60. | Mother Language





2017, Steel blade, diameter 150 cm, thickness 8 mm.
Exhibition view of Fragmented Memory, Goodman Gallery, 2017, Johannesburg.
Courtesy of the artist and Ceysson & Bénétière, Paris.
Ed. of 5 + 1 A.P.

L’installation Langue maternelle emprunte la forme d'une lame de scie circulaire en acier d'un mètre cinquante de diamètre, percée de motifs calligraphiques en arabe classique. La lame est suspendue au plafond de l'espace d'exposition à l'aide d'un système de poulies et d'une chaîne à maillons passée à travers un trou pratiqué au centre du disque métallique. La chaîne traîne jusqu'au sol, que jonchent également des éléments calligraphiques découpés au laser dans le métal, disposés en tas, sans ordre apparent.

L'œuvre interroge le rapport du locuteur arabe à sa langue natale désignée par l'expression "langue maternelle" et aborde la question de son acquisition et de manière plus générale, celles de l'éducation et de l'héritage culturel transmis à travers le langage.

Le titre de l’œuvre pourrait évoquer une scène tirée du célèbre conte du petit chaperon rouge : "Dis-moi maman, pourquoi as-tu de si longues dents ? _ C'est pour mieux te manger mon enfant !" Avec ses grandes dents acérées, la sculpture livre au spectateur une image de la figure maternelle pour le moins effrayante et menaçante. Instrument ambivalent dans l'univers artistique de Mounir Fatmi, voué en même temps à la construction et à la destruction, à la vie et à la mort, il donne à voir la langue et ses rapports avec la religion et les croyances comme ce qui est au fondement de la civilisation arabo musulmane, terreau linguistique qui a notamment permis le succès d'une certaine forme de pensée dogmatique et religieuse, et dont une des propriétés semble être de s'attaquer à tout ce qui diffère ou qui s'en écarte.

The Mother Language installation takes the form of a circular steel saw blade with a 1.5m diameter and calligraphic motifs in classic Arabic cut into it. The blade hangs from the ceiling of the exhibit space with a system of pulleys and a chain that goes through a hole pierced in the center of the disk. The chain also drags onto the floor, where laser-cut calligraphic elements in metal can be found, left in piles, without any apparent order.

The piece questions the relation of the Arabic language speaker to his native language designated with the expression “mother tongue” and tackles the question of its acquisition, and in a broader sense, that of education and cultural heritage transmitted through language.

The title of the work brings up a scene from the well-known Little Red Riding Rood tale: “What big teeth you have, grandmother… The better to eat you, my dear!” With its big sharp teeth, the sculpture offers the viewer a rather scary and menacing image of a mother figure. The saw blade is an ambivalent instrument in Mounir Fatmi’s artistic world, as it’s destined to both construction and destruction, to life and death. This piece highlights language and its relation to religion and faith as the founding element of the Arab-Muslim civilization, a linguistic fertile ground that enabled, among other things, the success of a certain form of dogmatic and religious thought which seems to have as a characteristic to attack anything that differs or diverts from it.

Rife with potential violence and ambivalent graphic appeal, the massive presence of the disk in the exhibition space is, within Mounir Fatmi’s artistic corpus, both an esthetic trap

Pleine de potentialités violentes et de séductions graphiques ambivalentes, la présence massive du disque dans l'espace d'exposition relève, au sein du corpus artistique de Mounir Fatmi, à la fois du piège esthétique et de l'obstacle. Piège esthétique, il révèle l'ambivalence de la langue comme moyen d'expression mais également de répression, et il enseigne la juste distance à garder vis-à-vis de ces éléments de langage et de civilisation qui nous constituent et desquels il est si difficile de se distancier. Obstacle, il pousse le spectateur à ne pas se laisser aller à la passivité mortifère et l'incite à mobiliser ses capacités physiques, cognitives et intellectuels afin d'observer, de comprendre et d'agir en conséquence. L'œuvre invite le spectateur à porter son attention sur les éléments abandonnés au sol, c'est-à-dire sur les chutes - matière habituellement mise au rebut, mais à partir de laquelle une autre construction est peut-être possible. Arrachés à leur support initial, les éléments calligraphiques retrouvent leur indépendance et expriment le désir d'une langue débarrassée de toute idéologie religieuse, enfin rendue à sa précision, à ses pouvoirs critiques et à sa liberté. Si l'œuvre semble évoquer la question de l'héritage culturel comme un problème douloureux - Mounir Fatmi déclare en effet dans un des ses manifestes : "Ma langue est comme une hémorragie, je saigne à chaque fois que je parle", elle invite cependant à se défendre contre ses éventuelles violences en aiguisant ses capacités critiques.

Studio Fatmi, Septembre 2017.

and an obstacle. As an esthetic trap, it reveals the ambivalence of language as a means of expression but also of repression, and it teaches us about the right distance to maintain vis-à-vis the elements of language and civilization that are part of us and from which it’s so difficult to distance oneself. As an obstacle, it encourages the viewers to not give in to life-denying apathy and to mobilize their physical, cognitive and intellectual capacities to observe, understand and act accordingly. The work invites viewers to pay attention to the elements abandoned on the floor, the offcuts – materials that are usually discarded but that could also be the beginning of another construction. Torn away from their initial support, the calligraphic elements recover their independence and express a desire for a language freed from religious ideology and whose precision, critical power and freedom have been returned. The work seems to consider the issue of cultural heritage as a painful problem – Mounir Fatmi does declare in one of his manifestos: “My language is like a hemorrhage, I bleed every time I speak” – but it also encourages us to defend ourselves against its potential violence by honing our critical capacities.

Studio Fatmi, September 2017.

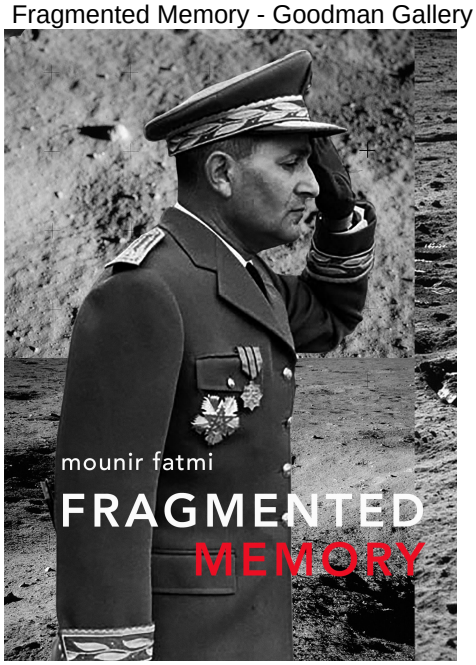
“Suspended from the ceiling, the cut-out letters lie jumbled on the floor directly below. The work casts a noticeable shadow, an abstracted ghost of the images portrayed.
The calligraphic work, titled Mother Language, is a visual link to his previous body of work, a continuity in his thinking and execution, evolving his visual language.”

Nicola Kritzinger, Arthrob, May 2017

exhibitions:

2017

Fragmented Memory - Goodman Gallery - Solo show



Fragmented Memory, SF Publishing, 2020

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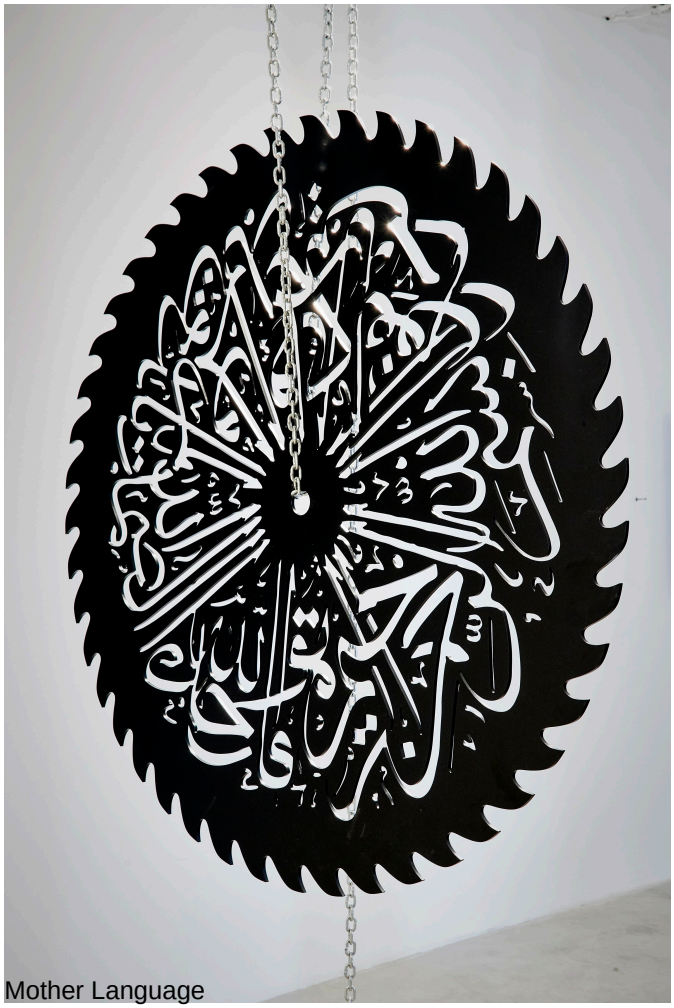


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