

Mona Hatoum: 'It's all luck. I feel things happen accidentally'

On the eve of a major Tate Modern show, the Beirut-born installation artist talks about identity, homeland and being a London student in the cheerless 70s



'I'm inspired by different cultures, spaces, architecture': Mona Hatoum in her London studio. Photograph: Katherine Anne Rose for the Observer

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In 1982, the artist Mona Hatoum staged a performance piece at the Aspex Gallery in Portsmouth. Its title was *Under Siege*, and it lasted for seven hours. Hatoum was naked, covered in clay, and trapped inside a huge transparent container, a strange primeval mermaid without any water in which to swim. Again and again, she would try to stand up; again and again, she would fail. As the day wore on, the tank's walls grew dirty, smeared with marks left by her muddy hands and body, her cheeks, her lips. Meanwhile, the gallery filled with the sound of revolutionary songs in Arabic, French and English, and with snatched news reports from the Middle East. How visitors endured this agonising spectacle, I don't know. In contemporaneous photographs, the crowd stands at what you might call a respectful distance from the tank. But if Hatoum's bruised flesh is causing them any anxiety, it doesn't show: a few have their hands in their pockets.

In the 80s, Hatoum's work was all like this: ephemeral but tough; inexpensive to stage, but not without cost to the artist's body and soul. The following year, she put on a piece called *The Negotiating Table*, during which she lay motionless for several hours, wrapped in plastic and gauze, her mummified frame heaped with raw kidneys. In *Roadworks* (1985), she walked through Brixton in bare feet for almost an hour, dragging behind her as she did the pair of Dr Martens boots that were tied to her ankles; *Position: Suspended* (1986) saw her covered in mud again, and confined in a coop-like construction of wood, corrugated iron and chicken wire. How did she feel after these tests of endurance and nerve? She must have been jittery, wired, winded by her own daring. In her pristine Shoreditch studio - no chicken wire here - Hatoum gives me one of her characteristically slow smiles. "It's funny," she says. "To get all the energy out, I would make these gestural drawings. I would just give them away. Can you believe it?"

Her performance art was highly political, a response to the plight of Palestine, where her parents were born, and to the war in Lebanon, the country where she grew up. It spoke of torture, separation, the disenfranchised, the besieged. But it was also a pragmatic thing. Broke and with no studio in which to work, it seemed the obvious - if not exactly natural - way to express her ideas, which sprang both from her own exile and the consciousness-raising to which she'd been introduced as an art student in 70s London. "I felt like I had nothing to lose," she says. "I was venting my anger, without caring what people thought. I was very restless. I couldn't sit with something for too long, so performance gave me the possibility of work that was immediate, unpremeditated. It was improvised. I didn't rehearse; I would just turn up with my props."

Did she feel self-conscious?

"Well, I never used my voice. It was always a visual thing. I didn't have the confidence to speak. Still, it was terrifying. I remember going to Vancouver to do a performance. I turned up without any idea of what I was going to do. Only the day before did it come to me. I used to think, why am I putting myself through this? There's enough tension and anxiety in my life already. But it was all I could do with the means that I had, which was me, and myself."



'Agonising': Hatoum's 1982 performance piece *Under Siege*.
 Photograph: J. McPherson/Galleria Continua, San Gimignano/Beijing/Le Moulin.

Me, and myself. The phrase gives you a vivid sense of Hatoum, a softly spoken but fiercely self-contained person who doesn't particularly care to talk about her work, preferring instead to let audiences make up their own minds as to what it all means. The performance and poverty, however, is long since at an end. Though her themes remain constant, she is better known today for her installations, stark but sought-after displays (Hatoum is represented by White Cube, the swank home of Tracey Emin, Gilbert & George et al) in which ordinary domestic items - colanders, graters, various items of furniture - are subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, adjusted in ways that imbue them with a certain lethal horror. *Incommunicado* (1993) is a child's cot with cheese wire where its mattress should be; *Untitled (Wheelchair)*, from 1998, is a

perfectly ordinary wheelchair, save for the fact that - take care now - its handles have been replaced by two gleaming steel knives. Some of these fabrications will soon be seen in a major show of her work at Tate Modern, an exhibition first staged at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, where 2,300 people saw it every day. All that mud and sweat and obscurity: it's but a distant memory now.

Hatoum's studio, to which she can walk from her home a little further east, is a vast white space in which, among other things, a full-time assistant works on her archive; it also has a kitchen, in which she makes me a terrifyingly strong coffee. We sit centre stage at a table laden with books beside a scale model of the Tate's galleries, her work in miniature inside it, and part of *Cellules* (2012-213), a steel cage from which an oozing blob of red blown glass appears to be trying to escape (cages and crates are a recurrent image in her work). Is she nervous about the Tate show? Yes, in the sense that there is still so much to be done; she is only sleeping four hours a night. But in another way, she looks forward to it. "It's good to have a survey every once in a while. It makes me reassess things. I look and I think: maybe this is a body of work I can now leave behind; maybe I can start again. I always feel the need to reinvent myself, and I'm having some interesting new ideas." So it's a full stop? "Well, it's a comma."

Does the art world, as it is now, alarm her? Is it too safe, too corporate? When she began her career, after all, the flashy mecca that is Tate Modern wasn't even thought of. "I suppose so, yes. You asked me why I like being in Berlin earlier [she has a flat in the city], and one reason is that you're away from the market. There's something more normal, sane and less competitive about the place. I enjoy doing residencies all over the world because it puts me in a space where things are handmade and intuitive, where I make quick decisions and work fast to produce a show in a short space of time. I gather objects and materials, whatever I can get hold of, leave myself open to whatever attracts my attention. Then, when the residency is over, the cabinet of curiosities [I have produced] is either torn up, destroyed, or, as it did in São Paulo, becomes a permanent piece of work. I'm not someone who's studio-based. I'm more inspired by different cultures, spaces, architecture. I like to extricate myself from this studio, where there are a lot of demands on me. London is very distracting and stressful."

It's hard to believe how much the city has changed since she arrived in 1975. "When we first moved here [to east London] we had a view of the NatWest Tower: I used to love that mauve light [at night, it is illuminated]. Then came the Gherkin. Then the Shard. Now, the whole sky is full of cranes. It's over-developed. There's nowhere to breathe." She has lived in London for 40 years. It is home... and yet it isn't, quite. Such a sense of displacement has been useful to her, a golden thread that connects all her work. But this isn't to say that, as a member of a diaspora, she doesn't wish things had been different. Even the most severe of her installations - the ones that make you think of violence, of torture and incarceration - seem to me to be shot through with longing. In Hatoum's hands, a bed of nails brings with it an unfathomable ache, a curtain of barbed wire, a confounding hunger for an elsewhere that may no longer exist at all.

Hatoum was born in Lebanon in 1952, her parents having left their home in Haifa, in what was

then northern Palestine, after 1948. She knew early on that she wanted to be an artist, but her father, who worked at the British embassy, wasn't having any of it. Should another catastrophe befall them, his daughter needed to have a means of making a living. So, after studying graphic design at university in Beirut, she took up a job at an advertising agency. "It was a compromise," she says. "Advertising was not at all what I wanted to spend my time doing. I hated office life." Her face, even now, is a picture of disdain.

But in 1975, the civil war broke out in Lebanon, and everything changed. At the time, she happened to be visiting London; stranded, she stayed (Beirut airport remained closed for the next nine months), studying first at the Byam Shaw School of Art and then at the Slade. It was both a wonderful and a terrible period. At last, she was doing what she had always longed to do, and in a city where she could walk down the street unnoticed, too: "I'd come from a place where everyone gossips about you, where people are always sticking their nose in your affairs." But she was often miserable and lonely, and London, oyster-grey and impossible to crack open, was a shock to the system. "This dark, sunless country. I'd heard about London fog, but I also knew the saying 'the sun never sets on the British empire' and for me, childishly, that meant there was a lot of sun in England. What a disappointment! I was on my own, and having to work evenings and weekends to make ends meet; I suffered from colds all the time. Sometimes, I felt that if I dropped dead, no one would come to look for me." And then there were her parents, for whom she was very afraid. "They were happy that I was able to do something with my life away from Beirut; there was nothing for me there. But they lived in a dangerous area, close to the Green Line. They spent a lot of time in the shelter."



Incommunicado (1993), in which a child's cot is fitted with cheese wire. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Arnolfini, Bristol

Weather aside, what were her first impressions of London? I'm expecting talk of terrible food and perhaps of strikes and uncollected rubbish. But, no. "My first impression was the control on the individual, the surveillance issues, cameras pointing at you all the time. That's why these things came into my work right from the beginning, and then of course I came across the writings [on surveillance, the idea of the ever-visible inmate] of Michel Foucault and of Jeremy Bentham, whose mummy was sitting in that box at my university [Bentham's skeleton, dressed in his own clothes and surmounted by a wax head, famously sits in a wooden cabinet at

University College London, of which the Slade is a part]. At the Slade, my first encounter with a big institution, I was shocked by the coldness, by all the rules. I was this chaotic person who wanted to find space. But they wouldn't give me any. I started seeing the class system for the first time, and race relations; I discovered feminism from the women around me and I got involved with consciousness-raising groups. After that, I saw myself in a different light. I was very vulnerable, alone, no support structure, nothing behind me. It was difficult. But my eyes were wide open."

After the Slade, she thought about moving to the US, where one of her sisters was living. But then she landed a job teaching at Central Saint Martins - "I'm glad I didn't go," she says - and began a life of teaching and performing. Did she feel ambitious?

"I don't really understand what ambition means. I take things one piece at a time. I'm excited about working on something, that's all. I didn't know what was going to happen next, and I still don't. I don't know if I think in terms of a career. I don't have a strategy. It's just the next show. I used to say to my father: 'I'm lucky: I got this, or that.' And he would say: 'No, no, you deserve it. You've been working hard.' But I was determined: 'No, it's all luck.' I feel things happen accidentally."

Her circumstances changed again in 1989, when she got a job as a senior fellow in fine art at the Cardiff Institute of Higher Education. "*That* was a full stop," she says of the decision to abandon performance. "In Cardiff, I had a studio for the first time, and a salary that meant I didn't have to worry about scraping a living. I was a little disillusioned with performance by then, and so I started to work with materials again." Her new work was a departure, but it also looked back to the days of her first degree, when conceptual ideas and the language of minimalism had been common currency, and it moved her pretty swiftly from the margins. Her first solo exhibition at the Pompidou took place in 1994; in 1995, she was nominated for the Turner prize; in 2000, she had her first show at Tate Britain.



Cellules (2012 - 2013). Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris/© Sébastien Normand

“No one has put the Palestinian experience in visual terms so austerely and yet so playfully, so compellingly and at the same moment so allusively,” wrote Edward Said of Hatoum in a now well-known 2000 essay (in the same piece, he noted the way that her work has the ability to “recall and disturb” at the same time). But she isn’t so sure.

“I’m never trying to make a direct political statement. There are issues in my head, but they’re in the background; they’re not foregrounded in the work, and they’re not specific to my own history. In the mature work, I’m thinking about form most of all. I am focusing on the materials, on the aesthetic. In fact, I sometimes spend time trying to remove the content, the better to arrive at abstraction. The tension is between the work’s reduced form and the intensity of the possible associations. For instance, the hanging cube in *Impenetrable* (2009) has an ethereal quality, it is almost levitating, but the material it is made of, barbed wire rods, takes you into war zones and disputed borders. Similarly, the clear glass marbles in *Map (clear)* (2015), appear seductive, but they make the floor dangerous to walk on.”

Until 1996, when she was invited to Jerusalem by the Anadiel Gallery, she had been neither to Israel nor the occupied territories. “That was my first trip to the whole area. I was there for a month. I travelled around and saw some members of my family I’d never met before. It was a

very emotional time. In Nazareth - my father was a Joseph of Nazareth - there was a first cousin. He took me to where my parents used to live.”

Did the country feel familiar, for all that it was unknown?

“My parents’ home felt familiar. I remembered my father’s descriptions of the house. I recognised his little office, with its own private entrance: he used to keep a bed in there so he could lie down in the afternoon. It was nice to be in a place where everyone spoke with a Palestinian accent, which was my parents’ accent - though in Beirut, people used to hide it so they would fit in. But it was very overwhelming, very sad. You feel angry all the time - though I had to keep myself together so I could make the work, and it was inevitable, then, that the work would be about the situation.”

The piece she constructed, *Present Tense* (1996), consists of dozens of squares of the olive oil soap that has been made in Nablus, in the West Bank, since the 14th century, into which are pressed hundreds of small red glass beads, bought in Jerusalem’s souk. The beads form the outline of a map indicating the territories that were meant to be returned to Palestinian control under the 1993 Oslo accords. *Present Tense* was acquired by the Tate in 2013, and on its website is a short film in which Hatoum talks of the difficulties of conserving such a piece (its surface will grow mottled with time). In her hand is a bar of the soap. She strokes it so tenderly it might almost be alive.

I wonder what Hatoum feels about her identity now. She has lived in Britain all these years; her husband, a musician, is Canadian; her parents are gone; her wider family is scattered. “It’s complicated. My parents were Christian Palestinian, but since I was born and grew up in Lebanon, I always identified with that more, though that situation was itself awkward because, unlike the rest of the family, we lived in the Christian east of Beirut and went to French schools.”

The best she can do is to describe herself as a “mixture”. And perhaps this is the real root of her restlessness, her abiding need to travel. Certainly, she shows no signs of stopping any time soon. Next year, there will be three big museum shows abroad, including one in Hiroshima (she is the recipient of the 10th Hiroshima art prize). “I’m starting to work on that now,” she says. “The first installation will be furniture moulded from chicken wire that has been burnt, a ghost chair. The second installation will have to do with light: I want to use the heat in a creative way, or that’s the idea in my head.” A distracted half-smile, and then her gaze shifts to a point just beyond my left shoulder. For a moment, she is elsewhere, again.

Mona Hatoum’s Tate Modern exhibition runs from 4 May to 21 August

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