43. | As a Black Man





2013-2014, serie of 10 C-Prints, 60 x 40 cm.
Exhibition view from Walking on the light, CCC Tours, 2014, Tours.
Courtesy of the artist and Ceysson & Bénétière, Paris.
Ed. of 5 + 2 A.P.

Collection of National Museum of Mali, Bamako

This work was part of 10ème Biennale Africaine de la Photographie - Telling Time, Bamako, 2015.

La série photographique As a Black Man prend pour sujet l'auteur américain John Howard Griffin (1920 – 1980) et son livre de 1961, Black Like Me. Dans son livre, Griffin décrit ses expériences d'homme blanc qui décide, en 1959, de se noircir la peau, de se raser la tête, et de voyager pendant six semaines dans les états ségrégationnistes du sud des Etats-Unis. Les dix photographies de la série de fatmi As a Black Man sont encadrées par un Griffin « blanc » à gauche et un Griffin « noir » à droite, les huit photographies intermédiaires devenant, selon le point de départ du spectateur, de plus en plus noires ou de plus en plus blanches. Premier plan et arrière-plan se confondant sur la surface plate et monochrome des photographies, ces images difficiles à lire soulèvent la question des endroits et des moments où la notion de race est, ou n'est pas, flexible. En utilisant ainsi la photographie, As a Black Man aborde frontalement le problème toujours brûlant de la longue utilisation de la représentation visuelle, et en particulier de la photographie, pour définir, propager et contester les constructions raciales, les représentations politiques, et le sentiment d'appartenance.

– Emma Chubb

The photographic series As a Black Man takes as its subject the American author John Howard Griffin (1920 – 1980) and his 1961 book, Black Like Me. In the book, Griffin details his experiences as a white man who decided to darken his skin, shave his head, and travel for six weeks in the segregated American South in 1959. The ten photographs in fatmi's As a Black Man are bookended by "white" Griffin on the left and "black" Griffin on the right, while the eight photographs in between become increasingly white or black depending on one's viewing position. As foreground and background collapse into the same flat and monochromatic surface of the photograph, these hard-to-read images raise questions about when and where race is—and is not—malleable. In doing so through photography, As a Black Man broaches the ever-pressing matter of how visual representation, and photography in particular, have long been used to delimit, circulate, and contest constructions of race, political representation, and belonging.

– Emma Chubb

This essay was first published in Telling Time, 10th Bamako Encounters, Biennale of African Photography catalogue.

Cet essai a été publié dans le catalogue Telling Time,
10èmes Rencontres de Bamako, Biennale Africaine de la Photographie.

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Rahel Aima, Art in America, 2017

exhibitions:

2018

Le Pavillon de l'Exil - Off de la Biennale de Dakar - Institut Français de Saint Louis - Expo collective

2017

Under the Skin - Maisons des Arts du Grütli - Solo show

Inside the Fire Circle - Lawrie Shabibi - Solo show

2016

Darkening Process - MMP+ - Solo show

2015

Permanent Exiles - MAMCO - Solo show

Le Point de Fuite de l'Histoire - Festival Photographique de Lectoure - Expo collective

2014

Walking on the light - CCC - Solo show

press articles:

Rahel Aima, Mounir Fatmi, Art in America, June 1st, 2017

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REVIEWS JUN. 01, 2017

Mounir Fatmi

DUBAI,
at Lawrie Shabibi

by Rahel Aima



Mounir Fatmi: *History Is Not Mine*, 2013, video, 5 minutes; at Lawrie Shabibi.

Tucked into a corner alcove of Mounir Fatmi's exhibition "Inside the Fire Circle" was a short video in which the artist sits down at a typewriter, picks up a pair of hammers, and begins to bang on the keyboard with them. The output is gibberish, of course, but the gesture is surprisingly gentle, even elegant. The artist resembles a well-dressed hotel pianist as he taps out a clattery patois that can be heard around the gallery. Titled *History is Not Mine*, the 2013 video is mostly black-and-white; only the typewriter ribbon provides a drop of red. The work melds a certain nostalgia for the refinement of the past with an underlying sense of ambivalence about claiming ownership over historical experience.

Typewriters also featured in the show's title work: a large new installation positioned in the center of the gallery. In this piece, waterfalls of jumper cables spill from typewriters arranged on a high table. The end of each cable is clipped to a blank sheet of paper on the floor. The configuration, with black cables running down one side of the table and red ones down the other, suggests some sort of analogue setup for automated writing, mindless and mechanized.

With only the occasional flash of color, the palette of the exhibition was predominantly black-and-white. The polarized color scheme hinted at the artist's interest in binaries, and where they break down. This interest is not confined to formal experimentation; several pieces in the show offered specific content related to black racial identity in the United States. These photo works focus on John Howard Griffin, a white civil rights activist from Texas who, in 1959, took medication and underwent UV treatments to darken his skin, allowing him to pass as black. He spent six weeks traveling in the segregated South before writing the bestseller *Black Like Me*. For the photo work *As a Black Man* (2013–14), Fatmi manipulated archival images of Griffin to allude to his "transformation" from white to black. An image of Griffin prior to his skin treatment is printed eight different times, appearing to darken progressively with each iteration. The series, arranged horizontally on a wall, ends with two shots of Griffin as a black man. In *As a Black Man*, as in

several other manipulated archival images depicting Griffin traversing the color line, Fatmi presents racial identity as malleable even as he invokes the historical role of photography in codifying racial distinctions.

Nothing in the exhibition suggested that Fatmi considered the limits of this malleability, or questioned the extent to which a nonblack person can access a black experience. The malaise evoked by *History Is Not Mine* seems to serve almost as cover for a deeper historical ignorance. In the video *Darkening Process* (2014), archival footage of Griffin, along with black dancers and jazz musicians is tinted red, green, blue, and yellow in turn. These scenes are edited together with shots of Fatmi methodically blackening his hands—palms too!—with shoe polish, in a nod to the only job Griffin was able to get while "black."

Perhaps Fatmi, who is Moroccan, has valid points to make about the fraught relationship between Arabness and blackness in North Africa—the history that is undeniably his. But his direct references to an Anglo, North American context make it impossible to separate his project from the ugly history of minstrelsy and blackface. Transposed again to Dubai, where slavery was abolished de jure only in 1963, the blithe obliviousness of this project is nothing short of chilling.



Mounir Fatmi's Inside the Fire Circle uses art to reinforce lessons of history. Jump leads spill from typewriters and photos reveal John Howard Griffin's 'colour change'. Courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist

Lessons of history come full circle in Mounir Fatmi's exhibition

Anna Seaman

April 30, 2017 Updated: April 30, 2017 07:11 PM

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The central installation of Mounir Fatmi's new exhibition gives the show its name. Inside the Fire Circle features a row of old-fashioned typewriters on an iron frame. From these obsolete objects, black and red jump leads spill out, the ends clipped to a page of plain, white paper.

Initially this might seem to question the transfer of information and provide a visual representation of the development of digital and future technologies – but it is also about the past.

"With this installation, I want people to remember history," says Fatmi, a French-Moroccan artist, of his first solo show in Dubai. "Unfortunately people have a short-term memory these days."

Fatmi describes the work as an aesthetic trap that draws viewers in but throws them into a circular motion of repetition.

"All these materials are going to disappear, so they are historical, but there is the notion of archive, which is constantly present," he says. "We see history repeating itself over and over again, like a palimpsest."

Palimpsest is a word for a manuscript or other writing surface that has been reused or altered but which still has visible traces of its original form.

This installation then, reflects the artist's preoccupation with the circle, a recurring symbol throughout his practice.

On the wall are several pieces made with coaxial antennae cables – another largely obsolete object – arranged and fixed in partly-circular and geometric patterns, encased in glass boxes.

Again, they draw the viewer in to the idea of repetition and infinity but also pick up the theme of physical material that is now part of history, soon to be discarded from use and, perhaps, even from memory.

By using such objects, Fatmi raises the question of whether when something is forgotten, does it mean it never existed? Why do we often fail to learn the lessons of history? If an incident falls out of the reaches of archive or memory, it can happen again, and we risk making the same mistakes.

This idea is highlighted in the story of John Howard Griffin, the subject of several pieces of work in the exhibition. Griffin was an American journalist and author from Texas. He was white but in the racially-segregated United States of 1959, he took medication and subjected his skin to ultraviolet rays to make himself appear black. He then went on a tour of the country's Deep South.

"I discovered the history of this amazing person who completed this experiment and I realised that many people hadn't heard of him so I decided to use his story to show others," says Fatmi.

A series of 10 photographs, titled *As A Black Man*, shows the gradation of Griffin's skin from white to grey to black. Another set, this time in black and white, show his legs crossing a white line in the street – which has several metaphorical and symbolic connotations.

"This story is especially relevant because of what is happening in the United States now," says Fatmi. "People forget the original American dream was in fact, the immigrant's dream. You can't imagine America as it is today without immigrants.

"So, I want to show people that back then, there was a white, educated person who was willing to literally burn his skin because he wanted to understand 'the other'. If people were to think like him now, it would help a lot."

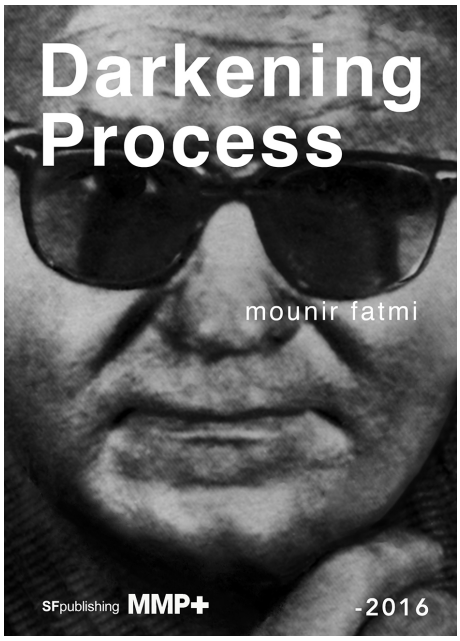
Fatmi's interest in forgotten stories, and in inspiring his audience to think for themselves, comes from a childhood spent in an impoverished Moroccan village where access to information was scarce.

He remembers there was only one dictionary in the village and he had to search it out. When he began creating art in an age of information saturation, Fatmi never forgot the importance of memory, and he hopes to harness the power of art to make a difference.

"Art changed my life," he says. "I try to understand life, history and everything with art – it is the key. And yes, it is a romantic idea but I do have a hope to be able to change something with my art."

• *Inside the Fire Circle is at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, Alserkal Avneue, Dubai, until May 15. www.lawrieshabibi.com*

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Darkening Process, SFpublishing 2024

The first project The Journey into Shame is in honoring John Howard Griffin, the white American writer and journalist, born in 1920, known for his fight against racial discrimination and best known for his book ‘Black like Me’.

Mostafa Aghrib, January 2016

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As a Black Man, 2013–14, series of ten C-prints, 23 1/2 x 16".

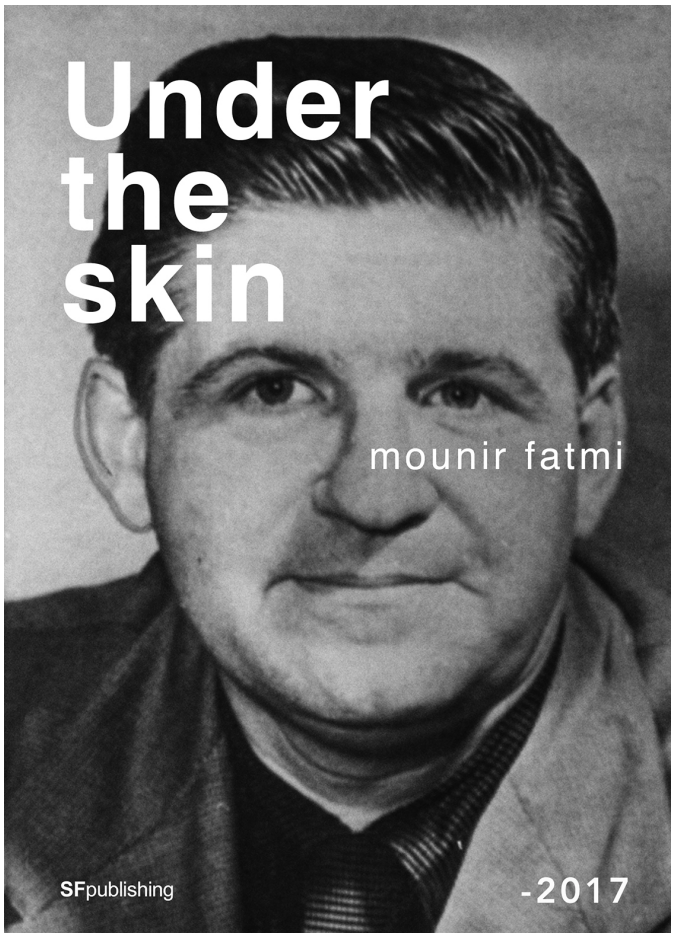
Mounir Fatmi

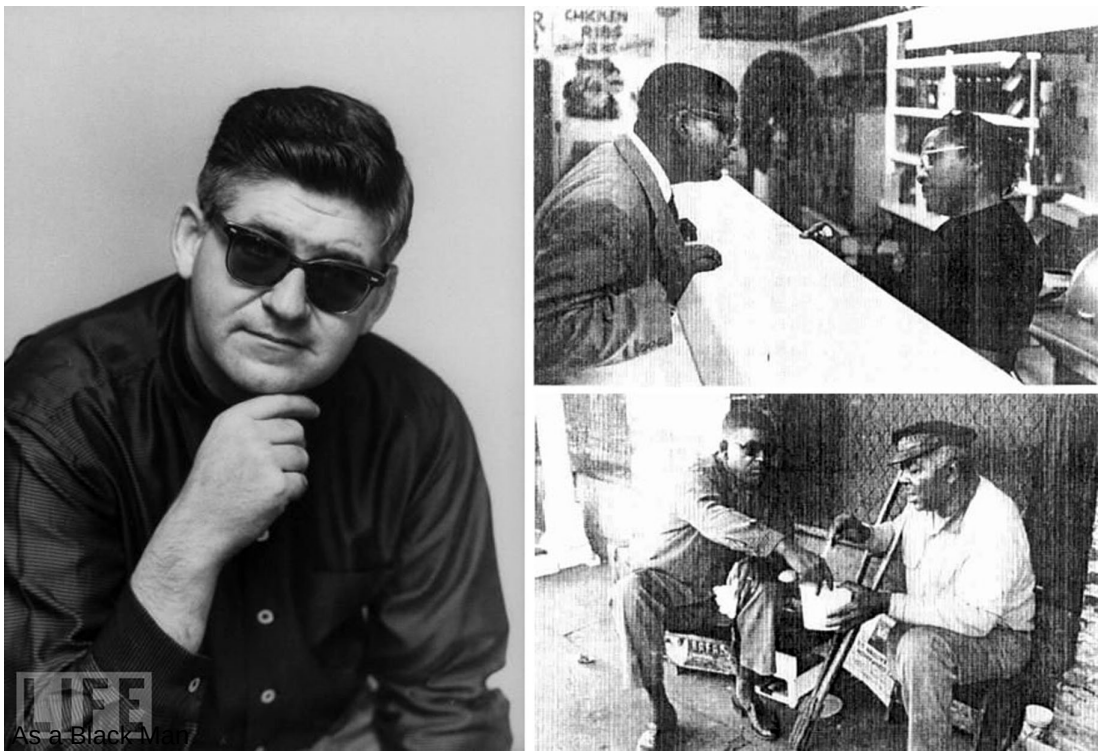
THE MARRAKECH MUSEUM FOR PHOTOGRAPHY AND VISUAL ARTS
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There are too many faces in *Who Is Joseph Anton*, 2012. This psychedelic amalgamation of literary giants includes Salman Rushdie, Anton Chekhov, and Joseph Conrad. They may be three unique personalities, but Mounir Fatmi intends for them to be just one: Joseph Anton, a character who exists only in Rushdie's mind, a pseudonym that the besieged writer uses to divert attention from his real identity in order to survive. On the opposite wall, a series of ten photographs document a man's transformation from light to dark skinned in *As a Black Man*, 2014. The concept of "real" identity discomforts viewers and triggers questions: In which direction is he transitioning? Is he disappearing? Is this more than just one man? The answer to this last inquiry seems to be affirmative, and here, too, are multiple personalities. Motivated by his desire to understand the Other, American journalist John Howard Griffin—the subject of the portraits—attempted to turn himself from white to black. But how powerful is a staging of identity addressed only in black and white photographs? There are more psychological shades of gray to unpack in this intellectual interrogation.

Peering at the surgery in the operating theater depicted in the photograph *The Blinding Light*, 2013, there is no gore, but rather uncomfortably, the doctors' heads have been replaced with those of classical saints. In what reads like a twisted prayer for the dying, the patient has a saint's head, too. Fatmi's images merge faith, science, and history in a visual narrative that asks the question: Who do you identify with?

— Myrna Ayad

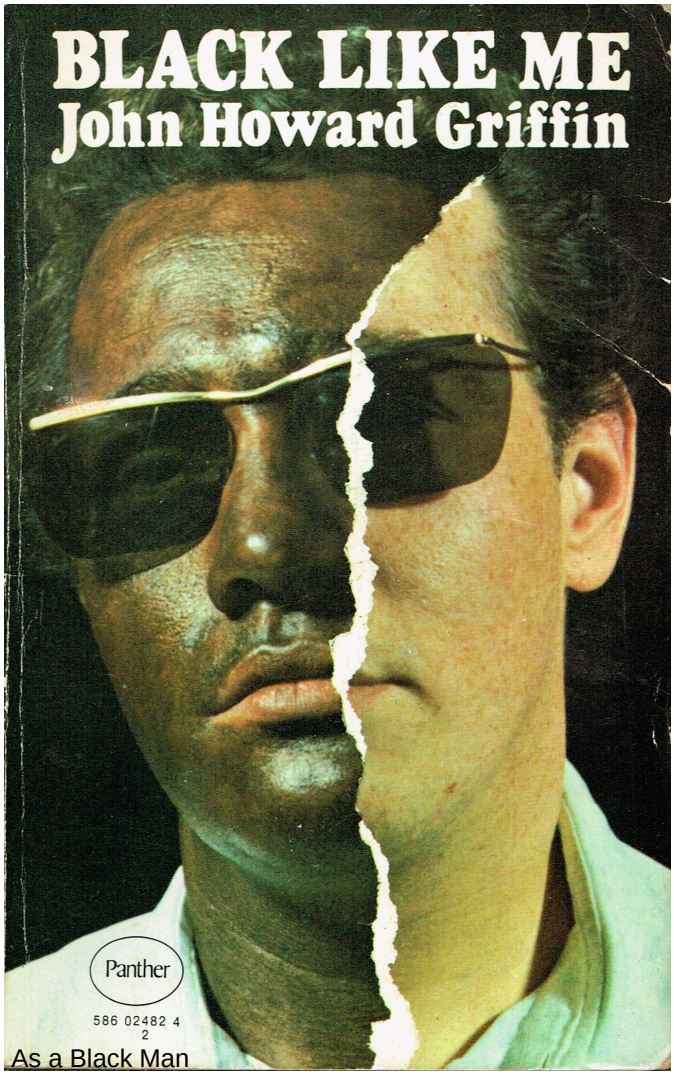




The photographic series As a Black Man takes as its subject the American author John Howard Griffin (1920 – 1980) and his 1961 book, Black Like Me. In the book, Griffin details his experiences as a white man who decided to darken his skin, shave his head, and travel for six weeks in the segregated American South in 1959.

As a Black Man

The ten photographs in fatmi's As a Black Man are bookended by "white" Griffin on the left and "black" Griffin on the right, while the eight photographs in between become increasingly white or black depending on one's viewing position.



As a Black Man

As foreground and background collapse into the same flat and monochromatic surface of the photograph, these hard-to-read images raise questions about when and where race is—and is not—malleable.