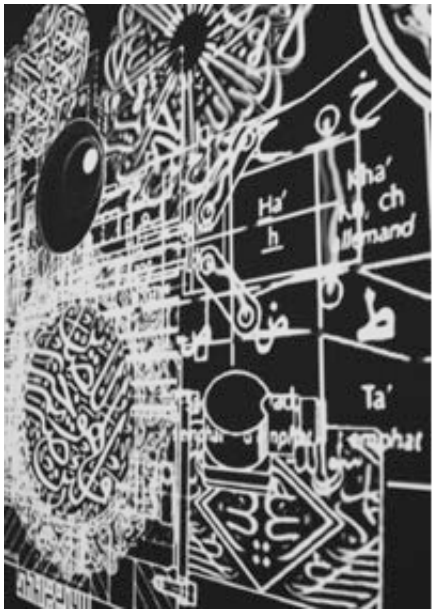
36. | Modern Times, A History of the Machine





2009-2010, videos, sound, saw blades in steel.
Exhibition view of Told, Untold, Retold, Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, 2010, Doha.
Courtesy of the artist and Art Front Gallery, Tokyo.
Ed. of 1 + 1 A.P.

Collection of Mathaf, Modern Arab Art Museum, Doha

This work was part of 6th Manif d'art Biennial -Machines - Les Formes du mouvement, Québec, 2012.

This work was part of 3rd Thessaloniki Biennale - A Rock and a Hard Place, Thessaloniki, 2011.

"Les Temps modernes » est une œuvre qui enveloppe le spectateur. Au milieu de la salle, un ensemble sculptural forme une pièce à la fois délicate et menaçante. Une série de scies circulaires à ruban sur lesquelles on peut voir des calligraphies arabes sont suspendues, évoquant un système d'engrenages ou une boîte de vitesses. Des images projetées sur le mur autour de la sculpture montrent des constructions architecturales au Moyen Orient, créant un environnement cinématographie intense. Le titre de l'œuvre, « Les Temps modernes », s'inspire du célèbre film de Charlie Chaplin de 1936, dans lequel Chaplin incarne un ouvrier en détresse dans une ligne production à la chaîne. La modernité des machines de l'usine est visuellement représentée par une série d'engrenages vrombissants. Des scènes comiques montrent Chaplin se faisant dévorer par la machine, mais ces images suggèrent une réalité plus sombre : l'aliénation de l'homme dans la société moderne industrialisée. L'ouvrier en usine est avalé par la machine avec laquelle il ne peut plus rivaliser.

“Modern Times” envelops the viewer. In the middle of the room a sculptural ensemble forms a delicate yet menacing centrepiece. A series of circular band saws, displaying Arabic calligraphy, are suspended, reminiscent of a system of cogs or a gear mechanism. Images projected on the wall around the sculpture show architectural construction in the Middle East, creating an intense cinematic environment. The title of the piece “Modern Times” is inspired by Charlie Chaplin's celebrated 1936 film, in which Chaplin plays a lowly worker on a factory production line. The modernity of the factory's machines are visually characterised by a series of whirring cogs. Comic scenes show Chaplin being consumed by the machine; but these images suggest a darker side – the alienation of man in a modern industrialised society. The factory worker is swallowed up by the machine with which he can no longer keep up.

In his “Modern Times”, mounir fatmi engages with this modernity, which began in the 19th century in the West. The speed of industrialisation and the growth of cities is reflected

Dans ses « Temps modernes », Mounir Fatmi s'intéresse à cette modernité née au XIXe siècle en Occident. La rapidité de l'industrialisation et la croissance des villes sont reflétées aujourd'hui dans le développement rapide de l'urbanisation du Moyen Orient. Des villes apparaissent dans le désert, avec des immeubles construits si rapidement qu'il ne reste plus aucun temps pour réfléchir à ces changements. Ce lien mental entre industrialisation occidentale et développement récent en Orient se manifeste dans « Les Temps modernes » à travers les interactions entre les différents éléments de l'installation.

Les lames circulaires en forme d'engrenages sont décorées de calligraphies arabes, un motif récurrent dans l'œuvre de Mounir Fatmi. Dans « Les Temps modernes », la calligraphie est découpée dans le métal comme un stencil, au lieu d'être inscrite sur les lames. Cette inscription en négatif permet une interaction entre les lames et les projections, créant un sentiment d'ambiguïté, les courbes et arabesques de la calligraphie éclipsant la signification des mots, comme si le message disparaissait dans le moteur de la machine. Les mots sont ravivés d'une façon purement visuelle en tant que formes circulaires abstraites, reflétant le mouvement circulaire de l'installation.

Ces formes circulaires sont aussi un clin d'œil aux peintres modernistes Sonia et Robert Delauney et Fernand Léger. La répétition de formes circulaires et géométriques dans leurs peintures était une façon d'essayer de décrire le monde moderne, tout comme l'installation de Mounir Fatmi est une façon d'en découdre avec le mouvement continu et apparemment sans fin de la production et de la consommation au XXIe siècle.

La vitesse et le mouvement jouent tous deux un rôle important dans « Les Temps modernes ». Tout comme les premiers astronomes arabes ont observé le mouvement des astres et des planètes, Mounir Fatmi observe la forme du monde d'aujourd'hui et le mouvement souvent anarchique de la société globale contemporaine. L'effet étourdissant de l'installation puise aussi dans l'héritage de Marcel Duchamp et ses « Rotoreliefs ». Les illusions optiques circulaires en rotation de Duchamp furent parmi les premières manifestations de l'art cinétique, produit dans le contexte d'une société moderne et industrialisée. Presqu'un siècle plus tard, « Les Temps modernes » poursuit cette exploration du mouvement dans le monde contemporain, avec la complexité supplémentaire de la dimension globale et du dialogue entre Orient et Occident.

L'œuvre de Mounir Fatmi a souvent manifesté une relation tendue à l'architecture, évoquant les effets dystopiques de l'expérience moderniste et les démonstrations arrogantes de pouvoir et de puissance économique. « Les Temps modernes » s'intéresse à l'architecture au Moyen Orient, soulevant la question de l'impact humain de cette implacable machine à construire. L'artiste compatit avec le personnage de Chaplin, dont la confrontation burlesque avec les machines de l'usine pointe l'obstacle humain à une production mécanique et parfaitement rationalisée. Mounir Fatmi explique : "Je veux être le produit que la machine échoue à produire, sinon on pensera qu'elle est parfaite."

today in the rapid development and urbanisation of the Middle East. Cities are appearing out of the desert, with buildings thrown up so fast that there is no time to reflect on the changes. This mental link between Western industrialisation and recent Eastern development manifests itself in “Modern Times” in the interactions between the different elements of the installation.

The cog-like circular blades are decorated with Arabic calligraphy, a recurring motif in mounir fatmi's work. In “Modern Times”, the calligraphy is cut out of the metal like a stencil, instead of being inscribed onto the blades. The negative space allows an interaction between the blades and projections and creates a layer of ambiguity, with the curves and arabesques of the calligraphy eclipsing the meaning of the words, as if the message were disappearing into the engine of the machine. The words are reanimated in a purely visual way as circular abstract forms, reflecting the circular motion of the installation.

The circular forms are also a nod to modernist painters Sonia and Robert Delauney and Fernand Léger. The repetition of circular and geometric forms in their paintings were an attempt to depict the modern world, as mounir fatmi's installation is a way of grappling with the continuous and seemingly endless motion of 21st century production and consumption.

Speed and motion both play an important role in “Modern Times”. As early Arab astronomers observed the movement of stars and planets, mounir fatmi observes the shape of today's world and the, often erratic, motion of global contemporary society. The dizzying effect of the installation also draws on the legacy of Marcel Duchamp and his “Rotoreliefs”. Duchamp's spinning circular optical illusions were amongst the first manifestations of kinetic art, produced in the context of a modern industrial society. Almost a century later “Modern Times” continues this exploration of movement in the modern world, with the added complexity of a global dimension and the dialogue between East and West.

mounir fatmi's oeuvre has often displayed a fraught relationship to architecture, addressing the dystopic effects of the modernist experiment or arrogant contemporary displays of power and economic might. “Modern Times” explores architecture in the Middle East, raising the question of the human impact of this unrelenting construction machine. The artist is sympathetic to Chaplin's character, whose slapstick encounter with the factory machine suggests the human obstacle to a perfectly streamlined, mechanical production. mounir fatmi explains: “I want to be the product that the machine fails, otherwise one will think that the machine is perfect".

Caroline Rossiter, March 2008.

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Caroline Rossiter, March 2008

exhibitions:

2025
Art Front: mounir fatmi - Art Front Gallery, Tokyo - Solo show

2024

De L’Incarnation... - Université Mohammed VI, Benguérir - Group show

Alhamdu Muslim Futurism - Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center - Group show

Alhamdu Muslim Futurism - PS1 Close House - Group show

2023
Modern Times in Paris : Machine, Art deco and Surrealism - Pola Museum, Japan - Group show

2022

ALHAMDU Muslim Futurism - Rubenstein Arts Center - Group show

2019

A matter of perception - Skanstull Metro Station, Stockholm - Expo collective

2018

180° Behind Me - Göteborgs Konsthall, Göteborg – Solo show

This is My Body - Art Bärtschi & Cie - Solo show

2017

Lettres ouvertes, de la calligraphie au street-art - Institut des Cultures d'Islam - Expo collective

2016

On the Origins of Art - MONA - Expo collective

2015

Modern Times - Miami Beach Urban Studios Gallery - Solo show

Jameel Prize 3 - Sharjah Museum - Expo collective

Jameel Prize 3 - The National Library - Expo collective

Créer c'est résister - Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon - Expo collective

La Fabrique de l'homme moderne, en résonance avec la Biennale de Lyon - La FabriC, espace d'art contemporain, Fondation Salomon - Expo collective

Art Paris - Grand Palais - Art fair

2014

Le Maroc Contemporain - Institut du Monde Arabe - Expo collective

Giving Contours to Shadows - N.B.K - Expo collective

Jameel Prize 3 - Hermitage-Kazan Museum - Expo collective

Jameel Prize 3 - New Manege - Expo collective

2013

Jameel Prize 3 - Victoria & Albert Museum - Expo collective

50 ans d'arts videos internationaux - La Friche Belle de Mai - Expo collective

2012

Oriental Accident - Lombard-Freid Projects - Solo show

Kissing Circles - Shoshana Wayne Gallery - Solo show

Suspect Language - Goodman Gallery - Solo show

25 ans de créativité arabe - Institut du Monde Arabe - Expo collective

Intranquillités - B.P.S.22 - Expo collective

L'histoire est à moi ! - Le Printemps de Septembre - Expo collective

2011

Megalopolis - AKBank Sanat - Solo show

Between the lines - Galerie Hussenot - Solo show

Told, Untold, Retold - Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art - Expo collective

West end ? - Museum on the Seam - Expo collective

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'.

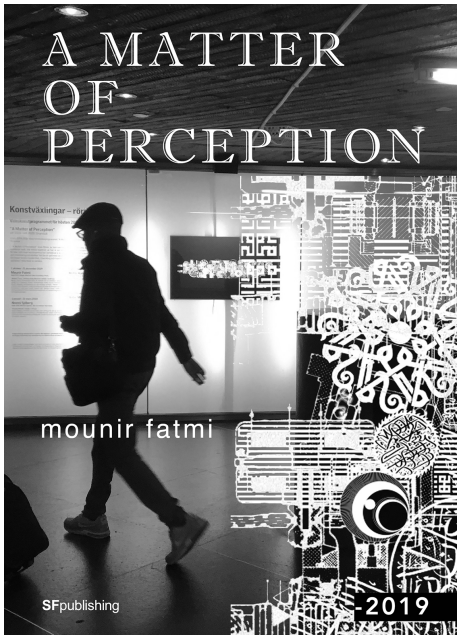


I Like America – Tribute to Jacques Derrida (J'aime l'Amérique – Hommage à Jacques Derrida); courtesy the artist and FNAC (France)



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

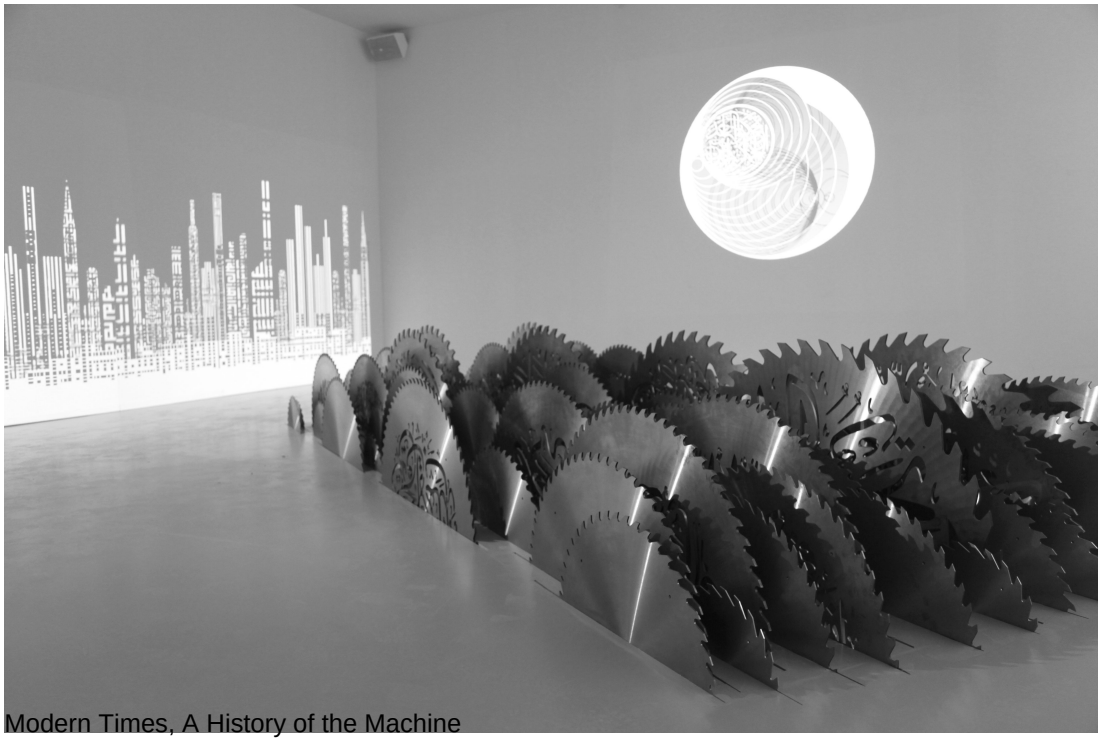
Mounir's search might seem finite, and his path as leading towards a final destination; yet, his dreams take him into another parallel universe, wherein his quest for alternate visions unearth new never-ending stories.



A matter of perception, SFpublishing 2024

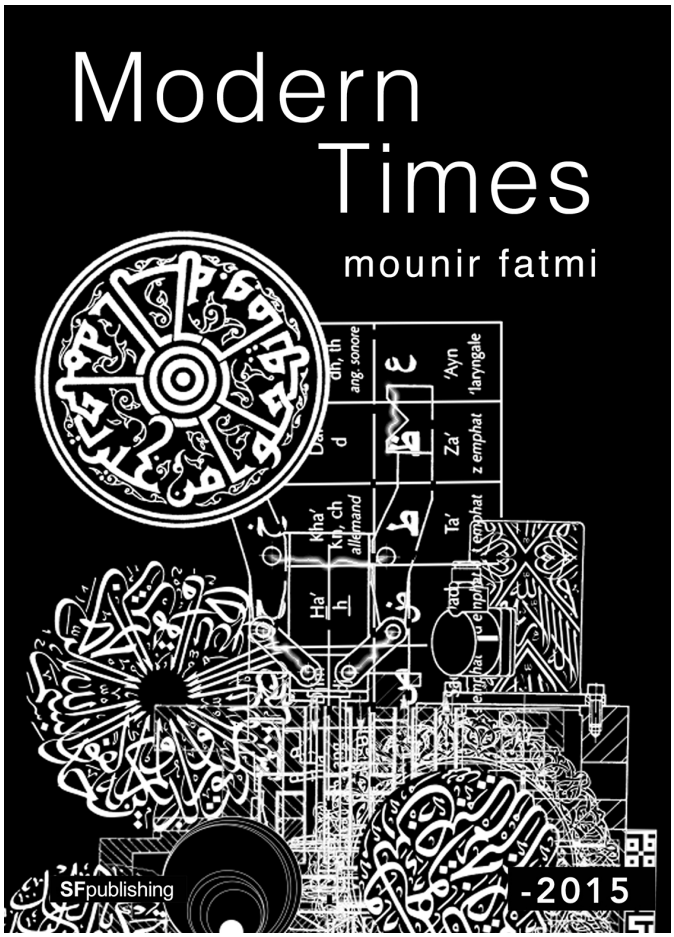
A series of circular bandsaws bearing Arabic calligraphy are suspended, reminiscent of a system of cogs or gear mechanism. The images projected onto the wall around the sculpture show architectural construction in the Middle East, creating an intense cinematic environment.

Nilo Amlashi, October 2019



Modern Times, A History of the Machine

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Modern Times, A History of the Machine

In his Modern Times, mounir fatmi engages with this modernity, which began in the 19th century in the West. The speed of industrialisation and the growth of cities is reflected today in the rapid development and urbanisation of the Middle East. Cities are appearing out of the desert, with buildings thrown up so fast that there is no time to reflect on the changes.

Modern Times, A History of the Machine

Modern Times explores architecture in the Middle East, raising the question of the human impact of this unrelenting construction machine. The artist is sympathetic to Chaplin's character, whose slapstick encounter with the factory machine suggests the human obstacle to a perfectly streamlined, mechanical production.



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