28. | The Impossible Union





2011, arabic calligraphies of steel, hebrew typewriter.
Exhibition view from The Angel's Black Leg, Conrads Gallery, 2011, Düsseldorf.
Courtesy of the artist and Ceysson & Bénétière, Paris.
Ed. of 5 + 1 A.P.

Collection of Kunst Palast Museum, Düsseldorf

Collection of Galila's P.O.C., Brussels

<"Mais pour nous, l'art est tout ce que nous trouvons qui porte ce nom. Quelque chose qui n'est pas gouverné par des lois, quelque chose qui est un produit complexe de la société."

Cette citation de l'écrivain autrichien Robert Musil, dans laquelle il fait référence à la construction sociale et par conséquent à la composante sociale de l'art, s'applique parfaitement à la « machine à écrire » de Fatmi, parce que cette œuvre trouve sa concrétisation artistique dans le mélange de trois cultures dans l'esprit du spectateur et, de façon concomitante, dans l'inévitable engagement politique qui l'accompagne.

Au premier abord, ce qu'on voit c'est une machine à écrire vieillote, mécanique et de couleur vert militaire, d'où des lettres arabes jaillissent comme des flammes. Mais, en regardant de plus près ce que Fatmi a ici conçu à la façon d'un ready-made, la surprise s'accroît face à la nature a priori paradoxale de cette combinaison : une machine à écrire avec des caractères hébreux, le nom du fabricant allemand Olympia Werke West GmbH inscrit sur l'avant. Cela évoque des réflexions sur le passé – la machine à écrire occidentale en tant que reliquat d'une époque remémorée mais techniquement dépassée. Et à l'endroit où les branches métalliques devraient normalement entrer en

"*But for us, art is what ever we find that goes by that name. Something not governed by laws, something that is a complicated social product*."

This statement by the Austrian writer Robert Musil, in which he refers to the social construction and thereby the social component of art, can definitely be applied to Fatmi's "typewriter work", because the work ultimately finds its artistic fulfilment via the conflation of three cultures in the mind of the viewer and, concomitantly, the unavoidable political engagement therewith.

At first glance, what you see is an old-fashioned, mechanical, military-green coloured typewriter, out of which metal Arabic letters dart forth like flames. However, upon closer inspection of what Fatmi has fashioned here in the manner of a ready-made, our surprise about the seemingly paradoxical nature of this combination grows: a typewriter with Hebrew type, the German manufacturer's name *Olympia Werke West GmbH* emblazoned across the front. It conjures up thoughts about the past – the Western typewriter as a relic of a remembered, but technically outmoded epoch. And in the place where the metal type would normally connect with the paper, there is florid Arabic calligraphy as an ornamental painterly expression of Oriental culture which veritably seems to explode time and space – an amazing collision of Western

contact avec le papier, une calligraphie arabe sophistiquée en tant qu'expression ornementale de la culture orientale qui semble véritablement pulvériser le temps et l'espace – une collision impressionnante de la modernité occidentale et du traditionalisme islamique qui évoque forcément des événements historiques autant que des problématiques actuelles. On ne peut s'empêcher de penser aux conflits au Moyen Orient, à la relation irréconciliable entre Israël et Palestine et, au bout du compte, à la Shoah.

Dans ses peintures, sculptures, photographies, films et installations invariablement percutants, Mounir Fatmi revient sans cesse sur ces références à multiples niveaux situées entre Orient et Occident, ainsi que sur les changements culturels et politiques et les poudrières qui y sont associés. Né en 1970 à Tanger, une ville qui a de tout temps été considérée comme un lieu ou les cultures maghrébine et occidentale se mêlent, Fatmi vit et travaille entre Paris et Tanger. Activement engagé dans le débat social et artistique dans les deux villes, il endosse le rôle de l'artiste en tant qu'étranger dans des contextes culturels différents. Il voit ainsi la question de la relation à l'« Autre » - celui qui existe prétendument hors de sa culture à soi, hors de la compréhension qu'on a de soi-même – comme le principal point de départ de son art. Parallèlement, le thème de l'Union impossible est à la fois éminemment politique et existentiel. Fatmi fait ici une référence subtile, autant sémantiquement que par le contenu, au réseau complexe de relations qui existent entre les cultures juive, chrétienne et arabe : la machine à écrire aux caractères hébreux signifie la précision, mais aussi la violence et l'oppression ; les caractères arabes métalliques soulignent la signification du mot, et en réalité la force du mot ; et enfin le titre de l'œuvre peut soit être compris comme une question, soit comme une harangue pour que nous agissions, que nous nous engagions.
Sans aucun doute, l'œuvre tire sa puissance de l'expressivité même de la calligraphie arabe, qui est traditionnellement liée au Coran, car la parole divine dans l'Islam fut dite et retranscrite en arabe. La relation intime entre la religion et la parole écrite entoure la langue arabe d'une sorte de nimbe, ce qui fait que la calligraphie peut être en quelque sorte comprise comme une forme de représentation allusive – « on l'aborde comme on aborderait une peinture et une œuvre isolée ». Qui plus est, l'écriture arabe appartient à l'art islamique classique et possède – au même titre que sa signification contextuelle – une fonction esthétique, avec des possibilités graphiques diverses qui sont déployées dans l'art contemporain oriental mais aussi occidental. Fatmi – en tant qu'individu qui met en place l'œuvre – utilise le champ de la calligraphie dans l'Union impossible en combinant les lettres de façon aléatoire pour créer des signes esthétiques et même des mots, en sachant parfaitement que l'esthétique ornementale de l'arabe recèle une certaine ambiguïté, en l'occurrence la force et la beauté d'une œuvre ornementale dotée d'un message sémantique qui peut être à la fois terrifiant et incroyablement douloureux. Ainsi, le travail de Fatmi peut être compris autant dans le sens d'une injonction pour promouvoir la tolérance, le progrès et la connaissance que comme un combat en faveur de la beauté, de la divinité et de l'humanité, mais aussi la quête d'un chemin qui soit partagé par la modernité occidentale et la tradition islamique.

modernity and Islamic traditionalism that nevertheless evokes unavoidable associations with historical and current political events. Thoughts about the conflicts in the Near and Middle East force themselves to the surface, about the irreconcilable relationship between Israel and Palestine and, ultimately, about the Holocaust.

In his invariably incisive paintings, sculptures, photographs, films and installations, Mounir Fatmi repeatedly focuses thematically upon these multilayered references situated between the spheres of East and West, as well as the associated cultural and political changes and flashpoints. Fatmi, born in 1970 in Tangiers, Morocco – since time immemorial, a city that has been considered a place where Maghrebian and Western cultures coalesce – lives and works in Paris and Tangiers. Actively engaged in the current social and artistic discourse in both localities, he takes up the position of the artist as a stranger within respective cultural contexts. Thus, he sees the question relating to the relationship with the 'Other' – the one who supposedly exists outside one's own culture, one's own cultural self-understanding – as the key point of departure for his art. Correspondingly, the theme of *The Impossible Union* is both highly political and existential at the same time. Fatmi is subtly referring here, both semantically and in terms of content, to the complex network of relationships between Jewish, Christian and Arab cultures: the German typewriter with Hebrew type, which stands for precision, but also violence and oppression; the metal Arabic symbols that highlight the meaning of the word, indeed, the power of the word; and the work's English title, which can be understood as a question and /or an entreaty for us to act, to engage. Undoubtedly, the work obtains its incisiveness through the very expressivity of the Arabic calligraphy, which is traditionally closely related to the Koran, as the word of God in Islam was spoken and recorded in Arabic. The close connection between religion and the written word surrounds Arabic with a kind of 'nimbus' and consequently, the calligraphy can be understood as a form of allusive representation, as it were – "one approaches it as one would an isolated painting and artwork". In addition, Arabic script belongs to classical Islamic art and has – along with its contextual meaning – an aesthetic function, the diverse graphic possibilities of which are deployed in contemporary Oriental as well as in Western art. Fatmi – that is to say, the person who sets the work up – uses the scope of the calligraphy in *The Impossible Union* by combining the individual letters randomly to create aesthetic signs or even words, in the knowledge that the ornamental aesthetic of Arabic definitely contains a certain ambiguity, namely the power and beauty of an ornamental work endowed with a semantic message which can be simultaneeously terrifying and agonizingly painful. Thus, Mounir Fatmi's work can be understood both in the sense of dictum promoting more tolerance, enlightenment and insight, and indeed as an engagement concerned with beauty, divinity and humanity, as well as with the quest for a joint path somewhere between Western modernity and Islamic tradition.

Barbara Til, Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf 2013
Translation: Tim Connell

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Barbara Til, Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf 2013
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" An amazing collision of Western modernity and Islamic traditionalism that nevertheless evokes unavoidable associations with historical and current political events. "

Barbara Til, 2013

exhibitions:

2019

Ekphrasis - Fondation Boghossian - Villa Empain - Expo collective

2014

Between two stools, one book - Villa Empain-Fondation Boghossian - Expo collective

2013

Spot On: Mounir Fatmi - Museum Kunst Palast - Solo show

Intersections - Keitelman Gallery - Solo show

Art Cologne - Galerie Conrads - Art fair

2012

The Armory Show - Galerie Hussenot - Art fair

2011

The Angel's Black Leg - Galerie Conrads - Solo show

press articles:

Elisabeth Védrenne, mounir fatmi le messager, Connaissance des Arts, June, 2019, p. 88-89

Elena Stanciu, A struggle with meaning - The art of mounir fatmi, PETRIe, April 4th, 2016

connaissance des ARTS
Pays : FR
Périodicité : Mensuel
OJD : 41968





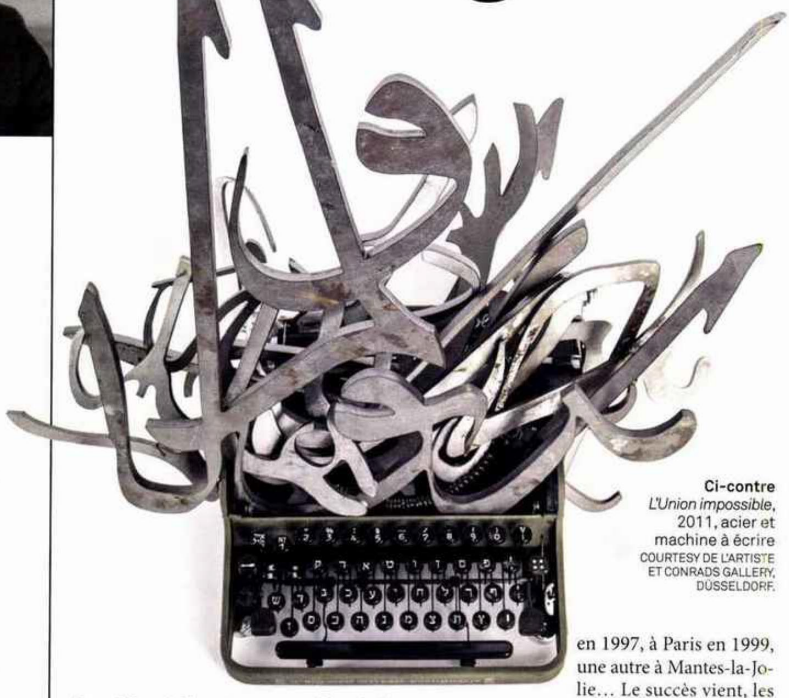
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Journaliste : ÉLISABETH VÉDRENNE

nouveau talent



L'artiste marocain dédie son exposition de la galerie Ceysson & Bénétière au câble, le medium du message, qui modifie nos façons de penser.

Mounir Fatmi le messager



Ci-contre
L'Union impossible, 2011, acier et machine à écrire
COURTESY DE L'ARTISTE ET CONRADS GALLERY, DÜSSELDORF.

1970 Naissance de Mounir Fatmi (*ill.* : ©Miguel Bueno/FIFDH) à Tanger, Maroc.

1987 École libre de l'Académie des beaux-arts de Rome, après un passage éclair aux Beaux-Arts de Casablanca.

1994 Présente photographies et vidéos au festival annuel de vidéos de Casablanca.

1999 Dans le cadre de l'Année du Maroc, résidence à la Cité internationale des arts de Paris et expositions au Frac Franche-Comté, au musée des Arts décoratifs et au Couvent des Cordeliers à Paris.

2014 Exposition collective au Palais de Tokyo, Paris.

2017 Exposition personnelle à La Maison Rouge, Paris. Participe à la 57e Biennale de Venise.

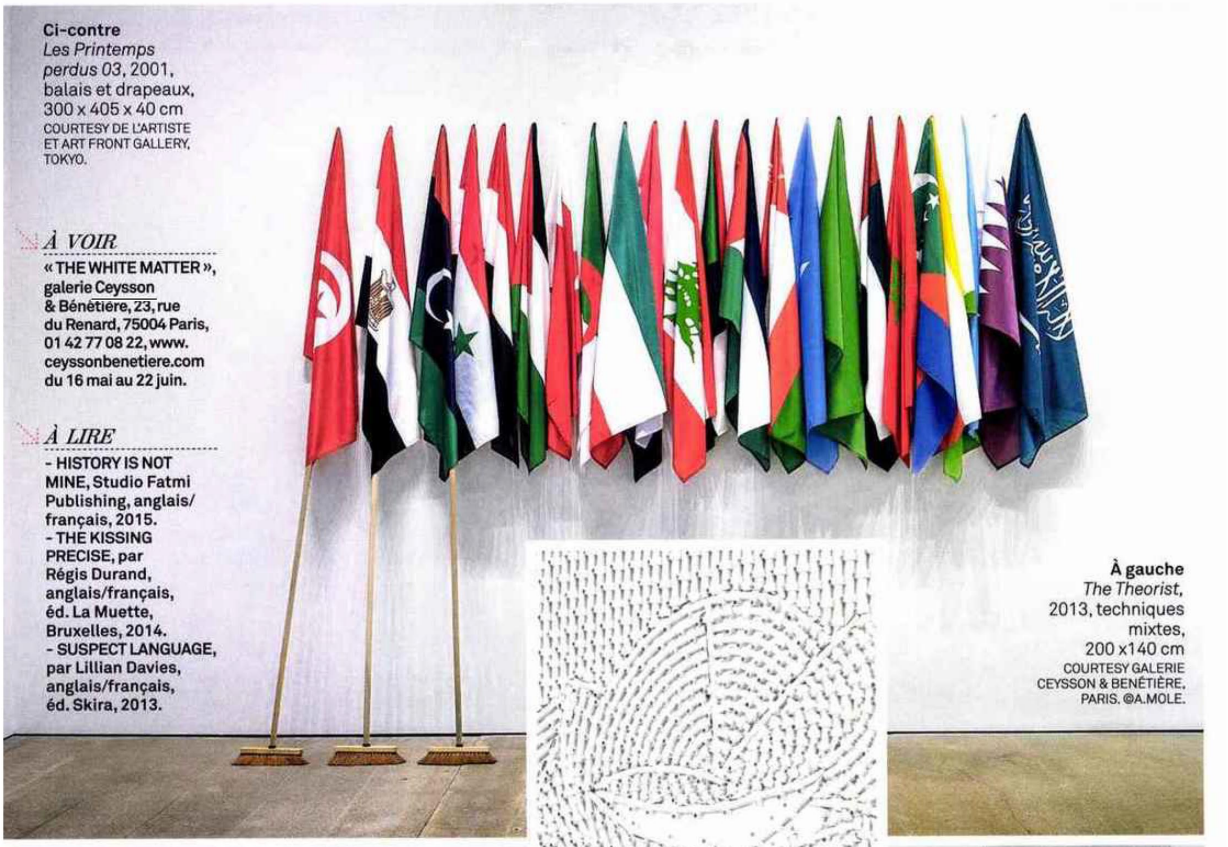
2018 Exposition collective au Macaal, Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden de Marrakech, Maroc.

Pour Mounir Fatmi, tout est affaire de langage, de transmission, mais aussi de leur perte. Langage des objets inutiles qu'il découvre enfant au marché aux Puces de Casabarata à Tanger, langage visuel du télescopage entre passé et présent. Ce bric-à-brac de l'enfance lui ouvre le regard sur le mélange, la cohabitation, le choc des cultures, l'art du prélèvement et de la recomposition, le choc du temps et de la mort annoncée. Avec ces outils désormais sans usage, l'artiste constitue de nouvelles calligraphies et des « archives » dans lesquelles il ne cesse de puiser. La pratique du graphisme publicitaire pendant six ans, où il peaufine le remixage d'images, le conforte dans son désir de liberté et de retour à la pratique artistique. Il enchaîne les résidences en France, à Lille en 1997, à Paris en 1999, une autre à Mantes-la-Jolie… Le succès vient, les voyages ne cessent plus. Ses prises de position politiques, au début un brin littérales, se font plus sarcastiques. L'humour, interdit dans les pays du Maghreb, devient une arme. Aujourd'hui, toujours plus obsédé par les connexions entre les nouvelles technologies et notre mémoire, il s'intéresse au cerveau, cette substance blanche et molle qui évolue sans cesse. Afin d'exprimer son intérêt constant pour la fabrication des images-messages, il a recours à ses fameuses archives. Ainsi, pour cette exposition, il n'utilise que des câbles blancs, ainsi qu'il l'avait déjà fait pour des installations (2004-2007) telles que *La Pietà*, ou encore *Pollock*. Cette fois-ci, il sculpte des objets labyrinthiques blancs, le blanc de l'effacement, de l'écran, de la toile blanche. **ÉLISABETH VÉDRENNE**

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Ci-contre *Les Printemps perdus 03*, 2001, balais et drapeaux, 300 x 405 x 40 cm
COURTESY DE L'ARTISTE ET ART FRONT GALLERY, TOKYO.

À VOIR

« THE WHITE MATTER », galerie Ceysson & Bénétière, 23, rue du Renard, 75004 Paris, 01 42 77 08 22, www.ceyssonbenetiere.com du 16 mai au 22 juin.

À LIRE

- HISTORY IS NOT MINE, Studio Fatmi Publishing, anglais/français, 2015.
- THE KISSING PRECISE, par Régis Durand, anglais/français, éd. La Muette, Bruxelles, 2014.
- SUSPECT LANGUAGE, par Lillian Davies, anglais/français, éd. Skira, 2013.

À gauche *The Theorist*, 2013, techniques mixtes, 200 x 140 cm
COURTESY GALERIE CEYSSON & BENÉTIÈRE, PARIS. ©A.MOLE.



Ci-dessous *L'Index et la machine 01*, 2016, tech. mixtes, 180 x 226 x 160 cm
COURTESY DE L'ARTISTE ET ADN GALERIA, BARCELONE. ©ROBERTO RUIZ.



Ci-contre *Everything Behind Me 01*, 2018, techniques mixtes, 90 x 80 x 500 cm
COURTESY DE L'ARTISTE. ©JEAN-BAPTISTE BÉRANGER.

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It was shock, angst, and inescapable panic that introduced me to the work of Mounir Fatmi, a 'French artist in USA, an African artist in Europe'. His kinetic installation Modern Times – tA History of the Machine, on show in Denmark's Brandts 131 gallery, sends the viewer into somatic overdrive, yet remains acutely conceptual, as it employs referential elements pertaining to both Western and Eastern (Islamic) aesthetics. Visual repetition, perpetual circular motion, illegible Arabic calligraphy, and aggressive sound create a sense of danger, announcing an imminent clash of worlds embracing the mechanics of modernity, but struggling to grasp the essence of it.



A portrait of Mounir Fatmi

At times, Fatmi's works tap into strands of speculative philosophy, often breaking down bonds of meaning: objects are dislocated, taken beyond their instrumentality, reconceptualized, separated from the burden of a necessary relation to their qualities, in a potential attempt to explore what Graham Harman would call the 'object oriented ontology'.

In Between the Lines, a steel circular saw blade becomes the inscription surface for Quoran verses, which undergo a process of being emptied of semiotic content and rendered decorative elements. The defining qualities of both the object and of language are suspended, and the image becomes the new bearer of knowledge.



Between the lines, 2010, saw blade in steel, 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town. Photo credit: Mia Dudek

In his creative process, Mounir Fatmi uses a variety of media and materials, and appropriates objects at hand, in attempts to question their materiality and attributed function. His artworks challenge the thingness of things, as they take the form of known objects, but occupy meanings beyond their shape and instrumentality; in Brainteaser for Moderate Muslims, the commonplace colourful cube is transformed, redirected towards new possibilities of its materi
alism. The title suggests a playful reference to The Kaaba, a pre-Islamic monument rededicated by the prophet Muhammad, while the work as a whole invites critical thinking, with tones of political reflection.



Brainteaser for Moderate Muslim, 2004, acrylic on rubiks cubes, 54 x 11 x 13,5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town. Photo credit : Rebecca Fanuele

Fatmi's oeuvre contains political statements, at various levels of articulation, which have the value to inform criticism and confront hierarchical or binary structures. Religious or ethnic identity is explored in the series titled Face. Here, markers of gender and lineage survive fragmentation and erasure, speaking to the dangers of prejudice and reductionism.

In a moment of reflection, Mounir notes: 'there are some things that cannot be named, nor described, and these are the things I am trying to show in my work.' This makes me doubt my own attempt to contain his work, to apply my limited language to his unlimited creative universe. Am I closer to the truth of a thing when I name it, when I describe it, or when its presence makes me feel shock, angst, and inescapable panic?



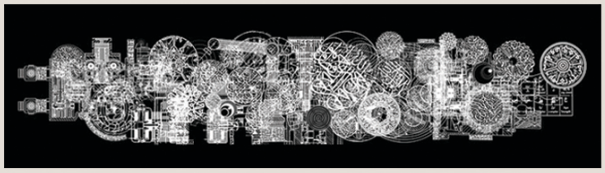
No Witness, (Portrait format) series started in 1996, 1995 paintings erased in 1996, 25,5 x 38 cm



Face,1999, serie of 13 drawings, ink and acrylic on paper, 29,7 x 21 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Private collection. Photo credit : mounir fatmi

Elena Stanciu: found your work in Merchants of Dreams : An exhibition of Contemporary Moroccan Art – Modern Times – a History of the Machine 1– to be very powerful and a compelling commentary to contemporary social and political realities. Tell me a little about what inspired you.

Mounir Fatmi: Modern Times – A History of the machine is about the speed of modernization in the Arab World. With the speed of industrialisation, cities in the Middle East appear out of the desert, with buildings thrown up so fast that there is no time to reflect on the changes. "Modern Times" explores architecture in the Middle East, raising the question of the human impact of this unrelenting



Modern Times History of the machine, 2010, France, video installation,15 min, HD, B&W, stereo. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town Photo credit : Mounir Fatmi

ES: How did you come to choose this piece to be shown in Denmark? How do you think the Danish public will react to your work, and to Moroccan and African art throughout this biennale?

MF: Christian Skovbjerg invited me to exhibit in the Images 2016 biennale in Denmark. We met in Paris about one year ago to discuss the exhibition, as he wanted to focus on Moroccan artists. It is great to have the opportunity to show my work there. Scandinavian cultures are very far from me and luckily art is the perfect opportunity to build cultural bridges.



Deconstruction Structure N°1, 2013-2014, Typewriter, hammers, A4 paper on office desk, video on flatscreen, Bilboquet game, typed sheets. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town. Exhibition view from Merchant of Dreams. Photo credit : Viborg Kunsthal

ES: You are very particular about consumption and the subject of consumption. Could you elaborate on these concepts, and on how they influence your work?

MF: I am concerned with the end of the object, the notion that one object becomes something else, like VHS becoming a town like in my installation Skyline, antenna cables become networks and depict a geometric pattern like in Kissing Circles.

I have started to explore the notion of politics, that it becomes the object of consumption like in the project Mutation, where the ideology of the Black Panthers Party became the brand of a hot sauce to raise money for children, or Picasso who is now a car produced by Renault, or even the PC, which was the Communist Party in French is now the Personal Computer. All those displacements are very interesting to me, as I observe how the world changes in terms of using images and creating meaning.



left:

The Last Springs, October 2011, 3 brooms of 3 meters, 22 flags or arabian countries, 300 x 405 x 40 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town.

Exhibition view from Le Monde Selon…, FRAC Franche Comté-Besançon, 2015. Photo credit : Blaise Adilon

ES: At the moment, Europe is struggling to make sense of various kinds of Otherness, which leads to particular crises – of identity, of meaning, of communication. Can art contribute to solving these issues?

MF: Otherness is a complex issue that I address in many of my works, for example in Who is Joseph Anton?, The Blinding Light, or Darkening Process.

I live in Paris and when I am in the USA, I am a French Artist, but when I am in France, I am a Middle Eastern or African artist. I am always from somewhere else, wherever I am! I see here an urgency to understand the other, to accept and to learn with the other, and art can be a way to facilitate this.



The Impossible Union, 2011, arabic calligraphies of steel, hebrew typewriter. Courtesy of the artist and Collection of the Kunstpalast Museum, Duesseldorf. Photo credit : Mounir Fatmi

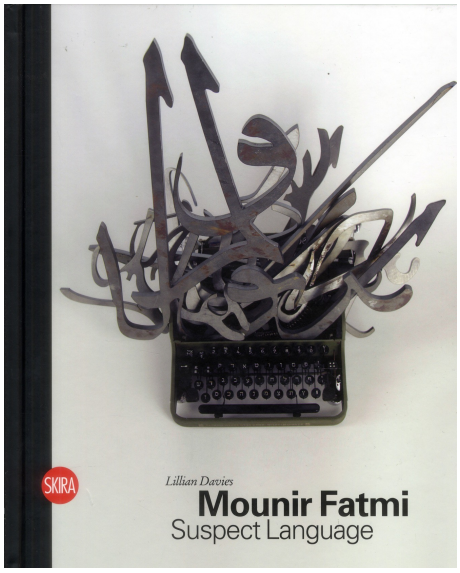
ES: I see a recurrent motif in your works – Arabic calligraphy, visually manipulated and aesthetically repurposed, to the point that words and language abandon their function. Tell me a little about this.

MF: Indeed, the text in my work loses its function and becomes an image. Language loses its meaning and for me there is a kind of inability to mean something. Claude Levi-Strauss asks in his book, The Jealous Potter: "what does the verb to mean mean?"

We can discuss many things but there are some things that cannot be named, nor described and that is what I am trying to show in my work.

Words: Elena Stanciu

Artist: Mounir Fatmi



Suspect Language, France, 2012

Contemporary politics, especially where informed by religion, fuel the core of fatmi’s work, while the mysticism and cyclical structure implied by a practice of faith shapes his delivery.

Lillian Davies, Suspect Language, June 2010



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