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Mona Hatoum: a sense of unease

The Palestinian-British artist, this year's Whitechapel Gallery Art Icon, talks about displacement and ambiguity

Rachel Spence JANUARY 19, 2018



Mona Hatoum in her studio in London © Gabby Laurent

Alexander and Bonin

My first encounter with the work of Mona Hatoum was nearly 20 years ago, at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. After the shock-and-awe confessionalism of the Young British Artists, Hatoum's "Measures of Distance" (1988) was startling in its complexity. In this video, Hatoum films her mother in the shower behind a screen of Arabic script as she reads the letters her mother wrote to her during their war-inflicted separation, the whispers of love and exile flickering through the bars of their calligraphic cage like a faulty, seductive current.

"It was the one occasion when I thought I'd work with the biographical," Hatoum said earlier this week at her studio in London's Shoreditch. "When I finished it, it was a huge relief. I thought, I can put this away and concentrate on something more subtle and abstract."

Hatoum's gift for weaving glimpses of intimacy through a mysterious, crystalline formalism has made her one of the world's most respected artists. Now in her 66th year, the Beirut-born London-based practitioner has just enjoyed a major career retrospective in Paris, London and Helsinki.

Last year she won the Hiroshima Art Prize; her work is currently on show, along with Turkish artist Ayse Erkmen, at the Museum der bildenden Künste in Leipzig.

Our conversation, however, is to mark her most recent accolade: the Art Icon award from London's Whitechapel Gallery in partnership with Swarovski. The lifetime achievement prize has previously been won by such luminaries as Richard Long and Peter Doig.

Asked why Hatoum was chosen, Whitechapel Gallery director Iwona Blazwick points to her achievement of a "paradigm shift in practice and influence over successive generations".



'Hot Spot III' (2009) © dotgain.info

Alexander and Bonin

Originally a performance artist, Hatoum has a gift for “marrying the exploration of body and subject” begun by artists such as Yvonne Rainer with a “sense of herself as a woman and a displaced person”.

Yet Hatoum has often asked viewers not to read her art as an expression of any particular histories, including her own. “I try not to make my work go into the realm of propaganda. Even when I did performance, I insisted on the visual as a way of communicating. My work is in the realm of connotation. You can’t point a finger at any specific conflict. It’s more a general unease of displacement. Of the uncanny,” she tells me.

A slight, bright-eyed figure dressed in workaday black, her curly dark hair threaded through with silver, she conveys a winning blend of restrained discipline warmed through by a friendly, curious spirit that maps the paradox in her work. The sensation is



'Roadworks' (1985) © Patrick Gilbert

deepened by the fact that our conversation is watched over by a spectral, monochrome image of Hatoum’s mother sewing in her Beirut home. Originally a tiny photograph, Hatoum has blown it up, printed it on to

layers of tulle and hung it in the centre of her studio. “It has this ghostlike feel,” she murmurs, gazing fondly at the work. “Its been there since 2013 and I don’t want to take it down.”

One couldn’t blame Hatoum for being haunted by her history. Born in 1952, the daughter of Christian Palestinians who were obliged to leave their home in Haifa after 1948, Hatoum arrived in London for “a short break” in 1975. But civil war broke out in Lebanon while she was away and Hatoum found herself stranded in the British capital.

Alexander and Bonin

Although she was anguished for her family, Hatoum, who had a UK passport thanks to her father's job at the British embassy in Lebanon, took the chance to follow her dream of becoming an artist, a path from which her father had dissuaded her because he doubted its commercial prospects.

Enrolling first at the Byam Shaw and then at the Slade schools of art, Hatoum's political flame was kindled by the fiery discourses of the time around race and gender. Even then, she cleaved to conceptualism and minimalism. But a predilection for running electrical currents through her installations proved troublesome. "The Slade said my conceptual stuff was too dangerous," she recalls with a grin as she explains why she originally moved towards performance.

By the 1990s she'd re-embraced minimalist, geometric forms. Her Tate show last year offered a spellbinding voyage through drawings, sculptures and installations that employed notions of grids, cells, cages and maps — many buzzing with menacing live wires — to suggest an inner world shuttling between profound disturbance and meticulous order.



'Grater Divide' (2002) © Iain Dickens

Alexander and Bonin

Hatoum's imagination feeds off those oscillations. Discussing "Light Sentence" (1992), which sets wire lockers either side of a swaying lightbulb, she describes how she aimed to make something that was "beautiful and mesmerising" but that would also — by "enmeshing you in the shadows" — make the viewer feel that "the ground is shifting beneath your feet." Is that how she feels? "I don't set out to express those feelings," she replies. "After [I've made a work] I think, 'Oh, maybe I'm feeling I'm on shaky ground.'"

Perhaps inevitably, her first visit to her parents' homeland, in 1996, brought up strong feelings. In Jerusalem she was "outraged" by the presence of the Israeli soldiers. "It was the first time I'd experienced it — the occupation." Though "not at all religious", she wept at an Easter service. "I felt emotional about the land." Yet Hatoum also fosters her own displacement. An enthusiast of inter-national residencies, she spent 12 years in Berlin after accepting a residency there in 2003. Back in London since 2015 she feels, she says, "a bit lost" and misses the "quietness" of the German capital.

Her most fruitful moments happen in unfamiliar environments. "Very often the work is inspired by a situation or location when I'm working towards a new show," she says. "I visit a market or see local craft or manufacturing and I get an idea." To illustrate her words, she whisks me around her studio where works include "Remains of the Day" (2016) — a table and chairs made from chicken wire and flecked with soot-black remnants of wood — made after visiting Hiroshima; a delicate grid that she singed on to parchment-like paper bought from a supermarket in Helsinki ("I thought it looked like skin"); and a group of exquisite, diminutive sculptures woven from pasta. "I found the right rice noodles in Berlin," she says, frowning as she fingers one that requires repair. "I hope I can find them again."

She sees herself first and foremost as "a maker" who "has to be engaged physically to be happy". Her drawing practice is a constant. "It's very grounding," she murmurs as she proffers a pencil frottage of what looks like netting in a prison compound but turns out to be lifted from bathroom tiles in a hotel in Houston, Texas.

In a polarised world, Hatoum's gift for ambiguity feels precious. But does she ever feel a responsibility to speak truth more explicitly to power? "I feel that the language of art is ambiguous — unless one is making documentary-style work. I like my work to offer a physical experience in the first instance and then certain thoughts, maybe about conflict, war or feminist issues can come out of this experience as a sensation that grows on you, almost as an afterthought."

A lecture by Mona Hatoum, Whitechapel Gallery's Art Icon 2018, supported by Swarovski, takes place on January 25. whitechapelgallery.org