

Mona Hatoum

DARAT AL FUNUN

A barrier of coarse gray sandbags spouting tender shoots of green grass. A wooden tabletop strewn with fifty grenades made of pastel-colored ceramics. Silhouettes of armed soldiers snipped from wispy white tissue paper. Mona Hatoum's exhibition at the Jordanian arts foundation Darat al Funun presented numerous pairings of brutality and fragility. She took a series of images and implements of war—such as troops, ammunition, boulders, barbed wire, and bomb sites indicated on maps—and translated them into precious objects rendered in delicate materials, including a draped scarf, a cage of bent willow tree branches, a spider's web fashioned from thousands of tiny glass beads, and a map of Palestine stitched into a small, soiled pillow with strands of human hair.

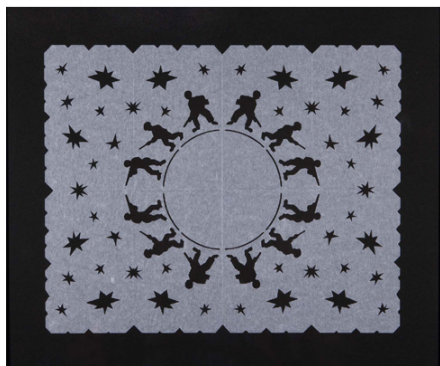
Hatoum, who was born in Beirut to Palestinian parents in 1952, has been a fixture of international exhibitions and biennials for more than twenty years, but she has rarely shown in the Arab world. This was only Hatoum's third solo outing in the region, after appearances at Jerusalem's Anadeil Gallery in 1996 and Cairo's Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art ten years later; but it was also the most substantial. The exhibition featured eighteen works, with videos dating back to the 1980s, such as *Measures of Distance*, 1988, and *Road Works*, 1985, displayed alongside new sculptures and installations made in collaboration with the Iraq Al Amir Women's Cooperative during a monthlong residency in September 2008.

More often than not, the critical reception of Hatoum's work in the West has emphasized the artist's identity as a Palestinian, an Arab, and a woman. But, curiously, seeing her work in a Middle Eastern context served to amplify the universality rather than the geographic or biographic specificity of her themes. Her ongoing work on maps, domestic environments, and institutional architecture often hums with low-intensity rage, born of a broader fascination with power relations. Through works such as *Medal of Dishonor*, 2008, with a map of the world etched onto an image of a grenade, and *3-D Cities*, 2008, with explosion-like shapes marked on maps of Beirut, Baghdad, and Kabul, the exhibition at Darat al Funun referenced the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, and any number of wars in Lebanon, but the artist's evocations of imperialism and occupation remained faint, loose, and vague. Hatoum's allusions to Palestine in *Keffiyeh*, 1993–99 (an iconic head scarf embellished with waves of human hair and lusciously draped inside a Plexiglas box), and *Interior Landscape*, 2005 (the country's map embroidered on a pillow and tossed onto a bed frame with barbed wire instead of springs), likewise suggested personal intimacy and pain rather than a specific political point of view.

Still Life, 2008, *Untitled (cut-out 1)*, 2005, and *Untitled (cut-out 2)*, 2005, bound delicacy and aggression within singular, self-contained pieces—ceramic grenades in the first, tissue paper soldiers in the second two—but perhaps the most meaningful pairing in Hatoum's exhibition was the placement of one work, *Witness*, 2008, before another, the wall of sandbags

in *Hanging Garden*, 2008. *Witness* consists of two ceramic sculptures that were fashioned, under Hatoum's direction, by local artisans. It mattered less that the pieces were modeled after the Martyrs' Square statues that hold pride of place in central Beirut, or that the word for *martyr* in Arabic also means *witness*, or that the latter piece paid tribute to the ancient Babylonian relic that once stood in the territory now known as Iraq. More important was the way in which they stood, small but defiant, evoking a sense of fearlessness in the face of a crude, imposing barricade that likewise showed signs of life—seemingly in spite of itself, in spite of history, and in spite of war.

—Kaelen Wilson-Goldie



Mona Hatoum,
Untitled (cut-out 2),
2005, tissue paper,
10 7/8 x 13 1/2".