

ARTS

# Mona Hatoum interview: 'If everything is predictable, then it's not interesting'



Ahead of the curve: Mona Hatoum at her studio in Dalston with a work set to feature in her exhibition *Remains to Be Seen*  
(*Daniel Hambury/@stellapicsltd*)

BEN LUKE

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Most of Mona Hatoum's time over the past four years has been focused on big exhibitions such as her remarkable show at Tate Modern in 2016. These retrospectives are often the pinnacle of artists' careers but most artists are happiest when charting new courses, battling in the white heat of experimentation. And it's in this mood that I find Hatoum when I visit her studio in Dalston.

All around are materials she's using for the first time in her new show, *Remains to be Seen*, opening at White Cube Bermondsey next week. As she talks me through the works — including a vast map of the world fashioned from glass that will hang from White Cube's tallest space, sculptures made with reinforcement bars and clumps of rough cement, and stacks of perforated red brick — she points to details that remain uncertain until they're installed in the gallery. "It's exciting to be working towards a work without knowing what the final outcome would be," she tells me. "If everything is predictable, then it's not so interesting for me."

Characteristically, Hatoum is exploring contradictory forces and effects. The works are intimate and suggest domestic space yet evoke global events and historical ruptures. They're poised between order and destruction. They often entice and repel at once.

She honed her knack for balancing beauty and violence in *The Light at the End*, shown at the Showroom in 1989, as she shifted from her Eighties performance work into sculpture. It featured a "gate-like structure with bars, which you perceived as light", she says. Up close, you see that they're searingly hot electric heating elements. The hope in the title "was totally disrupted as you approached a dangerous and repulsive situation that conjures up images of imprisonment, torture and pain". At the same time, she adds, "it was quite seductive — everybody likes to play with fire".

And she has literally been playing with fire recently. In the White Cube show is *Remains of the Day*, first made for the Hiroshima Art Prize in 2017, featuring, she says, "a domestic environment that has been hit by a sudden, devastating disaster".

Of course, it suggests “the sudden devastation” of the Japanese city in 1945. Hatoum took domestic furniture, covered it with wire mesh, and then set it on fire. “They look like ghost images of themselves with the charred remains barely held together by the mesh.”

The installation that gives the White Cube show its title, *Remains to Be Seen*, emerged from a long desire to use rubble from razed buildings. It’s constructed rather than found but the intention is the same. “This time, it looks like a skeleton of a demolished building which is still hanging by a thread,” she explains.

“I’m really interested in modern ruins: ruins of architecture affected by war or urban decay or even buildings collapsing because they’ve been shoddily built, like factories in Bangladesh...It makes you realise how impermanent everything is, even those structures that are supposed to be solid, to contain you, they can collapse.”

Human vulnerability in physical and social constructions has long been a Hatoum theme. In one of her finest installations, *Homebound* (2000), domestic furniture and objects are linked by lethal electric wire, viewable from behind a metal fence. It’s ambiguous but loaded. “It’s like a condemned space or even a denied homeland,” yet also “problematizing the whole idea of the home as a haven”, she says.

It’s tempting to link this directly to her biography. Born in Beirut to Palestinian parents in 1952, she was in London in 1975 when civil war broke out in Lebanon. Her family were forced into exile and she has lived here ever since. But she doesn’t set out “to illustrate my own biographical experience”, she explains. “Often after making a work I might reflect on how it might relate to my experience or that of my parents losing their homeland, for instance. But I don’t start off with this aim in mind. It’s almost an afterthought.” Viewers’ own interpretations are crucial.

Hatoum’s also wary of interpretations relating to literally to specific global events — she’s obsessed by form and material, absorbing and evolving the art of the past as much as by geopolitics. A new sculpture called *A Pile of Bricks* riffs on the Seventies scandal around the Tate acquiring Carl Andre’s *Equivalent VIII*, that minimalist rectangle constructed of two stacked layers of bricks.

Yet her art inevitably conjures present crises. One work, *Remains (cabinet)*, builds on the charred wood and mesh pieces. Hatoum wanted “to create an element that goes higher than human height, therefore aspiring to architecture” and found a kitchen dresser, more than two metres high, which she burned in the same way. I doubt anyone will look at it without being reminded of the tragedy of Grenfell Tower.

A version of *Hot Spot*, Hatoum’s globe fashioned from pulsing electrical wire, is also in the show — of course, it’s redolent of the climate emergency. She first made *Hot Spot* in 2006, “when I felt like there was unrest all over the world. It seemed that spots of conflict were no longer related to a specific region, like the whole world was up in arms. But it’s still happening — even more so now.”

Hatoum says the feeling of the new show is best captured by the word “precariousness” — it “sums up our current state of being and that of the whole planet”, she explains. “*Remains to Be Seen* suggests an uncertain future.”

*Mona Hatoum: Remains to be Seen is at the White Cube, SE1 (whitecube.com), Sep 12-Nov 3*