

Sleep, Perchance to Dream

Mounir Fatmi dares to go against the tide

The works of Mounir Fatmi are pregnant with meaning. This is an artist who incorporates the complexities of the world – particularly its cultural and political characteristics – into his life and into each of the pieces he produces. Believing aesthetics to essentially be a trap, he is eager to imbue his artworks with guts, ingredients evoking the real, less-than-beautiful issues of our time. Fatmi's cultural background and international lifestyle bestow on him an openness and a balanced vision that enable him to observe controversies and injustices with clarity and fairness of mind. And it is this that he chooses to make manifest.

ANNA SANSOM

Mounir Fatmi is sitting in a noisy place called Café de Libre Échange in northern Paris. The café's name recalls his performance project, Libre-échange (Free trade), made in 1999, the year he moved to Paris from his native Tangier in Morocco, to participate in an artist's residency. Fatmi offered a white badge to passers-by, onto which he had written his name, thereby circulating his work in the public domain through a simple, innocent gesture. Text, language, and the exchange of ideas still lie at the heart of Mounir Fatmi's work, though now on a more sophisticated and controversial level. Last October, two of his pieces were censored – one from the Printemps de Septembre festival in Toulouse in the south of France, another from the Institut du Monde Arabe (Arab World Institute) in Paris.

Dressed in a dark suit, Fatmi is just back from the opening of *History Is Not Mine*, his exhibition at Paradise Row in London, where *Sleep Al Naim*, the video of Salman Rushdie slumbering, is being pre-

miered. This is the same piece that was pulled out of an exhibition on 25 years of Arab creativity at the Institut du Monde Arabe just days before the show's inauguration. According to www.france24.com, the French institution claimed that the piece lacked pertinence. Fatmi says it was deemed too sensitive on religious grounds. The six-hour black-and-white video installation appropriates the form of Andy Warhol's film *Sleep*. Given that a fatwa was issued by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran in 1989, in outrage over Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, the film of Rushdie sleeping has political poignancy. "The idea was to put the public in a position of culpability", says the artist, who divides his time between Paris, Tangier, and Los Angeles. "After one minute of watching somebody sleeping, you start to feel voyeuristic and guilty. Salman Rushdie, and his right to freedom of expression, was not supported enough in the West and in the Arab countries." Fatmi made the video using 3D digital animation, after his request to meet Rushdie in person was declined by the author's



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SLEEP AL NAIM, 2005-2012 (1)
HD, B&W, stereo; 6 hours
Courtesy of the artist and Paradise Row, London
Photo: Mounir Fatmi

CIRCLES, 2012 (2)
Coaxial antenna cables and staples on plywood
70 cm diameter
Courtesy of the artist and Paradise Row, London
Photo: Paradise Row

WITHOUT HISTORY, 2012 (3)
Bilboquet and book
Courtesy of the artist and Paradise Row, London
Photo: Mounir Fatmi

publisher. Consequently, Fatmi embarked on a six-year-long production process, using portraits from the Internet and from books and magazines to sculpt his face and create his body. For the sound accompanying the imagery of Rushdie's hairy chest heaving up and down, Fatmi inserted a recording of his own breathing, taken over several nights.

CONTROVERSIAL REVERBERATIONS

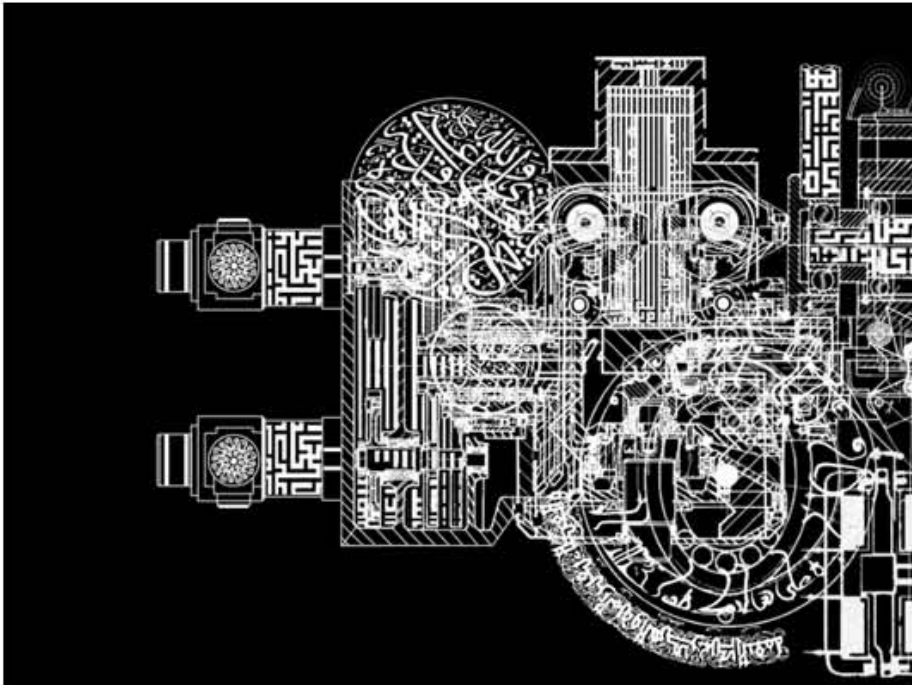
Last year, the Moroccan artist and the Indian novelist finally met at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, in a rendezvous organised by the cultural venue's director, Paul Dujardin. "When I explained to Salman Rushdie that I had injected my breathing into the piece, he was very touched. He liked having this combined with the 3D image of him", says Fatmi. "We talked about censorship, creation, fear, and freedom of expression. I asked him what he would think if I presented it in the Arab world, because I was afraid that continuing

to show the project would create more problems for him. But he was very enthusiastic about the idea." The Institut du Monde Arabe's decision not to exhibit *Sleep Al Naim* has changed the way the film is perceived, believes Fatmi. "It can never be about the novelist that had a fatwa issued against him and just be shown in a cultural, artistic context", he says. "It's as if a veil is always hanging over the piece." What's terrible is that the Institut du Monde Arabe is out of step with the rest of the Arab world. During the Arab Spring, the youths wanted change. But the institute doesn't understand that."

And withdrawn from the Printemps de Septembre festival in Toulouse, was the installation *Technologia*, featuring images of verses from the Koran displayed inside circles, inspired by Marcel Duchamp's Rotoreliefs and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, which were projected onto the city hall and onto a bridge. A group of young men became angry when



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people stepped on the projected Arabic lettering, and a young woman was slapped in the face. "A lot of journalists asked the Association Musulmane de Toulouse for their point of view, as if it were a group of art critics or curators", says Fatmi. "But I can understand the withdrawal because the whole city was on edge following the shooting Jewish school. I never thought somebody would be injured because of my work. For me, when a member of the public is hurt, that is the moment to stop."

THE QUEST TO UNDERSTAND

To Fatmi's mind, the incidents raise wider issues about censorship, from Pussy Riot in Russia to the cartoons of Muhammad that were published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. "By expecting artists to self-censor, it's as if art is a shiny dance floor and when the music is turned-off no one can understand anything", he says. "People don't want

artists to make work that offers a critical point of view about religion. It's catastrophic. Yet religion has become the biggest spectacle of our time. The live transmission of the election of the new Pope was almost like the Oscars."

Along with *Sleep Al Naim*, Fatmi's exhibition in London includes a new conceptual piece, *Without History*. It is composed of black-and-white jump poles – typically used in equestrian competitions – that are inscribed with words and phrases from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. Nearby, his *Dripping on Persian Carpet* evokes the drippings of a Jackson Pollock painting covering an intricately woven Persian carpet. The incongruity is not merely a reference to American and Iranian aesthetics but to political and historical differences. "I have always believed that all works are an aesthetic trap", says Fatmi. "I use the aesthetic so that another reading behind it can be discovered. The meaning of the work rapidly

MODERN TIMES, A HISTORY OF THE MACHINE - THE FALL, 2010-2012 (1)
Video installation: HD, B&W; 15 min
Courtesy of the artist and Paradise Row, London
Photo: Nicolas Brasseur for the Printemps de Septembre, Toulouse

MODERN TIMES, A HISTORY OF THE MACHINE, 2010 (2)
Video installation: HD, B&W; 15 min
Courtesy of the artist and Paradise Row, London
Photo: Mourir Fatmi

THE ANGELS' BLACK LEGS, 2011 (3)
SD, 4/3, B&W, stereo; 9 min 48 sec
Courtesy of the artist and Analix Forever, Geneva
Photo: Mourir Fatmi

switches to the history of art and humanity, and to death, life, and religion.”

Time and again, Fatmi has interpreted political realities in his work. Think of *The Impossible Union* (2011), a German typewriter with a Hebrew keyboard and Arabic calligraphy pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Or *The Lost Springs* (2011) – also not in the Paradise Row show – that comprises of two brooms hoisting the Tunisian and Egyptian flags while the other 20 flags of the Arab League are just hung on the wall. Or *Keeping Faith* (2007), which is of a chair made from VHS tapes, with tape trailing from its arms, and it's positioned in a VHS tapes-constructed chamber. This brings to mind Warhol's *Electric Chair* and the influence of minimalism, pop art, and op art. “On one level, the chair disappears into the VHS tapes”, affirms Fatmi. “There's the notion of culpability and the death of the image. It's a visual trap about the programmed spectacle of death.”

THE SHOCK OF THE AESTHETIC

Questions about cultural identity inform much of Fatmi's work. “In France, people often refer to me as a Moroccan artist. In the US, they refer to me as a French or Parisian artist, while in Morocco they call me an artist of the Diaspora. It interests me to say that I'm a Moroccan artist who's Muslim and from the third world. I don't agree with people who simply say 'I'm an artist'.” Significantly, Fatmi's first artistic memory is of watching a sheep eating the hands of Mona Lisa on an upside-down reproduction painting in a flea market in Tangier. “For me, it's the shock of the 'aesthetic' that formed my artistic language”, he says resolutely “It's not only the original, but also the copy, that's interesting.” Fatmi's relationship to the history of art resurfaces in his digital black-and-white video installation, *La Jambe Noire de l'Ange* (*The Angel's Black Leg*) (2011), which is the centrepiece of Fatmi's exhibition at Analix Forever in Geneva. It is based on Fra Angelico's paint-



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KEEPING FAITH, 2007 (1)
VHS, tapes, mirrored floor, leather belts
Size may vary
Courtesy of the artist and Paradise Row, London
Photo: Julien Carot

RUSHDIE AND FATMI, 2012 (2)
Meeting for the first time at BOZAR, Brussels

HISTORY IS NOT MINE, 2013 (3)
HD, stereo; 5 min
Courtesy of the artist and Paradise Row, London
Photo: Mounir Fatmi



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ing *The Healing of the Justinian* (1438-1440), which depicts Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian grafting the leg of an Ethiopian onto a white man. "I'm passionate about this story because it's completely emblematic of my own history, of being a Moroccan artist living abroad", he enthuses.

Looking ahead, Fatmi is one of 10 short-listed artists for the third edition of the Jameel Prize and his work will be exhibited at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London at the end this year. Under the patronage of Zaha Hadid, this is an international award for contemporary art and design inspired by Islamic tradition. "The notion of a prize in art is like sports", remarks Fatmi. "For me, art is not about entering a competition with others, but is a combat with oneself." For the occasion, Fatmi will be presenting *Modern Times* (2009-2010), an installation with the selfsame title as Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film. A series of circular saw blades cut in half, with Arabic calligraphy cut out of each them, stand upright on the floor while projected onto the surrounding wall are images of architectural construction in the Middle East. The modernity of the factory's machines are visually characterised by a series of whirring cogs, the circular forms of which are reminiscent of the work of French artists Sonia and Robert Delaunay, and Fernand Léger. The piece alludes to Western industrialisation and the impact of construction in Arab countries.

Fatmi's fascination with Rushdie has inspired this new work, named after the alias that the London-based writer chose when he was forced underground. Rushdie used the first names of the authors he loved, Conrad and Chekhov, in writing a

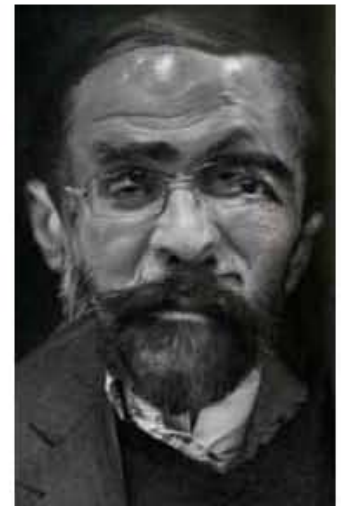
memoir entitled *Joseph Anton*, about how he lived with the threat of murder for over nine years. It was published last year. Here, Fatmi has superimposed black-and-white portraits of Conrad, Chekhov, and Rushdie to create a photomontage. It is the starting point for a video piece he is now making of 'robotic portraits', an investigation of the portrait, the face and fugitive identity. He is also working on a book about the notion of sleep that will include a long interview with Rushdie, together with other texts. Referring to the Arab Spring, Fatmi says, "It's as if the Arab world was sleeping for 30 years, when the countries were under dictatorship, and that they are now waking up. What's interesting is to talk about the idea of virtual censorship and the real. When you're asleep, that's the time when you're neither dead nor alive but travelling, because you're not really on this earth." <

History Is Not Mine is at Paradise Row in London until 01 June 2013
www.paradiserow.com

Blinding Light is at Anabr Forever in Geneva from 02 May - 02 June 2013
www.anabr-forever.com

Works by artists and designers shortlisted for the 2013 edition of the Jameel Prize will be exhibited at the V&A in London from 11 December 2013 to 21 April 2014. The winner will be announced on 10 December 2013.

Fatmi's video *Sleep At Night* can be seen on the cable channel Numero 23 on 02 June 2013 from midnight to 6:00 am CET
www.numero23.fr



WITHOUT HISTORY, 2007-2013
 Jumping poles
 Size variable
 BETWEEN THE LINES, 2010
 Steel
 150cm diameter
 Courtesy of the artist and Paradise Row, London
 Photo: Paradise Row

JOSEPH ANTON, 2013
 Joseph Anton was the alias that Salman Rushdie chose (a combination of Conrad and Chekhov - both authors of great inspiration to him) when he was in hiding, after being 'sentenced to death' upon publication of *The Satanic Verses*
 Photomontage
 Courtesy of the artist
 Photo: Mourir Fatmi