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Journey to the heart of Hajj

Sarah Walters talks to renowned artist Idris Khan

EVERY year, hundreds of thousands of people come together to fulfil a religious duty – the Hajj, a ritual pilgrimage to Mecca, South Arabia, carried out by the Muslim people.

The scale of the pilgrimage fascinates the public and the press, but the history and symbolism of the journey itself is what continues to resonate with practising Muslims all over the world.

For artist Idris Khan, born to Pakistani and Welsh parents, the Hajj has been a huge source of inspiration, one heightened by watching his own father embark on the journey as well as the loss of his mother and baby in 2010.

"I stopped being a practising Muslim when I was 14," says Idris as we talk about the story behind his latest large scale sculptural work, *The Devil's Wall*, which

arrives at the Whitworth Art Gallery next week. "But that was more out of rebellion than anything else.

"I always wanted to have a connection to my upbringing in some way; a lot of things within religion deal with repetition and returning to a daily practice.

"So I see my art in that way, as a exploration of where I came from and the questions that that asks about religion and culture and

Britishness. But not being full involved means I can see religion from an arm's length."

The Devil's Wall continues his exploration of Hajj, picking up where his 2010 piece *Seven Times* left off.

Seven Times examined the Kaaba shrine, but *The Devil's Wall* looks at a darker aspect of the Hajj pilgrimage – a point called the Jamarat, three walls that pilgrims throw stones at to banish the devil and cleanse the mind. Rather than the wall themselves, the sculptures allude to the circular dishes that the stones gather in after they have been thrown.

For Idris' sculpture, the stones represent words that endless disappear into the intriguing pools – which, sitting a metre high and around three metres in diameter, can't quite be peered into.

They are intended to provoke a kind of secular meditation on the spiritual practice.

"When you make a sculpture, you want the person looking at it to be impressed," he says. "I wanted them not be able to see in to the centre because that's exactly what you want to do.

"When you're dealing with something like the Jamarat you want it to feel as big as that. It had to be impressive to convey the power of the subject."

The Devil's Wall marks Idris'

debut show in Manchester, and it is supported by seven drawings made up of rubber stamped sentences and questions ritually added to daily for a year as a way of ridding himself of his own demons and creating a visual vortex that mimicked the sculptures themselves.

There are also four photographic works based on minimalist music scores by Philip Glass and Steve Reich, which Idris sees as the musical equivalent of religious practice: repetitive, spiritual, rhythmic.

The work is showing in the gallery's Mezzanine Court and has previously been exhibited in New York, where Idris was unsure what the response would be.

"When you make a piece of work, even when it has Arabic writing on, you have quite a few different responses," he explains.

"As a viewer your response to

the work is slightly controlled by the media. I showed this piece in New York about a year ago and worried what would happen when we got to customs.

"On the side of the crates it said, 'Big metal object with Arabic writing on', and I got really scared!

"There is that way of responding to it – but the feeling in New York was that it was a contemplative poetic response to what's going on in the world right now

towards Islam.

"The space at the Whitworth is really beautiful, very church-like and cold because of the bricks.

"They're blacking out the windows and spotlighting it so it feels even more like a contemplative, religious space – which is exactly what I want."

From Thursday at Whitworth Art Gallery, Oxford Road, until May 13. Free.



SACRED SIGHT Above, and below in detail, Idris Khan, The Devil's Wall, 2011. Courtesy of Victoria Miro Gallery, London and Yvon Lambert Gallery, New York