

When skateboards and prayer rugs meet in the name of art

BY CARL-EMIL • 10. APRIL, 2016 • ALL, ART, FEATURED, INTERVIEWS • COMMENTS (0) • ♡157



Mounir Fatmi by David Tardé

Using symbols and communicators of language such as flags, VHS tapes, speakers, typewriters and copy machines, artist Mounir Fatmi addresses topics such as culture, globalization and religion. He has applied prayer rugs to skateboards to symbolize the similarities of skating and religion. You wouldn't instantly think these two things are very connected, but Mounir makes us think twice. Both skating and religion is about seeking something higher, seeking transcendence. It's about freedom and escaping reality.

Mounir uses unexpected combinations of everyday objects to create visually striking and thought-provoking artworks. In the installations "Mehr Licht!" and "In the absence of evidence to the contrary" Mounir uses neon tubes to imprint a temporary image in the eyes of the viewer. When you look away from the installation, the text written on the tubes will appear in your sight for a few seconds before it

fades. In "Mehr Licht!" he approach the impossible mission of copying light with copying machines. Mounir's work is filled with symbols and historic references, but he manages to never get too academic to create an instant feeling within the viewer. For some, this feeling has been too strong though. Several times his art has led to debate and even censorship.

We had a chat with Mounir about how a Mona Lisa reproduction being eaten by a sheep was his first inspiration, the thoughts behind his art and how his work in the advertising business has influenced him.

What got you interested in art?

I have the feeling that I have always wanted to be an artist. At the age of four, I said that I wanted to become a painter. It was as if I had been programmed to do so. There was no alternative. At the age of 17, I met Paul Bowles in Tangier and at 29, I made a film with him called Fragments and Solitude. These were the last images of his life, as if we had unconsciously filmed his death. The Beat Generation saved me: Paul Bowles, reading Burroughs, Brion Gysin. They gave me another vision of life. I was born in Tangier in a neighborhood called Casabarata, which means "the cheapest house". We lived next to the flea market and that is where I saw a reproduction of Mona Lisa for the first time – upside-down gradually being eaten by a sheep. The vision that I have of art is of an upside-down Mona Lisa next to a sheep that is eating her hands. It is confusing perhaps, but that is what gave me the desire to do what I do today.





In the absence of evidence to the contrary, Mounir Fatmi

I saw your installation “In the absence of evidence to the contrary” at Yvon Lambert when they still had their gallery in Paris some years ago. The experience is still very clear in my mind. Can you tell me how that piece came to life?

I first used the neon tubes in the installation Mehr Licht!, it is an installation of 5 copy machines standing in circles with the neon tubes. The viewer can make a copy of the light. I am very interested in this cold, manufactured material. When staring at the neon tubes, the viewer is left with a picture in his retina like a ghost that print our eyes. I conceive my works like visual traps.

This installation with the verses printed in Arabic and English, where the eye goes from one language to another is so hypnotic. The viewer keeps the text like a ghostly picture in his eyes and project it on all

his surroundings. In the exhibitions where this piece has been shown, I have noticed the viewers stand around like you would around a fire or an altar.



Mehr Licht!, Mounir Fatmi

I read that words and languages started to have a very important role early on in your life, because you had to look for the only Arabic-French dictionary in your neighborhood and hope that the right page wasn't ripped out, when your family had to translate a word you didn't understand. Is this why you have worked so much with language?

That might be one of the reasons. The other reason was that I discovered the Beat Generation and the books of Paul Bowles but also William Burroughs and the technique of cut up. Brion Gysin and his works inspired by calligraphy have always fascinated me. I am very influenced by his researches. I

made a tribute to this artist with the piece *Calligraphy of Fire*, it is a deconstructed sentence with clamps that takes shape like fire. At some point the language loses its function and becomes a picture, which is a question that I raise in several of my works about language.



Calligraphy of Fire, Mounir Fatmi

What have you learned about language, by working with it in your art?

I have learned that language became so poor that it does not longer mean something, that we have difficulties to use it to really mean something. That is one question raised by Claude Levi-Strauss in the *Jealous Potter*: "What does to mean means?" I also think of Wittgenstein and the question that always concerned him; how to solve the problem that presents itself to our spirits when we use language with the intention of meaning something? And I'm not sure that neither of both have found the answer.

Though using everyday objects such as flags, skateboards, worker helmets, speakers, carpets and copy machines, you always achieve a very distinct and beautiful, sometimes eerie aesthetic in your installations. How concerned are you with visual beauty?

As I said above, my works function as visual trap. The aesthetics are very important for me in the way they drive the viewer in this trap and visual game. What is interesting after this experience is to figure out how the audience succeeds in getting out of this aesthetic trap of the work and to move onto another level of understanding and knowledge. My work has often posed problems because it pushes the debate.



In Maximum Sensation you create the unexpected combination of skateboards and prayer rugs – What does this combination symbolize for you?

I have used prayer rugs in his work before, in a series of collages called Father's Carpet's, but it's the first time they are applied onto an everyday object, in this case a symbol of teenage lifestyle and independence. I associated those two objects with a research of transcendence, a quest for something higher, for sensations. There is an attitude that fits with the skater, which is one of freedom and anti-establishment. a form of escape from a disappointing reality.

But Maximum Sensation speaks directly to the cross-pollination that is globalization. Our ever increasing connectivity, whether digitally, culturally, or physically has nurtured a reality where identity cannot be defined by only one construct.

You worked in the advertising business for six years before you started making art. How has that influenced you?

First, it pushed me to stop doing advertising to make art! Then, I would say it helped me to make a visually strong statement with impact.

How is it different working with advertisement and working with art?

Advertisement is clearly made for a client with a need, an order and commercial goals. It is part of a system and at the contrary; I am trying to reinject pictures in a system that does not want them.



L'Union Impossible, Mounir Fatmi



Oriental Accident, Mounir Fatmi

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: CARL-EMIL



Carl-Emil is the Founder and Editor-in-Chief of Dry Magazine. Besides running Dry he is also producing and DJ'ing under the alias Storm Gabriel.