

Art in America

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EXHIBITION REVIEWS

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View of Mona Hatoum's exhibition "Bourj," 2011, at Alexander and Bonin.



MONA HATOUM ALEXANDER AND BONIN

The street—so often personified in discussions of Middle East unrest—and the home interpenetrate in Mona Hatoum's work, which for many years has involved domestic objects repurposed for the delivery of pain. A cheese grater was scaled up to a full-size bed, a wheelchair canted to tip out its occupant and metal furniture made to conduct an electric current that audibly hums. In *Mobile Home* (2005), an undersized kitchen table, chairs and suitcases ran shakily forward and back along wires strung across the gallery: an image of family life in perpetual exile.

Hatoum's latest show was titled "Bourj" (tower), which is also the name of a 5-foot-tall standing grid of rusted, pockmarked and partly broken steel elements—a blasted building, skeletal and stunted. It shared a room with two oversize swings (all works 2009 or '10). Evoking the glass backboards of David Hammons's basketball hoops, the equally vulnerable seats of *Balançoires* are made of glass sandblasted with street maps of Beirut, where Hatoum, a London- and Berlin-based artist of Palestinian descent, was raised. Nearby was another map of Beirut, along with others of Baghdad and Kabul, these made of paper and riddled with circular pop-ups that correspond to craters and upheavals caused by deadly explosives.

The curious delicacy of these charts

of lethal violence was sustained in other discrete objects on view. Installed in a glass-fronted Edwardian cabinet were 18 Murano glass baubles that look at first like Christmas tree ornaments, iridescent and fragile as soap bubbles, though several are detailed to suggest hand grenades. Glass is also the medium for six crimson coronas that were placed on the floor, each a frozen moment of what could be splashing blood. Two small framed works feature little men pointing guns at each other in circling symmetry, created from tissue paper folded and cut the way children make paper snowflakes: innocent images of warfare's eternal return, each conflict different, always the same.

The centerpiece of the show was *Interior/Exterior Landscape*, an installation spare as a monk's cell. Among its elements was the metal frame for a single bed, from the center of which thin locks of black hair hung to the floor; more hair was sewn into a yellowed pillow. On the wall was a birdcage with a hairball in one corner and a tiny bucket for seed—a prison cell in miniature. Dominating the installation was a desk and chair compounded so that the upper part of the seat back emerged from the desktop, and the rest of the chair continued beneath. Crafted as flawlessly as the impacted furniture of Doris Salcedo (a gallery-mate of Hatoum's), it seemed a potent emblem of both transcendence and violence—of an inmate will-

fully sublimated to shadow, and a living body slammed against a wall.

But the most striking aspect of this installation was its ominous quiet. There were no bothersome sharpened edges, no moving parts or moving images. The atmosphere just about qualified as postapocalyptic.

—Nancy Princenthal