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Interview with Nicolas Baume, 2007

For *Momentum 9*, French artist Kader Attia uses simple materials—foam-padded cots bearing the imprints of bodies—create a poetic meditation on childhood, absence, and community (see p. TK). Chief Curator Nicholas Baume spoke with Attia recently about his creative approach, the threads that unite his works, and the importance of emptiness.

Nicholas Baume: Can you comment on your creative process? Your ideas for this project have evolved, but you have always wanted to connect to the audience, building layers of association with form, material, and image.

Kader Attia: My mind is full of paradoxes. All of my work is based on a confrontation between paradoxical ideas; they all include one thing and its contrary. For me, the creative process is the path from the mind to a concrete aesthetic form. I think that my work also reflects my culture—Arab, with Greek and Asian influences, all of them stamped with philosophy.

One of the core ideas of my work is from the Chinese philosopher Lao Tseu: “human beings create things, but emptiness gives them meaning.” This has influenced my previous work as well as the work for the ICA. In *Flying Rats*, children sculpted out of birdseed disappear over time, [pecked into oblivion by live pigeons]. It speaks to the loss of childhood, among other things. *Ghost* consisted of empty casts of women bodies; with this work, I wanted to fill the space with emptiness. Sometimes, the work is not only about material but also the emptiness in and around it. In *Holy Land*, mirrors reflect what illegal immigrants have left behind, what parts of them they try to fly away from. More broadly, it shows what any man leaves behind him when he leaves his home.

Most of the time, I am interested in the evocation of something by its contrary. The articulation between form and meaning often happens through emptiness. In my Haifa exhibition, for instance, the space that is not occupied by the installation is as much – and maybe more—important as the installation itself.

NB: You developed an overall concept for *Momentum 9*, but your process seems open to collaboration, working with students from Massachusetts College of Art and Design and incorporating their attributes into the work. Is this important to you?

KA: For me, art is about mixing up, sharing, and confronting ideas, points of view, and personal stories. Working on a piece of art means involving both other people and my own individuality, my deepest convictions. I am interested in incorporating

different personalities in my installations for two reasons. First, I need assistants—an extension of my own hands—to build a project on a large scale. Second, I want people to participate as viewers but also to take part in the construction of the work. In this particular work, they are models. I used their bodies as a trace of their presence at a particular place and time. Moreover, the fact that they are lying down on a bed has huge symbolic meaning—it deals with intimacy and death. The students will grow up and get older, and these will be traces of bodies that no longer exist. They also reveal the shape of their bodies to viewers in a very intimate—even macabre—position.

NB: Are you interested in the specific physical and cultural context for a work—does it make any difference that this exhibition is presented in Boston as opposed to, say, Paris?

KA: In my work, I try to deal with universal issues: childhood, death, intimacy, fantasies, neuroses, phobias. Since I have been in Boston, I have been sensitive to the academic, cosmopolitan aspect of this city, which has a rich intellectual tradition. Showing my work in Boston is an opportunity to give the city a kind of lecture about my work, based on a mental image. That said, I like to make works that can be shown and understood anywhere. I want to speak to an audience with no cultural, religious, or national borders.

NB: If there are connections between your works, there are also many differences—you do not work in one “style.” How do you find the right formal language for each work?

KA: Martin Kippenberger, when accused by a critic of having no style, answered, “My style is that I do not have one.” This is a reference for me. Because I care a lot about the form, I want it always to be adapted to my concept. Otherwise, all the work would be similar. What is important to me is the “scientific” or experimental aspect of art. I want to search for, use, and try different forms of language that are relevant to my subject. To understand a philosophy text, you need “keys”, references to other philosophic minds. In the same way, my work should be read within a system of references: cultural, historical, philosophical, formal, material, personal. I don’t want my work to be monotonous; I see it as a research laboratory for different forms.

One thing that my works have in common is that they are often rooted in an anecdote from my childhood. That has been the case with *Flying Rats* and *Childhood*, and the work I created for the ICA. The basis is emotion, memory, intimacy, nostalgia, melancholy. I also talked about the importance of emptiness in my work—I think that absence expresses both an emotion (sadness, for example) and a physical characteristic (empty space). In *Momentum 9*, the emptiness bound by the shape of the carved-out foam and the vast exhibition space builds a dialogue between balance and unbalance. It then breaks the silence and produces a musical rhythm between emptiness and fullness, the container and the contents.

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