



## Fragility and the machine: Morocco's Mounir Fatmi – artist profile

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**Mounir Fatmi addresses doubts, fears and desires through architecture, machines and twists of phrases.**

Moroccan artist Mounir Fatmi takes a look at the complexities of modern-day life through videos, installations, drawings, paintings and sculptures that seek to deconstruct dogmas and ideologies and shatter preconceptions.



Mounir Fatmi, 'Sleep Al Naim', 2005-2012, France, 6 hours, HD, B&W, stereo. Photo: Stephane Cuisset. Image courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town.

**Mounir Fatmi's** artwork provides a raw and at times uncomfortable narrative to the world. Fatmi often employs technologically obsolete machines, ambient sound and stark imagery, overlaid with critical, "less than beautiful, issues of our time". Collections of cables, copier machines and video tapes provide a backdrop to rampant consumerism and the jarring collision between the East and West as well as age-old traditions versus wide-spread global modernisation.

Fatmi was born in Tangiers, Morocco in 1970. His family lived in a neighborhood known as "the Cheap House". From an early age, Fatmi was acutely aware of the differences between the rich and the poor, particularly in reference to the city's architecture. To supplement the family's income, Fatmi's mother worked at the city's boisterous flea market, providing him with his first exposure to consumerism.



Mounir Fatmi. Photo: David Tardé.

### Fatmi's artistic beginnings

In his late teens, Fatmi spent time in Casablanca, where he attended the School of Fine Arts for a brief stint. From there, the artist resided in Italy where he attended classes at the Ecole Libre de Nu of Academy of Fine Arts in Rome. Upon returning to Morocco, he secured a job as an Artistic Director at a local advertising agency. This position provided Fatmi with an intimate look at how product images could be manipulated for maximum gain.

During the six years that Fatmi spent in advertising, he continued to create and experiment. In 1999, the artist travelled to France to participate in an artist's residency programme. While there, he was introduced to many of the country's contemporary philosophers who continue to inform his work to this day. His work references some of the great creative minds of the 20th century: **Andy Warhol**, Charlie Chaplin, **Marcel Duchamp**, Sonia and Robert Delaunay and **Fernand Léger**, to name a few.

It was during this period of transition, as he relayed to Christophe Gallois in a 2008 interview, that his transformation as an artist and his identity as an individual straddling cultures came more and more into focus:

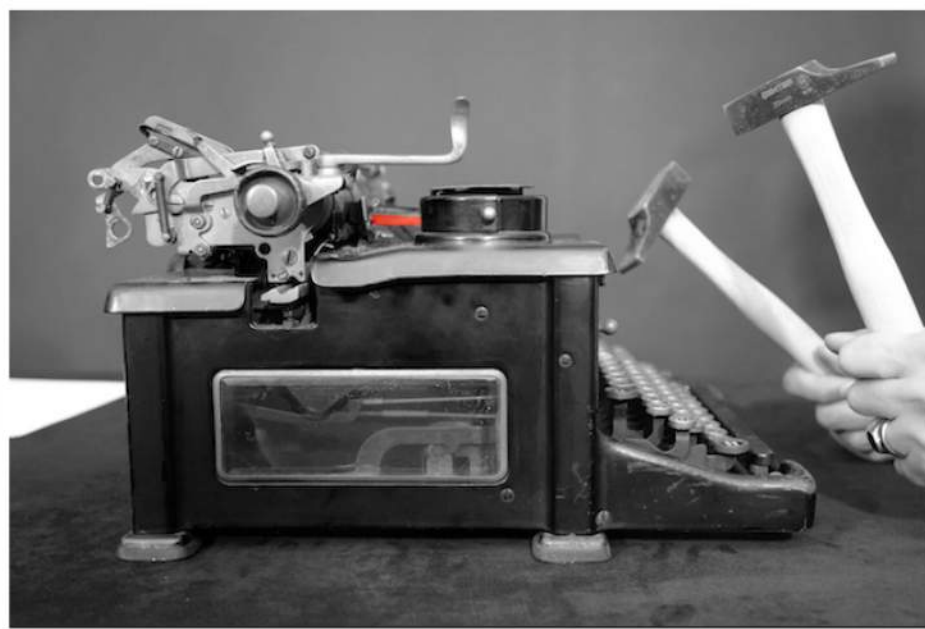
*Out of exile, I created glasses so I could see.*



Mounir Fatmi, 'Motherland', 2014, jumping poles and prayer rugs. Photo: Rebecca Fanuele. Image courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town.

To date, his multidisciplinary work has been exhibited widely throughout the world. Fatmi was short-listed for the **Jameel Prize 3** (2013) and has participated in notable solo and group exhibitions and biennales, including the 52nd and 54th editions of the **Venice Biennale**. Fatmi now spends his time between Tangiers and Paris.

Fatmi's work is currently being shown in countries located on four different continents, including "**Jameel Prize 3**" at Singapore's National Library until 30 November 2015, "Who Said That Tomorrow Doesn't Exist" at the **1st TRIO Biennial** (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) until 8 December 2015, "**Telling Time**" as the 10èmes Rencontres de Bamako – Biennial Panafricaine de Photographie (Bamako, Mali) until 31 December 2015 and "**Global Control and Censorship**" at **ZKM** (Karlsruhe, Germany) until 1 May 2016.



Mounir Fatmi, 'History is Not Mine', 2013, France, 5 min, HD, colour and stereo. Photo: Mounir Fatmi. Image courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town.

### **Power of the written word**

Mounir Fatmi grew up in a country where there is a proscription against the creation of images according to the Muslim religion and where traditionally, artwork follows the three pillars of Islamic design: symmetry, repetition and rhythm. As the artist told *Art Radar*, his modest childhood home contained few cultural objects and even fewer images:

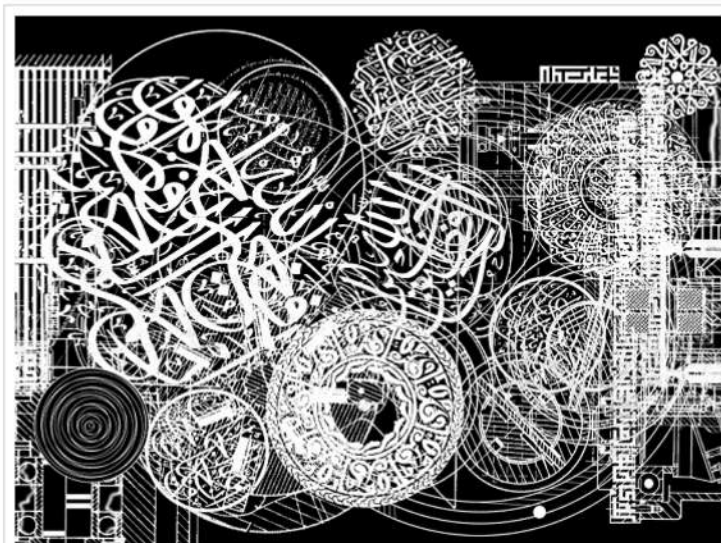
*The only cultural objects in my childhood home were a calligraphic verse of the Qur'an in one frame and in another, a black and white photograph of the King of Morocco. The only book was Qur'an. I remember sometimes there was also an Arabic-French Dictionary, but it was not ours.*

*Every time we needed to translate a word we did not understand, we would have to look for the dictionary throughout the neighborhood. Once we found it, we hoped that the page containing the word we were searching for was not ripped or missing. Because of this experience, words have a very important meaning in my life.*



Mounir Fatmi, 'Calligraphy of Fire', 2012, steel calligraphies and clamps, 42 x 48 x 48 cm. Photo: Rebecca Fanuele. Image courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town.

Words hold an incredibly high value to Fatmi, who once pledged to never label a finished work as simply "untitled". Although Fatmi utilises both English and French in his work, hyper-stylised Arabic script occurs in some of Fatmi's most visually lush work. One of his most well-known installations is *Modern Times: A History of the Machine*, in which **Marcel Duchamp's Rotoreliefs** appear with rotating gear-like religious verses overlaying architectural drawings of Middle Eastern monuments, a contemplation on contemporary architecture and the "sense of a futile and hypnotic machine".



Mounir Fatmi, 'Modern Times: A History of the Machine', 2010-2012. Image courtesy the artist and Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica.

Calligraphy, and in particular select verses from the Qur'an, are prized in the Middle East, where apprentices learn from master calligraphers. One of Fatmi's main inspirations of this form of writing is **Brion Gysin** (United Kingdom, 1916-1986). Gysin was a painter, writer and poet, who is credited with the "cut-up technique", used by writer William S. Burroughs, a technique that cuts text apart and then assembles it in a new way. Gysin himself lived and worked in Tangier from 1954 to 1958. Fatmi learned about the artist from writers Mohamed Choukri and Paul Bowles, whom the artist met as a young man. As Fatmi relayed to *Art Radar*:

*I started thinking about calligraphy and its use after discovering the work of Brion Gysin in Tangier. His insight of calligraphy does not stop just with beauty and aesthetics, but is also about the deconstruction of language.*



Mounir Fatmi, 'Calligraphy of Fire, Tribute to Brion Gysin', 2012, steel, clamps, and table, 120 x 160 cm. Photo: Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town. Image courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town.

### **The shape of contemporary civilisation**

In addition to words, phrases and calligraphy, architecture is one of the most prominent themes found in Fatmi's work. In their most basic manifestation, buildings providing shelter. They can also provide an identity for a group or country and become targets or be fought over by differing factions. According to Lillian Davies in the book *Mounir Fatmi: Suspect Language*, architecture can also be quite problematic in terms of ego and sense of self-importance:

*For Fatmi, architecture either "poses problems," as in the situation "I don't have a roof," or is "pretentious, thinking it can solve problems."*



Mounir Fatmi, 'Save Manhattan 01', 2004, table, books published after Sept. 11th, 2001, strings and spotlight, around 150 x 90 cm. Photo: Jean-Paul Senn. Image courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg – Cape Town.

To create a façade, Fatmi employs everyday objects to construct a visual landscape and “fragile architecture”. In his “Save Manhattan” series of installations, Fatmi uses copies of the Qur’an (*Save Manhattan 01*) and a pair of stereo speakers (*Save Manhattan 03*) to represent the Twin Towers found in New York City before 9/11, along with actual sounds recorded in the famous metropolis. In another installation, VHS tapes construct a slick, black room with an electric chair (like Andy Warhol’s *Big Electric Chair*) gleaming inside. Books, speakers and tapes allude to the training and propaganda that can be cheaply reproduced and quickly introduced to others across borders, ethnicities and cultures.



Mounir Fatmi, 'Al Jazeera Bas Relief', 2004-2007, coaxial antenna cable on wood panel and staples. Image courtesy the artist.

## Flow of information

Due to Fatmi's intimate experience with consumerism, much of his work builds upon obsolete or soon-to-be retired products reappropriated in surprising ways. In Fatmi's *In the Absence of Evidence to the Contrary* installation, the audience must lean into the installation, in order to read the small Arabic and English text on each fluorescent tube. The image of the text is then imprinted on the viewer's sight for a brief duration, blurring the line between illusion and reality. In Fatmi's capable hands, coaxial cables, copier machines, fluorescent tubes and VHS tapes become fodder for the idea of the demise of a consumed product but can also reference censorship in the surveillance state and the "transfer of images and information".



Mounir Fatmi, 'In the Absence of Evidence to the Contrary 03', 2012, luminescent tubes, size may vary. Photo: Leslie Artamonow. Image courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg – Cape Town.

## The demise of dogma

Ideology, dogma and spirituality represent an irreverent playground and jumping off point for Fatmi. Topics ranging from the Black Panthers Party, the disappearance of Moroccan dissident Mehdi Ben Barka (1965) and the Fatwa issued by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini (1989) against author Salman Rushdie are examined with subtle imagery and symbolism. In *Sleep Al Naim*, the artist constructed a 3D image of Rushdie sleeping peacefully. Unable to initially meet with Rushdie, Fatmi pieced together images found online and then added his own recording of himself sleeping to the installation. As Fatmi told Oscar Gomez Povinã in an interview in 2010, the piece addresses censorship, freedom of expression and fear:

*He [Rushdie] is the subject of the film because on one hand he is an important figure, but also to show that he is able to sleep, that he can be in peace and not under the threat as he [has been] for so long.*



Mounir Fatmi, 'Holy Water Ice Cubes', 2006-2014, holy water, ice bucket, ice cubes and alcohol.  
Photo: Mounir Fatmi. Image courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town.

Another recent work called *Holy Water Ice Cubes* blends “spirits” with the “spiritual”, in an experiential performance. Again, Fatmi is deftly able to examine reality and illusion, as he relayed to *Art Radar*:

*I emphasise again the question of illusion, by offering the public cocktails in which I blend the spiritual and the spirits: iced holy water in alcohol. The experience asks the audience to judge a work of art that is consumed. The more one consumes the alcohol, the more the alcohol goes to the brain and the less one is able to judge the work.*



Mounir Fatmi, 'The Paradox', 2014, machine in steel, arabic calligraphy, and engine, 75 x 100 x 116 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town.



This breakdown of illusion and widespread detachment speaks of the fragility that many feel today in contemporary society amongst the offerings of the mass media and what many consider to be an impersonal machine. Fatmi seeks to deconstruct illusions through intense concentration and remind the audience that everything is an illusion, a game of the mind. Regardless, this fragility has a very positive aspect, as Fatmi tells *Art Radar*:

*I think that our physical and mental detachment in contemporary society makes everything so vulnerable and fragile. At the same time, it is this fragility that makes us human.*

**Lisa Pollman**