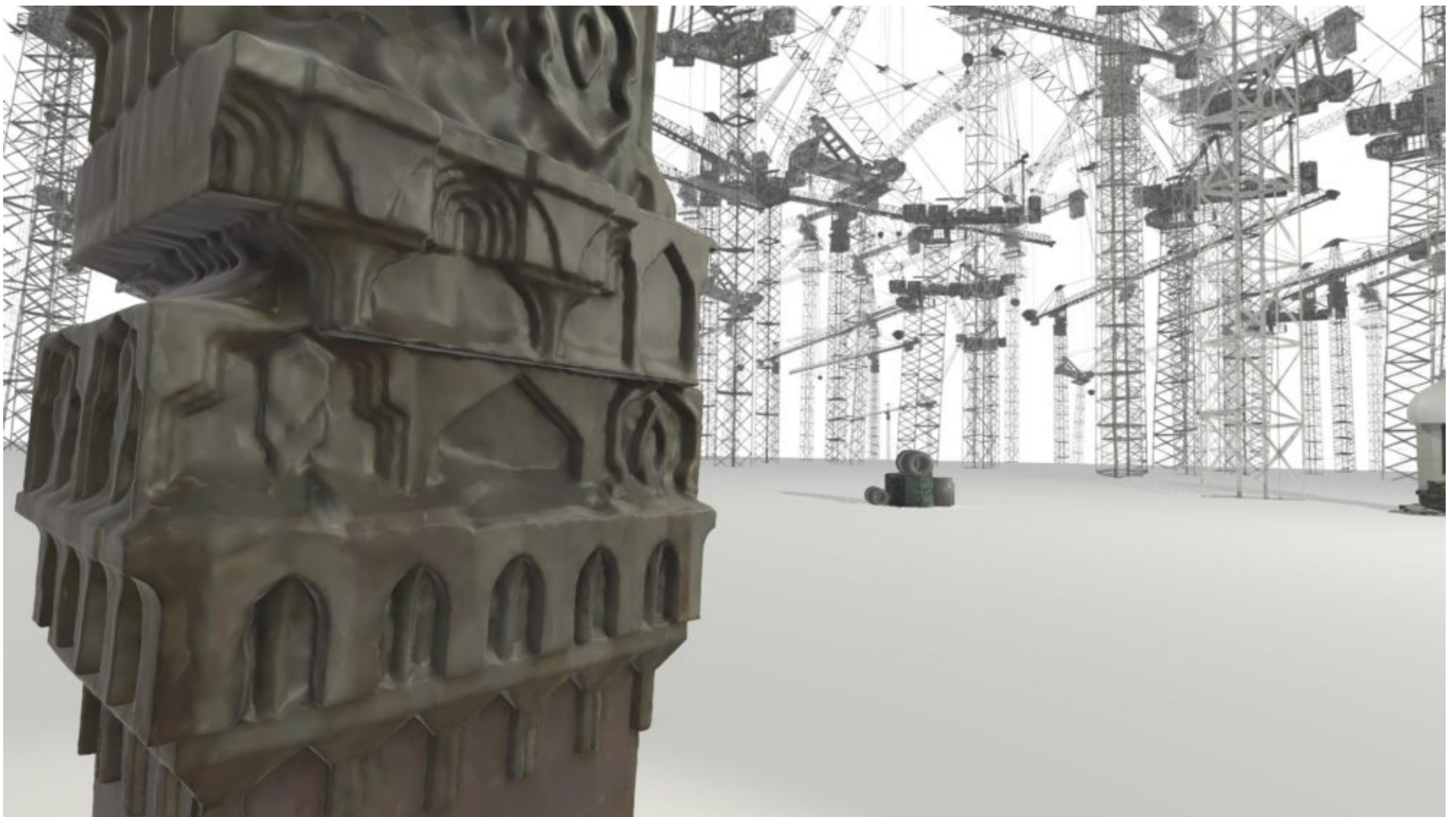
Ferreira has taken on many locales in the course of his art career. He has photographed the [salt mines of Brazil](#), swept away his own footprints in Mozambique in a performance piece entitled "[Sweeping Maputo](#)," broadcast anguished screams in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg as part of a conceptual piece. To a large extent, Ferreira's process involves the simple act of walking. He has walked across parts of the United States, South Africa and Europe. In June, he is planning a walking trip across parts of Brazil. Along the way, he talks to people and takes pictures. He makes repeated visits to places he visits, to map changes and avoid what he calls "dry season" bias.

"I like to think of my research as going back multiple times, taking photographs during different periods of the year, becoming these layers of history so that I can uncover this as I go along," he says. "That's the premise for a lot of the work."

Asma Kazmi, also investigates the idea of memory and place, but in a completely

different way. She offers two different pieces: "Cranes and Cube" and "Indian Mangoes by the Red Sea," interweaving virtual reality objects with drawings, text and video and sculptures. She is most concerned with how cities change, pushing certain people out while welcoming others in. An assistant professor in the Department of Art Practice at UC Berkeley, Kazmi experiences these shifts in the Bay Area, but she sees them as well everywhere else — not only in Boston, where she attended MassArt as an undergrad, but also in her native Karachi, and in the places she has traveled, including Mecca in Saudi Arabia. In her virtual reality piece, "Cranes and Cube," viewers are invited to enter a virtual Mecca, populated not just with architectural fragments, but with construction cranes and cones reflecting the development that has gone on in the city in recent years.

"I'm interested in that sort of juxtaposition of religiosity as well as this kind of real estate and commercialism," she says.



Asma Kasmi's virtual reality exhibition "Cranes and Cube," created in 2017. (Courtesy of the artist)

Kazmi took hundreds of pictures of various architectural elements in Mecca and

Jeddah and collapsed them into strange assemblages and objects that are meant to feel dreamlike and surreal. It is Kazmi's reinterpretation of a city whose buildings were influenced by the traditions of migrant laborers from India, Morocco, Turkey and Iran but now feels more like an anonymous construction zone.

“These buildings brought together all these architectural influences from all over the world, and that’s what we’ve lost by having lost all these buildings.”

Kazmi says she has nothing against change in cities, but it’s the *way* things change that is worrying.

“It tells you something about the values of a culture and a society,” she says. “For instance, in San Francisco, the way the city has changed, it caters to a very specific kind of person who is tied to the tech industry.”

Meanwhile, she says, hotel rooms in Mecca now charge thousands of dollars a night, far beyond the means of most Muslims making the pilgrimage to the city each year.

“It’s not that I’m lamenting change, but I’m critiquing how the change is happening in an unconsidered way, where lots of people have been marginalized in the process.”

“The City Inside Us” is not the first time Kazmi and Ferreira have shown together. They most recently combined efforts in another version of this show “[Hiding in Plain Sight](#)” at the University of Hawai’i. Both are research-oriented artists who are as much about ideas as images, and who have found commonality in their art practice through non-linear approaches to telling a story. The Distillery Gallery seemed the perfect backdrop to explore their ideas around memory, place and change, since South Boston itself has undergone such rapid change in recent years.

“That neighborhood has so dramatically changed since I had last seen it,” says Kazmi. “So even though I’m talking about a very specific place in the world, namely Mecca and Saudi Arabia, I’m interested in how some of the same ideas emerge in other places.”

“[The City Inside Us](#)” is on view at The Distillery Gallery, Feb. 16 to March 17. Opening reception is Saturday, Feb. 16, from 7 to 10 p.m. The gallery is located at 516 East 2nd St., South Boston.

Related:

- The Way We Take Photos Has Changed, But What Ansel Adams Brought To The Craft Hasn't
- 'Light Ballets' And 'Light Robots' Illuminate Visionary Artist Otto Piene's Career And Groton Roots
- You Know Those Grimy Fingerprints On Your Screens? Tabitha Soren Photographs Those
- At The Rose, Howardena Pindell’s Retrospective 'What Remains To Be Seen' Is A Must-See
- Using The Language Of Symbols, Nina Chanel Abney's New Mural At The ICA Tackles Systemic Racism



Pamela Reynolds  Visual Arts Writer

Pamela Reynolds is a writer and a visual artist. She was a feature writer and editor at The Boston Globe for more than a decade.

[More...](#)

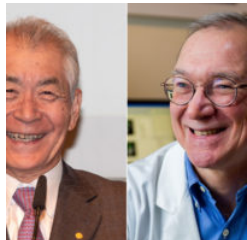


Join the discussion



View comment(s)

More from WBUR



In Boston Courtroom, Cancer Research Titans Clash Over Patents Likely Worth Billions

The battle over work that led to the Nobel Prize involves issues of scientific credit, honesty and reliability, one expert says, and "if you add money to the mix, it..."

CommonHealth in 2 hours



McGovern: Trump Needs To Understand He's 'Not All-Powerful'

Massachusetts Rep. Jim McGovern spoke with Bob Oakes on Morning Edition Friday, slamming Trump's "ridiculous" border wall.

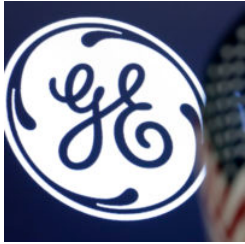
WBUR News 05:05 in 10 mins



'Our Country Is In Grave Peril': Weld Launches GOP Presidential Exploratory Committee

The announcement means the former Massachusetts governor may challenge President Trump in a 2020 Republican primary.

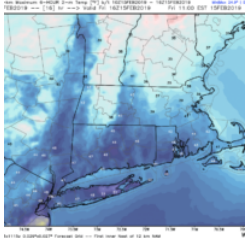
WBUR News 1 hour ago



Amazon And GE Cutbacks Are A Lesson For Cities Offering Big Incentives

Local business leaders and officials say GE and Amazon offer important lessons about cities offering companies big incentives.

 **Bostonomix** 03:42 4 hours ago



Today's Weather: A Few Springlike Showers

Friday will be mild with some showers and the weekend will be seasonably chilly.

WBUR News 4 hours ago



New England Conservatory Students Reimagine The Soundtrack Of The Film Noir 'Diva'

New England Conservatory's Contemporary Improvisation Program students will both “interpret” as well as “improvise” the 1981 film noir "Diva."

The ARTery 5 hours ago



A High School Diploma, Even For A Valedictorian, Will Never Be Enough

A high school diploma does not miraculously mitigate the challenges of living in poverty, writes Neema Avashia.

Cognoscenti 5 hours ago



Boston Filmmaker Roberto Mighty Wants To Show Martin Luther King And Coretta Scott King In All Their Complexity

Part of King Boston's multi-venue effort to memorialize the couple's work and time in the city, Roberto Mighty's 30-minute film is slated to come out in June.

The ARTery 5 hours ago

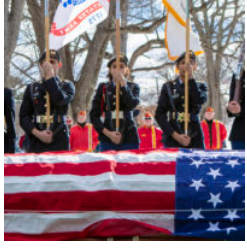
Hundreds Of Veterans, Supporters Attend Funeral For WWII Veteran With No Living Family

Nearly 400 people went to the funeral of James McCue, a Lawrence resident who

died at 97 years old, after learning that he had no surviving family to attend.



WBUR News 03:01 Feb 14, 2019



GE Will Scale Back Its World HQ In Boston And Return \$87M In Incentives Package

Boston-based General Electric announced Thursday it will scale back its headquarters in the city.



Bostonomix 04:28 Feb 14, 2019

© Copyright WBUR 2019