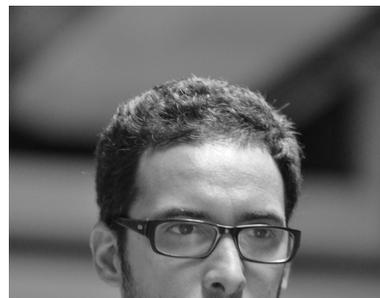


A STRUGGLE WITH MEANING - THE ART OF MOUNIR FATMI

It was shock, angst, and inescapable panic that introduced me to the work of Mounir Fatmi, a 'French artist in USA, an African



artist in Europe'. His kinetic installation *Modern Times – A History of the Machine*, on show in Denmark's Brandts 131 gallery, sends the viewer into somatic overdrive, yet remains acutely conceptual, as it employs referential elements pertaining to both Western and Eastern (Islamic) aesthetics. Visual repetition, perpetual circular motion, illegible Arabic calligraphy, and aggressive sound create a sense of danger, announcing an imminent clash of worlds embracing the mechanics of modernity, but struggling to grasp the essence of it.



A portrait of Mounir Fatmi

At times, Fatmi's works tap into strands of speculative philosophy, often breaking down bonds of meaning: objects are dislocated, taken beyond their instrumentality, reconceptualized, separated from the burden of a necessary relation to their qualities, in a potential attempt to explore what Graham Harman would call the 'object oriented ontology'.

In *Between the Lines*, a steel circular saw blade becomes the inscription surface for Quoran verses, which undergo a process of being emptied of semiotic content and rendered decorative elements. The defining qualities of both the object and of language are suspended, and the image becomes the new bearer of knowledge.





Between the lines, 2010, saw blade in steel, 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town. Photo credit: Mia Dudek

In his creative process, Mounir Fatmi uses a variety of media and materials, and appropriates objects at hand, in attempts to question their materiality and attributed function. His artworks challenge the *thingness* of things, as they take the form of known objects, but occupy meanings beyond their shape and instrumentality; in *Brain teaser for Moderate Muslims*, the commonplace colourful cube is transformed, redirected towards new possibilities of its materialism. The title suggests a playful reference to The Kaaba, a pre-Islamic monument rededicated by the prophet Muhammad, while the work as a whole invites critical thinking, with tones of political reflection.



Brain teaser for Moderate Muslim, 2004, acrylic on rubiks cubes, 54 x 11 x 13,5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town. Photo

credit : Rebecca Fanuele

Fatmi's oeuvre contains political statements, at various levels of articulation, which have the value to inform criticism and confront hierarchical or binary structures. Religious or ethnic identity is explored in the series titled *Face*. Here, markers of gender and lineage survive fragmentation and erasure, speaking to the dangers of prejudice and reductionism.

In a moment of reflection, Mounir notes: 'there are some things that cannot be named, nor described, and these are the things I am trying to show in my work.' This makes me doubt my own attempt to contain his work, to apply my limited language to his unlimited creative universe. Am I closer to the truth of a thing when I name it, when I describe it, or when its presence makes me feel shock, angst, and inescapable panic?



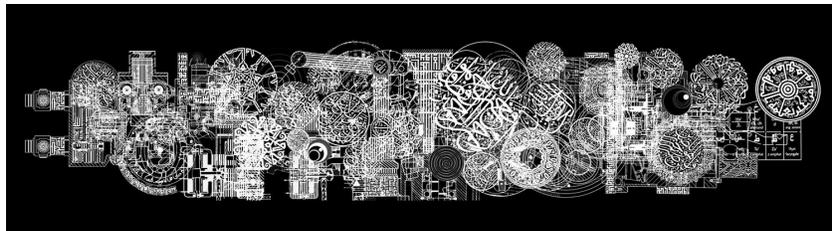
No Witness, (Portrait format) series started in 1996, 1995 paintings erased in 1996, 25,5 x 38 cm



Face, 1999, serie of 13 drawings, ink and acrylic on paper, 29,7 x 21 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Private collection. Photo credit : mounir fatmi

Elena Stanciu: found your work in *Merchants of Dreams : An exhibition of Contemporary Moroccan Art – Modern Times – a History of the Machine 1*– to be very powerful and a compelling commentary to contemporary social and political realities. Tell me a little about what inspired you.

Mounir Fatmi: *Modern Times – A History of the machine* is about the speed of modernization in the Arab World. With the speed of industrialisation, cities in the Middle East appear out of the desert, with buildings thrown up so fast that there is no time to reflect on the changes. “Modern Times” explores architecture in the Middle East, raising the question of the human impact of this unrelenting construction machine.



Modern Times History of the machine, 2010, France, video installation, 15 min, HD, B&W, stereo. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town Photo credit : Mounir Fatmi

ES: How did you come to choose this piece to be shown in Denmark? How do you think the Danish public will react to your work, and to Moroccan and African art throughout this biennale?

MF: Christian Skovbjerg invited me to exhibit in the Images 2016 biennale in Denmark. We met in Paris about one year ago to discuss the exhibition, as he wanted to focus on Moroccan artists. It is great to have the opportunity to show my work there. Scandinavian cultures are very far from me and luckily

art is the perfect opportunity to build cultural bridges.



Deconstruction Structure N°1, 2013-2014, Typewriter, hammers, A4 paper on office desk, video on flatscreen, Bilboquet game, typed sheets. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town. Exhibition view from Merchant of Dreams. Photo credit : Viborg Kunsthal

ES: You are very particular about consumption and the subject of consumption. Could you elaborate on these concepts, and on how they influence your work?

MF: I am concerned with the end of the object, the notion that one object becomes something else, like VHS becoming a town like in my installation *Skyline*, antenna cables become networks and depict a geometric pattern like in *Kissing Circles*.

I have started to explore the notion of politics, that it becomes the object of consumption like in the project *Mutation*, where the ideology of the Black Panthers Party became the brand of a hot sauce to raise money for children, or Picasso who is now a car produced by Renault, or even the PC, which was the Communist Party in French is now the Personal Computer. All

those displacements are very interesting to me, as I observe how the world changes in terms of using images and creating meaning.



The Lost Springs, October 2011, 3 brooms of 3 meters, 22 flags of arabian countries, 300 x 405 x 40 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town. Exhibition view from Le Monde Selon..., FRAC Franche Comté-Besançon, 2015. Photo credit : Blaise Adilon

ES: At the moment, Europe is struggling to make sense of various kinds of Otherness, which leads to particular crises – of identity, of meaning, of communication. Can art contribute to solving these issues?

MF: Otherness is a complex issue that I address in many of my works, for example in *Who is Joseph Anton?*, *The Blinding Light*, or *Darkening Process*.

I live in Paris and when I am in the USA, I am a French Artist, but when I am in France, I am a Middle Eastern or African artist. I am always from somewhere else, wherever I am! I see here an urgency to understand the other, to accept and to

learn with the other, and art can be a way to facilitate this.



The Impossible Union, 2011, arabic calligraphies of steel, hebrew typewriter. Courtesy of the artist and Collection of the Kunstpalast Museum, Duesseldorf. Photo credit : Mounir Fatmi

ES: I see a recurrent motif in your works – Arabic calligraphy, visually manipulated and aesthetically repurposed, to the point that words and language abandon their function. Tell me a little about this.

MF: Indeed, the text in my work loses its function and becomes an image. Language loses its meaning and for me there is a kind of inability to mean something. Claude Levi-Strauss asks in his book, *The Jealous Potter*: “what does the verb to mean mean?”

We can discuss many things but there are some things that cannot be named, nor described and that is what I am trying to show in my work.

Words: Elena Stanciu