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Mona Hatoum: present tense, Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art, London

Reviewed by Sue Hubbard | Monday 23 June 2008 23:00 BST | 0 comments

Maps are an abiding motif for the artist Mona Hatoum. A small carpet, like a prayer mat, depicts a map of the world. Sections seem to have been eroded to leave a negative space in the form of Peter's Projection, which reveals the true proportions of distributed land mass, as opposed to that which is shown on traditional Western maps.

Elsewhere, a grid of 2,400 blocks of olive oil soap from the town Nabus, north of Jerusalem, sits on the gallery floor in a Carl André-style grid. Its surface is embedded with tiny beads that

depict the map of the 1933 Oslo peace agreement between Israel and Palestine. Also marked are the territories that should have been handed back to Palestine. Present Tense, as it is called, was originally made in 1966, in Jerusalem and was Hatoum's response to her first visit to that city.

Born to Palestinian parents, her family fled Haifa in 1948 because of Israeli attitudes and settled in Beirut, where she was born in 1952. During a visit to London in 1975, civil war broke out in Lebanon and it became apparent that she would not be able to return. Instead, she enrolled at the Byam Shaw School of Art and then the Slade.

Hatoum stands outside the prevailing ironic mood of today's art scene. Not having been to Goldsmiths and being slightly older than the YBAs that it spawned, she makes work that supports the old adage that the personal is political. In fact, her work has more in common with that of Seventies feminist artists such as Nancy Spiro, or Europeans such as Anselm Kiefer, or the French artist, Christian Boltanski, who also deals with memory and loss.

In 1989, I first saw her The Light at the End. This heavy metal gate, installed at the end of a corridor, with glowing elements arranged like vertical bars, was a simple, authoritative and potent metaphor that spoke eloquently of detention and confinement. Discarded hair has also played an important part in her work, evoking a multiplicity of associations, from Auschwitz and fairy tales to fetishist objects. Her continued fascination can be seen in her delicate etchings, Hair and There, in this new exhibition at Parasol Unit.

To call Hatoum a political artist would be to create too narrow a category, for her work extends beyond the boundaries of such a definition. Certainly there are works here – such as Keffieh II, a

silk organza scarf reminiscent of those worn by Palestinians that has been embroidered with metal string to resemble barbed wire – which could be classified in that way, but other works have a more universal appeal. Mobile Home II, an installation at one end of the gallery, conjures feelings of displacement through the poignant arrangement of objects: a washing line, a child's soft toy, a tin bowl and a battered suitcase that might belong to any refugee family from Bosnia to Zimbabwe.

In other works, her meanings are more oblique. Undercurrent, a mat of woven, cloth-covered electric cables, speaks of many things, from day-to-day electricity shortages to a subliminal sense of ever-present threat. Her lattice-work steel ball, Globe, also evokes multiple meanings, suggesting not only entrapment and instability but the image of Sisyphus – a metaphor, perhaps, for endless failed peace negotiations.

Hatoum's work is undoubtedly political in the sense that it forces us to reconsider our place in the modern world and our relationship to its continuing conflicts. Full of paradoxes, it makes us question notions of "them" and "us" and what it means to be an exile. On a deeper level, these questions cease simply to be political but become an investigation of the sexual, racial and psychological barriers that we erect to keep ourselves apart. An artist unafraid of exploring diverse media, she creates highly articulate symbols that are able to express oppression and power, as well as human frailty.

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