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# millennium

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## Mounir Fatmi's Abstracting Winds

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Moroccan-French artist Mounir Fatmi came to video from a culture in which images are few. In the artist's interview on *Hard Head* (2008), the compilation DVD issued by the French distributor Lowave, he tells how when he was a child the only "images" in the house were a religious calligraphy, a picture of the king of Morocco, and the Qur'an: a picture of words, a person who must be respected, and a book the children were not allowed to touch because they were never clean enough. We understand that for this video-maker, images do not arise without a struggle, and the images that do exist are likely to support the claims of the powerful. Figurative images are avoided in

Muslim cultures, Farid Zahi explains, not because the body is unimportant but because it is extremely important, the site of a permanent dialectic between the sacred and the profane.<sup>1</sup> Much of Fatmi's work shares with Islamic aniconism an askance regard of the visual and, like Islamic art, draws creative power from a rejection of figurative images. Some of his videos address the relationship between the visible and the invisible, as it is known in both spiritual and erotic experience. Others address the obscenity of seeing, drawing an aniconic cloak of video effects over images of violence, pornography, and inhumanity. Fatmi's works are less concerned with the visual aspects of Islamic aesthetics and more with a profound sense of how the invisible unfolds into the visible or is held in a state of latency – both of which elicit an intense and often painful affective response. Often they are explicitly critical of the conformism of Sunni Islam, which can snuff out individuality and creativity.

Like most experimental video, Fatmi's work is hard to see (another kind of aniconism, compelled by the harsh environment for non-narrative cinema). Thus it is a great thing that some of his work was recently released for home use on this compilation from Lowave. The French distributor *Heure Exquise!* carries all Fatmi's work for public screening and purchase.

A number of Fatmi's earlier videos are based in the written word, drawing on the remarkable aesthetics developed in Islamic art in which the word becomes a living, transforming thing. In Islam the word is performative, bringing the world into being, as in God's command to the world, in the Qur'an, "Kun!"—"Be!" Calligraphy brings something into being that is both less and more than an image. Fatmi's early video *L'alphabet rouge* (1994) animates painterly letters so they become like swooping, dancing creatures. His *Face, the 99 names of God* (1999; on *Hard Head*) silently displays these names sequentially in elegant calligraphy, with translation. The names of God comprise a vast field of differences: God is *al-Tawwab*, the Relenting, and also *al-Nutqam*, the Avenger; *al-Ba'ith*, the Resurrector, and also *al-Mumeet*, the One who brings death; *al-Zâhir*, the Manifest, and also *al-Bâtin*, the Hidden. To gaze upon all these names together is to gradually look into the infinite, impossible thing, the face of God.

Islamic aesthetics became a source of inspiration for Western artists in the latter half of the nineteenth century when they started to look for alternatives to figurative images and ways to bring



Mounir Fatmi, *The scissors* (2003)  
FRAME ENLARGEMENT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST  
AND GALERIE HUSSENOT, PARIS



Mounir Fatmi, *Face, the 99 names of God* (1999), FRAME ENLARGEMENTS, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE CONRADS, DUESSELDORF

paint to the surface of the canvas. This heritage is usually disregarded, but Fatmi points it out with a laconic joke, in an ambiguous animation of 1997. A computer-animated scribble (decidedly not the graceful abstract line of the arabesque) begins to draw itself and gradually gathers momentum, until it entirely fills the white screen. Then the title appears as a kind of punch line: *Arabesque: hommage à Jackson Pollock*. The video mimics the “horror vacui” that Western critics attributed to Islamic art, while at the same time it shows that Pollock’s action painting inherited the all-over pattern of Islamic art. *Arabesque* neatly points out the debt of Western modernism to Islamic art, yet its awkward-looking scribble rejects the heritage of Islamic aesthetics.

Fatmi takes an ambivalent revenge on the sort of pious calligraphy that decorated the wall in his childhood home in the animation *The Machinery* (2006). It fixes on a stately roundel inscribed with the hadith: “If God gives blessings to His servants, He likes to see their effects.” A heavy machine sound is heard and the disk begins to rotate, slowly and then at ever greater speed. Watching it spin, I hallucinate faces arising from the words; the dots marking the letters look like eyes peering from a thicket. With the sound track of machine sounds, metal doors slamming, and water dripping, the work is quite menacing, and suggests that pious statements accepted “without asking how” become at best clichés, at worst weapons. But once I had the occasion to show *The Machinery* to a group of students who were Isma’ili, a branch of Shi’a Islam that privileges interpretation and mysticism, and many of them found it not menacing but meditative. The spinning inscription reminded some of the whirling dance that leads to *dhikr* or remembrance of God. One woman said that she focused on the center of the image to

avoid getting dizzy, just as if a devotee focuses on the One, she will not get distracted by the universe of illusion. Their reaction suggests that Fatmi's work aims to cut through the trappings of organized Islam but still seeks some kind of transcendental or mystical experience.

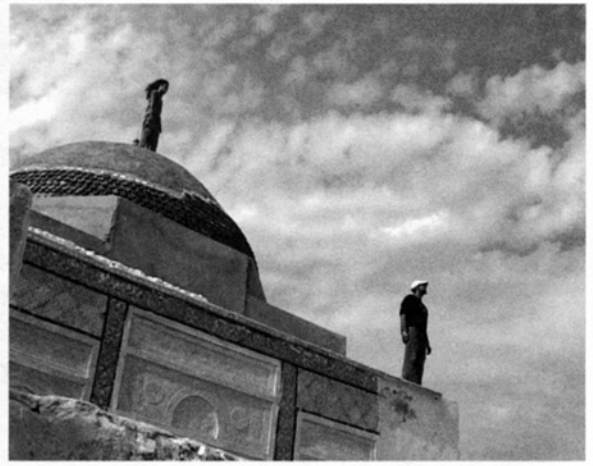
The image of the king of Morocco that Fatmi mentioned dominating his family home is a synecdoche for images of power, images that you cannot find anything to see in because their purpose is simply to reiterate themselves, and to reproduce themselves within us. Probably the majority of the images that most of us encounter every day are that kind of image, and it is sweet to imagine that our brains could somehow be swept clean of them. Fatmi's brutal video *Dieu me pardonne* ('May god forgive me', 2001-4) is a barrage of images that make you feel that looking is dangerous to the looker: pornography; a shot of Israeli soldiers throwing a Palestinian man and child to the ground; a martyr's coffin. An insistent, troubling electronic squeal and metronomic tap enhance the feeling of danger, and the blur and solarization Fatmi uses so often have the effect here of making the images seem to seep into your body through your eyes like an infection. "May god forgive me" – for the lustful and murderous thoughts that these images brought upon me. At intervals three texts appear: "the first look is for you / the second is for the devil / the third look is a crime," this last over an aerial shot of the bombing of Baghdad from the viewpoint of its destroyers.

An interesting pair of images of women who are barely more than white silhouettes recurs in *Dieu me pardonne*. One is a scantily clad, pale-limbed cabaret dancer who pirouettes while a circle of men in suits close in on her, clapping; the other is the slim, white-veiled figure of a woman on the street, probably in Morocco. Both seem cut out of the visible, but the dancer's body and the shape of her pretty legs cuts a feeling of desire into us, while the veiled woman is shielded, so both she and we are safe.

*The scissors* (2003) also presents an image of bodies deemed too dangerous to look at: a scene between the actors Lubna Azabal and Nouraddin Orahhou in Nabil Ayouch's film *Une minute de soleil en moins* (2003), which was removed by the Moroccan censors. It is the most blissful and abandoned scene of lovemaking I have ever seen. The couple's intimacy, impelled by the sound of a woman's breathing, is so different from the porn of *Dieu me pardonne* for, even though it is a recorded performance, it is not entirely rendered up to the visible. The woman embraces the man from behind ardently, reaching between his legs, cupping his head, and Fatmi makes the image echo and blur, emphasizing the grace and fleetingness of the gestures of passion. The man's face is blind with bliss, eyes half-closed, and a view of the woman's face while he is fucking her shows her distracted, grimacing, grinning privately – so different from the porn actress who has to play the clichés of desire across her face. There are a couple of brief shots of Fatmi's intent eyes, perhaps as he works editing the scene in video. Intercut with the lovers' scene is a



Mounir Fatmi, *Dieu me pardonne* (2001-2004)  
FRAME ENLARGEMENTS, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST  
AND LOMBARD-FREID PROJECTS, NEW YORK



LEFT Mounir Fatmi, *The scissors* (2003), RIGHT *Les égarés* (2003), FRAME ENLARGEMENTS, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE HUSSENOT, PARIS

traditional wedding parade in the mountains, and you hope that the bridegroom and the covered bride will have half as joyous a union with her husband as these lovers do. Trees rustle in the wind and a woman's voice repeats the words of Alfred de Musset: *Tous les hommes sont menteurs, inconstant, faux, bavards, hypocrites, arrogants et lâches, méprisables et sensuels. ... Mais s'il y a au monde une chose sainte et sublime, c'est l'union de deux de ces êtres si imparfaits et si affreux.*

The demanding insistence of images of power (such as images of gods) is why Islamic aesthetics rejects such images, and instead privileges the unseen over the seen. The slight images of Islamic art are pregnant with all the images it does not show. Fatmi draws on the power of latency in a similar way. Many of his videos are waiting for an image, or a new experience, to arise, as in *Les égarés* ("The lost ones", 2004). On the roof of a large mosque, dispersed here and there are several youths, quiet and still. They squint into the sun and the wind ruffles their hair; a young man with long hair crouches on the dome and holds on to its brass pinnacle with the crescent moon; a young woman drowns in the sun.

They seem to be waiting for something. One feels both that what they're doing is an offense against religion, for if they were devout they'd be inside the mosque and not on top of it, and that it is a devotion itself, for they seem intent, like antennas awaiting a new signal from the divine. Finally, over a scene of boys in Qur'an school rocking intently, learning by rote – everything these searching souls are not – a voice begins to speak: *I want to talk with the few words left to me. I want to cut off this tongue, sick with fear and shame. I feel like learning another language. I want to have a face, a voice, eyes, tears. I want to be a smile. I want to taste fruit, to drink. I want to have lungs, to breathe, to shout. I want to have hands, fingers, to caress a body and feel its heat. I want to walk, to have feet, to take steps, to run, and to fall. I want to be a heart, and to fight.* The voice speaks of a longing for something real that arises from a body that has no shame – something that is not here yet but might be.

This is why Fatmi's work is suspicious of images, and maybe also why the wind is an important motif. Most images infect the mind of the looker and enslave us: this applies to images of words too. Fatmi's work tries to open up spaces for feeling that are before or beyond images. His videos try to make small rents in the fabric of the visible through which a fresh breeze of something not yet might stir.

<sup>1</sup> Farid Zahi, "Art, islam et modernité: le corps dans la peinture marocaine," in *D'un regard, l'autre: L'art et ses médiations au Maroc* (Rabat: Éditions Marsam, 2006), p. 78.