19. | I like America, tribute to Jacques Derrida





2007, 44 painted jumping poles, ladders in metal, size may vary.
Exhibition view of Tuileries, FIAC, 2010, Paris.
Courtesy of the artist and Wilde Gallery, Geneva.
Ed. of 5 + 1 A.P.

Collection of FNAC, Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris

Collection of Navarra, France

A l'aide de barres de saut hippique, repeintes aux couleurs de la bannière étoilée, mounir fatmi transforme le drapeau américain en un immense obstacle impossible à franchir. Cet amas complexe de barres rouges, blanches et bleu, tel un mikado géant, occupe l'espace du patio et se dresse comme une sculpture à la fois imposante, instable et dangereuse.

Ces obstacles reviennent comme un leitmotiv dans l'œuvre de l'artiste. Ils représentent à chaque fois un nouveau défi à relever. *J'aime l'Amérique* invite le spectateur à dépasser l'idée de drapeau, de territoire et d'identité, toutes ces limites qui s'imposent en permanence à l'artiste et à tous ceux qui cherchent à franchir des frontières.

Comment contourner ces murs qui jalonnent l'histoire des relations entre l'Amérique, l'Europe et le reste du monde, comme celui qui est en projet entre les Etats-Unis et le Mexique ? Inspiré par la déconstruction de Jacques Derrida, Mounir Fatmi relie pour défaire, défait pour lier et joue de la multiplicité des points de vue. Lorsqu'on le contourne, son obstacle géant présente des failles et l'image du drapeau se désagrège, miroir d'une Amérique aux multiples facettes.

J'aime l'Amérique est à la fois un hommage et une critique.

Using equestrian jumping poles, painted in the colours of the star-spangled banner, mounir fatmi transforms the American flag into an immense impenetrable obstacle. This complex mass of red, white and blue poles, like a giant spillikins, towers like a sculpture that is both imposing, unstable and dangerous.

These obstacles recur like a leitmotif in the artist's work. Each time they represent a new challenge to be taken up. I like America invites the spectator to go beyond the idea of the flag, territory and identity – limits that are constantly imposed on the artist and anyone trying to overcome boundaries.

How can we get around these walls, that punctuate the history of relations between America, Europe and the rest of the world, like the one that is being planned between the United States and Mexico? Inspired by Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, mounir fatmi makes connections that disassemble and dismantles things in order to create links, playing on various perspectives. As you go around it, the giant obstacle reveals rifts and the image of the flag breaks up, like a mirror of a multi-faceted America.

I like America is both a tribute and a criticism. Formally it is

Sur le plan formel elle rappelle l'architecture, le Pop Art, Jasper Johns et tout ce que l'Amérique aura apporté à l'histoire de l'art. Mais son titre renvoie à la fameuse action de Joseph Beuys en mai 1974 : *I like America and America likes me*. A son arrivée à New York, l'artiste allemand se fit enfermer pendant quatre jours dans une galerie avec un coyote, l'animal sacré des Indiens ; puis il repartit pour l'Allemagne sans avoir échangé une parole avec quiconque. Réalisée en pleine guerre du Vietnam, cette performance invitait à une réconciliation entre l'homme et la nature, entre l'oppresseur et l'opprimé. L'installation de mounir fatmi, en 2007, vient lui donner une nouvelle actualité.

*Cette performance a été réalisée à New-York du 21 au 25 mai 1974 à la galerie René Block. Joseph Beuys avait choisi un coyote parce que c'était l'animal emblématique des Indiens d'Amérique. Il voulait apprivoiser ce symbole d'un peuple exterminé au nom du progrès, et réconcilier nature et culture.

Studio Fatmi, Octobre 2007.

Avec le soutien de
Fundaciòn Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso Para El Arte

reminiscent of architecture, Pop Art, Jasper Johns and everything that America has brought to the history of art. But the title refers to Joseph Beuys' famous performance in May 1974: I like America and America likes me. When he arrived in New York, the German artist locked himself up in a gallery for four days with a coyote, the sacred animal of Native Americans. He then returned to Germany without having spoken to anyone. This performance, which took place in the midst of the Vietnam war, suggested a reconciliation between man and nature, between the oppressor and the oppressed.

With the support of the Fundaciòn Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso Para El Arte

Studio Fatmi, Octobre 2007.

" The jumping poles, when they are painted in stars and stripes, they evoke Joseph Beuys's performance as a stranger in a strange land.
This work, however, lacks Beuys's self-assured rejoinder, ". . . and America likes me," as if the matter is still up for question. Whether America likes "me" is an immigrant's question. "

Naomi Beckwith, Flow, 2008

exhibitions:

2025

Grandeur Nature II - Château de Fontainebleau - Group show

2015

Detras del Muro - Collateral project to the 12th Havana Biennial - Expo collective

2013

Exercises on Democracy - White House Biennial - Expo collective

Sculpture on the beach - Art Dubai - Expo collective

Art Dubai - Galerie Hussenot - Art fair

2011

Collector - Tri postal - Expo collective

2010

FIAC - Galerie Hussenot - Art fair

2007

J’aime l’Amérique - La Maison Rouge - Solo show

press articles:

Kourang Pishdadi, Samannaz, Vicious Circles, REORIENT Magazine, December 14th 2015

REORIENT

Vicious Circles

By Samannaz Kourang Pishdadi
December 14, 2015

Spirals, sprawling cities, and the sacred – in conversation with Morocco's Mounir Fatmi

History is typed. Love is geometrised. Religion is sewn. Iconoclasts dream. Saw blades chisel Arab fantasies. Springs collapse, and tape twin towers are rebuilt.

The winner of prestigious awards including those of the Dakar and Cairo biennials (2006 and 2010, respectively) has starred on the mercurial stage of the contemporary art world for the past decade; yet, Mounir Fatmi's first bona-fide encounter with fine art, as he recalls, was as a child, when he witnessed an upside-down poster of the Mona Lisa being devoured by a sheep in a local flea market in his hometown of Tangier in Morocco. Growing up in a religious society provided his childhood days with little artistic exposure. At home, there were works of calligraphy, the image of the King (which he thought belonged to his family, until later), and a volume of the Koran that he was forbidden to touch, as it was believed his hands would sully the book.

'Growing up in Casabarata in Tangier, I was surrounded by flea market stands full of old cameras, objects, records, clothes, antennas, cables – everything', he recalls. 'I was constantly looking at all these discarded objects having their third, fourth, or maybe [even] tenth life being resold'. According to the artist, he 'loved looking through all these things, discarded stuff, and thinking about a new life for them.' As a result, Mounir wanted to become a postman, although his father envisioned him working in a bank. 'However,' he tells me, 'I was very close to my uncle, a painter in construction sites and the bohemian in the family. I wanted to be a painter, an artist.'

The Beat movement of 1950s America became a catalyst for Mounir's artistic life at the age of 17. The ethos of the Beats encompassed the advocacy of sexual liberation, the rejection of materialism, the exploration of Eastern religion and spirituality, as well as experimentations with psychedelic drugs. Its liberal International Zone, in addition to its status as a hub for artists attracted many Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Tennessee Williams, and Paul Bowles, the latter of whom Mounir met. 'The Beat generation saved me: Paul Bowles, Burroughs, and Brion Gysin. They gave me another vision of life', Mounir says. 'I met Paul when I was 17, and at the age of 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.'



Mounir attended the School of Fine Arts in Casablanca for three months before continuing his studies at the School of Fine Arts in Rome. In the Eternal City, the artist encountered a culture shock, as he had to draw nude models. 'To look, or not to look' was the question, remembers Mounir, who felt ill at ease as a result of his religious upbringing. Painting was his preferred medium, and his first sold piece was a painting of a fountain in Casablanca's Esperanza neighbourhood. The fountain was visible from Mounir's bedroom, and, until the early 80s, was a meeting place for prostitutes. A local tailor, for a mere 17 Dirhams (approximately 1.70 USD today), became the owner of the work.

It is somehow impossible to capture the manifold dimensions of Mounir's artistic career, as he explores the world he lives in as a scientist, philosopher, traveller, observer, and critic, all at once. In Casablanca Circles, a series of drawings on stills from the 1942 film, Casablanca (including some of Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman kissing), he superimposes intersecting circles of the French philosopher Rene Descartes and the English mathematician Frederick Soddy on Bogart and Bergman, as they close in for a kiss. Mounir sees circles everywhere – in the dance of Mowlavi dervishes, in the rotation of pilgrims around the Kaaba, and in everyday life; the shape of the circle has taken root in him as a sort of machine forcing him to rotate and spin.



Hard Head (courtesy the artist and the Collection Les Abattoirs at the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain in Toulouse, France)



L-R: Paul Bowles, Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs in Tangier in 1961 (courtesy the University of Toronto)

The circle motif also appears in a controversial video installation from 2010, Modern Times, which was recently exhibited at the Florida International University in Miami. In this piece , Mounir appears as a critic delivering a commentary on the sociopolitical events surrounding the Arab Spring. 'Modern Times was first commissioned for the inaugural exhibition of the Mathaf Museum of Modern Art in Doha', he tells me. 'I wanted to highlight the modernity and fast-growing development of the region, and create a mental link between Western industrialisation and recent Eastern development.' According to him, 'the speed of industrialisation that started in the 19th century in the West is in perspective with the rapid development and urbanisation of the Middle East. Cities are appearing out of the desert,' he notes, 'with buildings thrown up so fast that there is no time to reflect on the changes'.

Modern Times weaves an interconnected spider web out of the visual styles of Charlie Chaplin, Robert Delaunay, and Marcel Duchamp, resulting in entangled cogwheels of fragile modernity embellished with Arabic calligraphy. In the work, he takes on a political narrative to explore hierarchies of power in all its aspects – political, religious, capitalist, and so on. 'At the beginning, I think I was very naïve [in] thinking my work could change things. Eventually, I realised that the most important [thing] is to make works that make me change', he mentions. 'The most important [thing] is to try to create another reality than the one imposed on us.'

"There are those who really appreciate [my work] and are curious, and others who see it as offensive, or don't understand what I'm trying to do"

His fascination with the ideas of deconstruction and semiotics introduced by Jacques Derrida are visible in pieces such as J'aime l'Amérique (Hommage à Jacques Derrida) and Skyline. The recurring symbols of jumping pole obstacles are formed in the shape of a deconstructed American flag impossible to penetrate or pass through. 'The flags for me are symbols of identity and borders that one must get over. That is why I used the jumping poles in several installations', he explains. 'It is not the visual or aesthetic qualities of the flags that matter to me; their aesthetics are only traps to attract [as many] people [as possible].'

Mounir assigns to himself a role beyond that of the marginalised avant-garde artist: a modern-day Übermensch (superman) out of the pages of Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra. 'American culture has a big impact on many aspects of our lives … I think that man starts to experiment [with] the world and discover other cultures without necessarily being an ethnologist or scientist', he notes. 'The ideas of travelling and displacement [have] become very common, [not to mention] the Internet that connects more people and cultures.' Mounir believes that there is no difference between the mediums and messages in his works, and that at times, the medium becomes the message. 'For instance, in the pieces I made with the VHS tapes or the antenna cables, the message is contained within the medium itself.'

Despite his bold attitude towards social and public affairs, his take on religion is subtle, yet poetically tongue-in-cheek. 'In some of my work, I criticise, explore, and question all religions – not only Islam. Islam was the first I learned about, of course,' he clarifies, 'but it has not particularly influenced me in any way beyond instilling a level of skepticism about religion in general.' Religion, according to the artist, must confront the 'contemporary world'. 'I think that a new reading of [religious] texts from a contemporary [perspective] is the only way to change and evolve.'

It is difficult for Mounir to keep still. He is currently working on a project entitled The Fundamental Change, an installation involving several different media including sculpture, collage, and video that focuses on how architecture and the construction of museums in the Arab world are essential elements in understanding societal change. 'There is a long and incredibly rich artistic history throughout the [Arab] Middle East and that continues to develop today in places like the UAE, Egypt, Qatar, and elsewhere', Mounir tells me. 'It's more diverse and expansive than ever before, and that is exciting. The Arab world is vast and diverse, and, as in any culture, some people are open to dialogue and critiques [while] others are not.' Mounir's work is certainly no exception to the rule: 'my work elicits mixed responses', he mentions. 'There are those who really appreciate it and are curious, and others who see it as offensive, or don't understand what I'm trying to do.'

Like the Andalusian hero El Cid, Mounir Fatmi champions pluralism while paying little attention to the divisive potential of race, colour, and religion. 'Being an Arab does not mean much nowadays', he lets it be known. 'I am also African, Moroccan, and Mediterranean.' The problem, he feels, most often lies in his audiences. 'It is rather the audience that might sometimes look at an artwork and associate it with the identity of an artist', he explains, 'but I have always thought that art mustn't necessarily be associated with [particular] identities or geographies'.

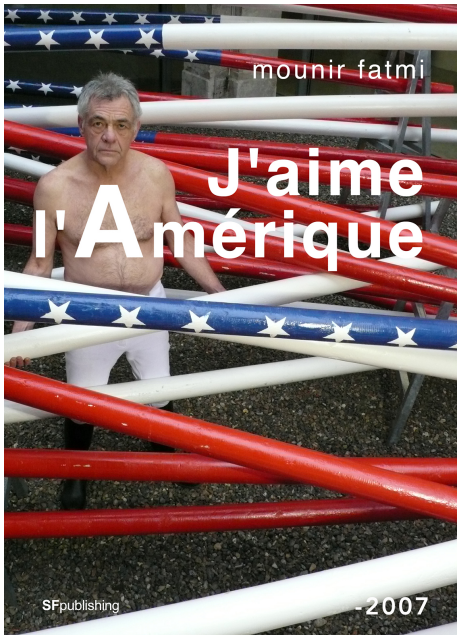


I Like America – Tribute to Jacques Derrida (J'aime l'Amérique – Hommage à Jacques Derrida); courtesy the artist and FNAC (France)



Between the Lines (courtesy the artist and a private collection)

Mounir's search might seem finite, and his path as leading towards a final destination; yet, his dreams take him into another parallel universe, wherein his quest for alternate visions unearth new never-ending stories.



J’aime l’Amérique, SFpublishing 2025

I Like America invites the viewer to go beyond the idea of flag, territory and identity.

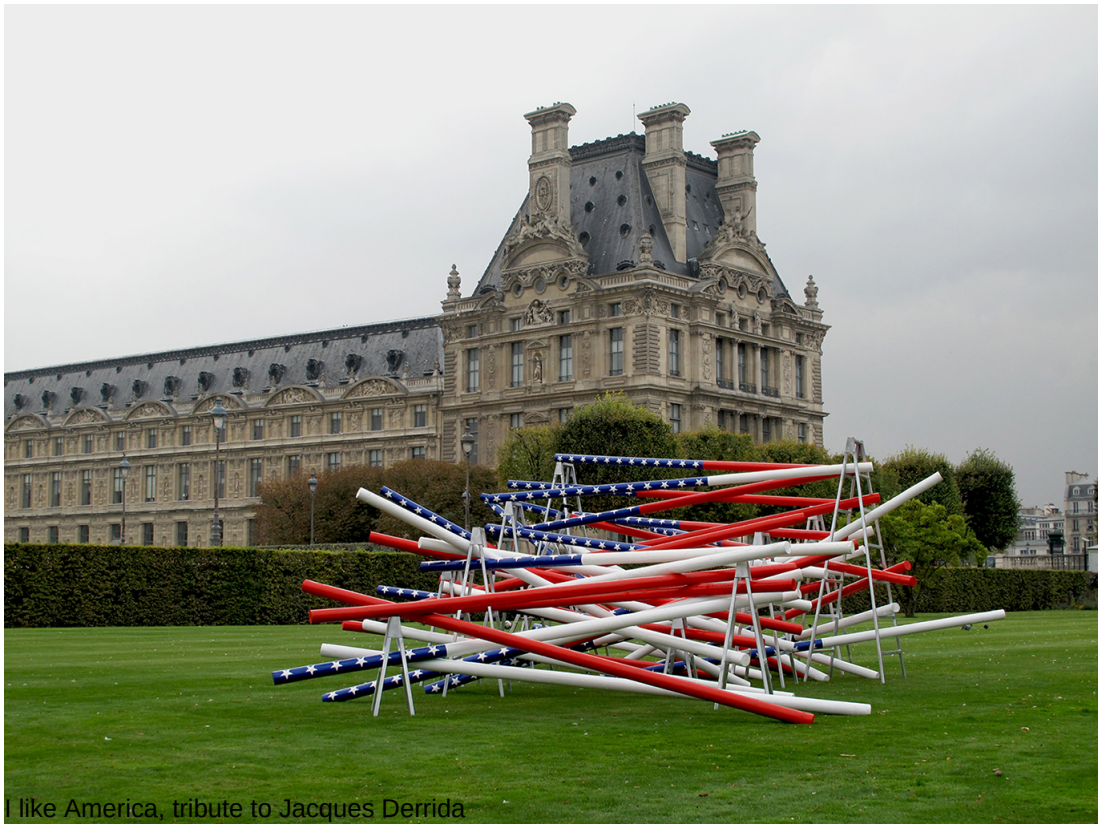
La Maison Rouge, February 2007



I like America, tribute to Jacques Derrida

Using equestrian jumping poles, painted in the colours of the star-spangled banner, mounir fatmi transforms the American flag into an immense impenetrable obstacle. This complex mass of red, white and blue poles, like a giant spillikins, towers like a sculpture that is both imposing, unstable and dangerous.





I like America, tribute to Jacques Derrida

These obstacles recur like a leitmotif in the artist's work. Each time they represent a new challenge to be taken up. I like America invites the spectator to go beyond the idea of the flag, territory and identity – limits that are constantly imposed on the artist and anyone trying to overcome boundaries.

I like America, tribute to Jacques Derrida

The jumping poles, when they are painted in stars and stripes, they evoke Joseph Beuys’s performance as a stranger in a strange land. This work, however, lacks Beuys’s self-assured rejoinder, '. . . and America likes me,' as if the matter is still up for question. Whether America likes 'me' is an immigrant’s question.



I like America, tribute to Jacques Derrida

Inspired by Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, mounir fatmi makes connections that disassemble and dismantles things in order to create links, playing on various perspectives. As you go around it, the giant obstacle reveals rifts and the image of the flag breaks up, like a mirror of a multi-faceted America.