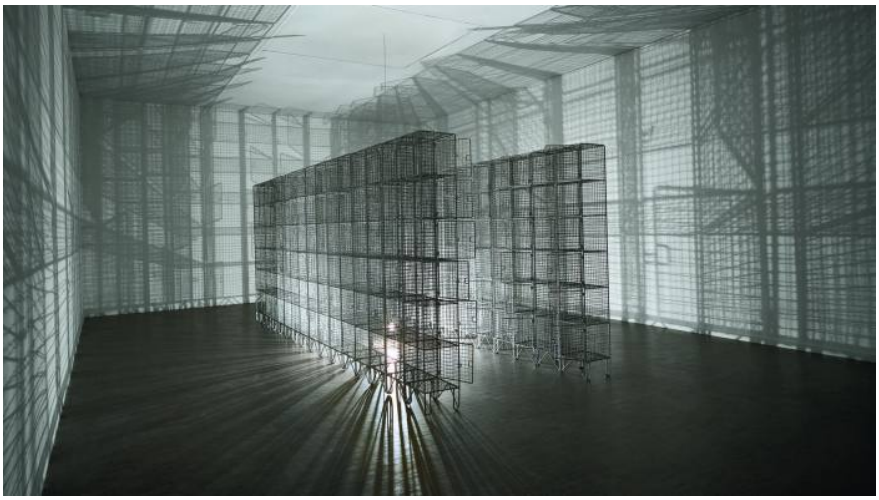
Visual Arts

Mona Hatoum, Tate Modern, London, review – 'Triumphant'



Mona Hatoum's 'Light Sentence' (1992). Photo: Philippe Migeat © Philippe Migeat

MAY 9, 2016 by: **Rachel Spence**

Before there was Warsan Shire, there was Mona Hatoum. Shire's poem "Home", which opened with the lines "No one leaves home unless/home is the mouth of a shark," has made her the 21st-century cantor for exodus. Yet the Somali-British poet is heir to a lineage of artists who have wrenched lyricism out of relocation.

As Tate Modern's triumphant new show demonstrates, no one has expressed the terrible beauty of unbelonging better than Mona Hatoum. Born in Beirut in 1952, the artist experienced a double exile. Her Palestinian family were obliged to leave Israel in 1948 and "existed with a sense of dislocation", Hatoum has said. Then, in 1975, Hatoum found herself stranded in London when civil war broke out in Lebanon. She completed art school in the British capital and now divides her time between London and Berlin, though a nomadic gene sees her accept residencies throughout the world.

Despite her personal trauma, Hatoum is far from a confessional artist. Tate's exhibition opens with "Socle du Monde" ("Base of the world"), a cube covered in black iron filings which cling to hidden magnets, which is named after a 1961 sculpture by Piero Manzoni.

The intellectual jester of conceptualism, Manzoni placed a plinth upside down to suggest that our entire planet was displayed on its surface. In a smooth metal which anticipated minimalism, Manzoni's work echoed the Duchampian credo that all the world's an artwork waiting for a museum to put it on display. Hatoum keeps the hermetic geometry, thereby declaring herself an artist who has no intention of letting her feelings overwhelm her form, yet her tactile pelt whispers of uncanny forces caged within, as if Carl Andre had been reimagined by Steven King's Carrie.

By the time she made "Socle du Monde" in 1992-93, Hatoum had adopted minimalist form as her main grammar. Yet the first rooms remind us that her early language was performance. A black and white photograph of Hatoum's bare feet tied to a pair of Doc Martens (footwear of choice for fashionable skinheads) as she trudges through Brixton is the legacy of a film — on screen in a later room — entitled "Roadworks" (1985) that sprang out of her anger at the era's race riots.

A layer-cake of imagery assembled from contact sheets and grainy footage, "Don't smile, you're on camera" (1980), creates the illusion that male bodies are being surreptitiously stripped by a prying lens. The unsettling sleight of eye speaks of an artist revenging herself — for this violating gaze is hers — on an art establishment which has denuded women for centuries.

Taking her cue from a generation of feminist artists before her, Hatoum saw performance as a "revolutionary medium". But by the 1990s she had outgrown its innate melodrama. Made in 1992, "Light Sentence" is one of her earliest installations. Consisting of two rows of wire-mesh lockers in between which hangs a single, swaying lightbulb, it envelops the spectator in an infinite grid of silky, fluctuating, wolf-grey shadows. At once prison cell, interrogation chamber and battery cage, yet also astoundingly, autonomously beautiful, it has an especially powerful resonance in a gallery where Agnes Martin, subject of a Tate retrospective last year, was a recent resident.

But the American painter declared that her lines were "innocent as trees" — private, transcendent expressions of her outer world. Hatoum puts her matrices to more pointed use. She know that without the grid there can be no cage, no prison cell, no bed, no electric power and no map, all of which are recurring tropes in her oeuvre. (Tate's show, sensibly, does not adhere to chronology and thus maintains the cyclical elegance of Hatoum's material repetitions and recalibrations.) As such, Hatoum is in the vanguard of a skein of political artists, including Cornelia Parker, Nadia Kaabi-Linke and Hajra Waheed, who use the foundation stone of geometric abstraction to temper overt emotion.

However, Hatoum also sieves her sensibility through a surrealist filter. She often uses organic substances — hair, blood, urine — and has a predilection for household objects which

makes her the daughter of Meret Oppenheim and Louise Bourgeois, feminist artists who also turned the tools of their oppression into weapons.

Mona Hatoum's 'Grater Divide' (2002). Photo: Iain Dickens, courtesy White Cube © Iain Dickens

At Tate, a gigantic cheese grater is blown up to resemble a hazardous daybed. A French garden chair ("Jardin Public", 1993) sprouts a triangle of pubic hair from the holes in its seat. The unsettling menace is intensified by the whine of "Homebound" (2000), an installation of objects — colanders, child's cot, hamster cage, assorted lightbulbs and furniture — electrically wired together so that they buzz, dim and flare with ominous indifference to our presence.

Time and again these Plath-like howls of fury are quietened by Hatoum's rationalist architecture. "Homebound", for example, is framed by a colony of exquisitely pared-down works including "Present Tense" (1996), a rectangle of golden soap bars which bears the faint tracing of a map of Palestinian territories as drawn up in the Oslo peace accords. On the wall, swatches of burnt toilet paper ("Untitled", 1989) have been burnt with tiny perforations that form stuttering, singed rows suggestive of an indecipherable morse code.

Mona Hatoum's 'Hot Spot' (2009). Photo: Agostino Osio, courtesy Fondazione Querini Stampalia Onlus, Venice © Agostino Osio

These diminutive interventions balance out the brutal violence that simmers in Hatoum's monumental installations. The second half of this show introduces us to "Quarters" (1996), four metal beds with bare mattress frames stacked five high and arranged in the panopticon shape that, thanks to its capacity for surveillance, made for ideal Victorian prisons. Nearby is "Hot Spot" (2013), a stainless steel globe with the continents outlined in red neon as if the entire world was in flames. Just as it's all getting too apocalyptic, we have "Projection" (2006), another map traced in

flocks of cotton on a white ground which imagines our planet as a pillowy, utopian phantom, the alter ego of those bleak, ascetic bunks.

As a songstress of home, clearly Hatoum is no Martha Stewart. Yet, despite critical attempts to pigeonhole her, she also isn't the visual equivalent of Edward Said. Although Said, the pre-eminent witness to the Palestinian displacement, wrote a beautiful essay about her work in 2000, reproduced in Tate's catalogue, Hatoum's concerns venture further. The plight of her parents' birthplace is always on her radar. But she's also telling us that domesticity is death to female empowerment. And that few of us, regardless of gender, ever truly find a refuge.

The show closes with "Undercurrent (red)" (2008), a scarlet mat whose tight weave loosens into tentacles plugged into lightbulbs, their intermittent glow reminding us just how much blood there is on everybody's carpet these days. It's a strong piece, reminiscent yet not derivative of the Aids-related light works of Cuban-American artist Félix González-Torres.

A more subtle *coup de foudre* would have been delivered by "Measures of Distance", which sits halfway through the exhibition. Made in 1988, this video is a palimpsest of sound and image, showing Hatoum's mother as she takes a shower, her body barely discernible behind a curtain of Arabic writing. Fluid as a river, spiky as barbed wire, as inspired a grid as Hatoum ever devised, the calligraphy makes a perfect formal container for the sadness in Hatoum's voice as she reads aloud the letters her mother wrote to her during their separation.

As lines such as "Dear Mona, I have not been able to send you any letters because the local post office was destroyed by a car bomb . . . " echo through the rooms before and beyond, we intuit that this exhibition will disrupt our own homecoming.

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