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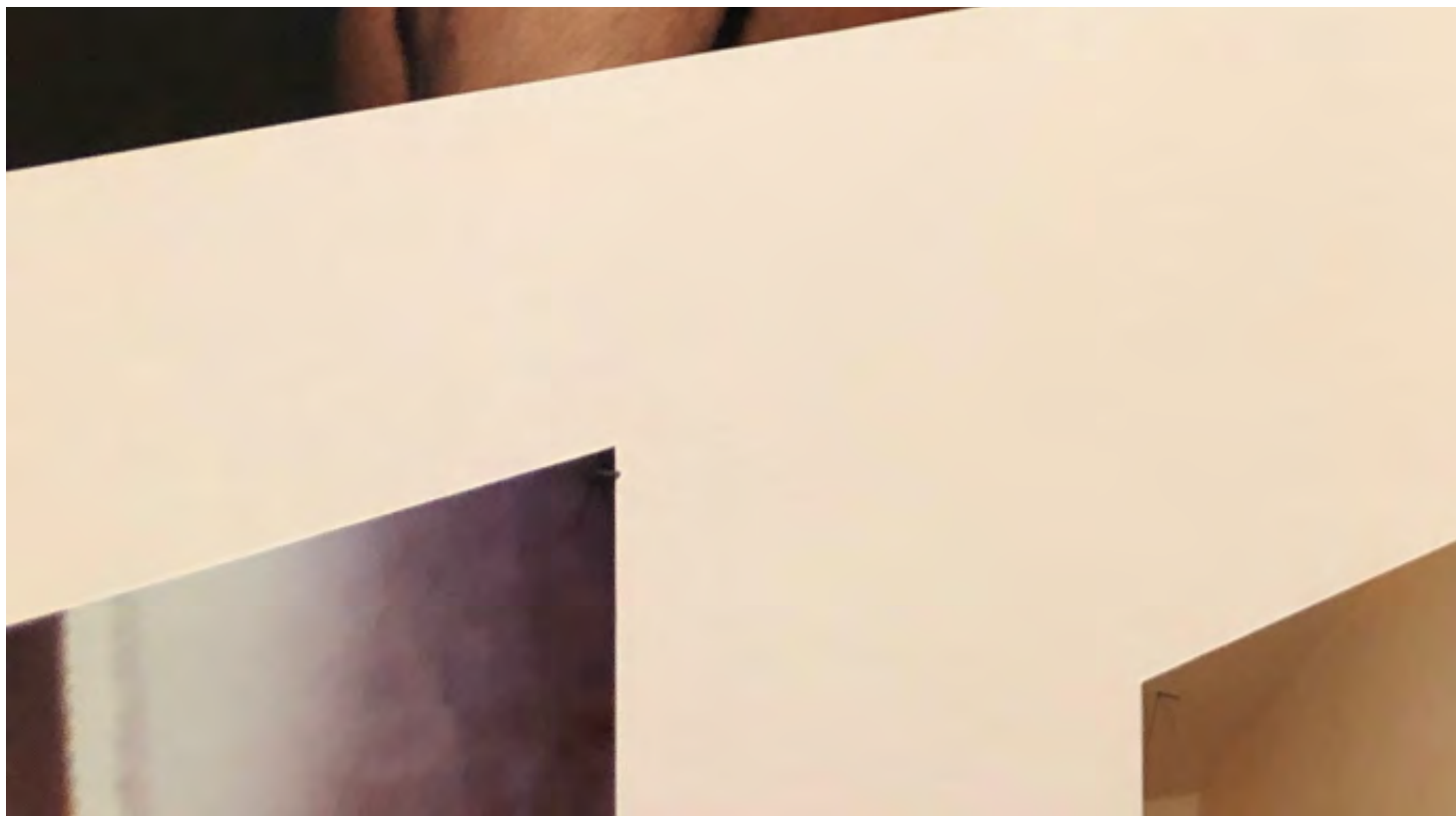
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The Artist Kader Attia Mocks Colonial History, then Heals Its Effects

Heba Elkayal / 03 May 2019





Kader Attia: The Museum of Emotion (Photo: Hayward Gallery).

The bright-yellow poster for artist Kader Attia's retrospective exhibition *The Museum of Emotion* at Hayward Gallery in London's Southbank Centre cheekily hints of an absurdity: Its image features a stuffed cheetah looking curiously out at the viewer, posed next to a primitively carved wooden feline mask.

The poster makes a subtle reference to the colonialists' habit of collecting wildlife specimens and accoutrements of cultures including costume, religious paraphernalia and housewares that wind up in museums. The poster, and the sculpture it refers to, mocks the colonial powers that once exhibited foreign cultures as objects of curiosity rather than items of religious and cultural importance.

Attia, who was born in France and now claims both Algiers and Berlin as home, started an art space in Paris in 2016 that focused on "decolonialisation not only of peoples but also of knowledge, attitudes and practices." His work, which also focuses on repairing the cultural and psychological damage of colonial history, has earned him France's most prestigious art award, the Prix Marcel Duchamp, in 2016.

Thousands of objects in museums today, argues Attia, have been brutally decontextualized and rendered devoid of meaning. The cheetah's majesty makes the placement of the wooden mask with it silly. The piece reflects the visually and intellectually superficial acts of putting stuffed animals and masks, without context, in ethnography museums. Attia asks: What was the point or knowledge gained?

A Personal Experience of Colonial History



Born in 1970 to Algerian parents, Attia spent summer holidays in Algeria's capital and the Aurès Mountains. It was the constant travel and movement, he states in the exhibition brochure, that formed his sensitivities to the "physical, geographical and intellectual" gaps between the places he regularly visited and lived in.

The Museum of Emotion manifests many of these themes by reevaluating shoddy representation of minorities and outsiders in ethnography museums and the western art history canon where objects were scientifically classified and placed in vitrines. Like the African tribal masks collected by French colonialists and displayed in Paris museums not as art but mere objects, Attia's retrospective is an admonishment to shame history. With wit and genius, he layers statement upon statement in his work. Such African masks once intended to showcase the "primitive" nature of indigenous people is what prompted Picasso to reconsider portraiture and propose a cubist style of painting, ultimately revolutionizing art.



Kader Attia: The Museum of Emotion. (Image: Hayward Gallery, London).

At the Hayward Gallery, seven rooms highlight different themes. One contains a recent video titled *La Tour Robespierre* (The Robespierre Tower.) The video documents the banality of housing projects built on the outskirts of Paris to house immigrant communities. Attia was raised in one, and the video speaks of the marginalization of immigrant communities and the inherent sense of surveillance and control these communities create amongst their inhabitants. As the camera moves from the bottom of the tower block to the top of its roof, balconies brim with objects and laundry lines whisper of the inhabitants' emotional desolation. There is no sense of animated life or color here, just stillness.

Attia's photography series *The Landing Strip*, about transgender Algerian prostitutes, references their method of arrival in France, and the nickname for the street where they work at night. Vignettes of daily life are on display: a figure in a green belly-dancing costume strides happily with bills tucked into her waistband; drag queens in bouffant hairdos blow out candles on a birthday cake; a figure peers into an empty refrigerator contemplating what to cook. These subjects are shown as human beings experiencing the full spectrum of life. In doing so, explains the artist in the show's catalogue, he was reclaiming the personhood of figures marginalized by society by capturing the subjects' emotions, hoping to start a healing process through them.

Classification as Control

Attia's work underscores the importance of returning stolen artifacts to their countries of origin, a promise French president Emmanuel Macron has made but which is proving to be difficult to put into practice because of the legal issues it raises. The obsession to classify and categorize other cultures is reflective of a desire to control, says Attia. The cheetah on the exhibition's poster can be found in a room dedicated to the theme of the West's museological impulse.



Kader Attia: *The Museum of Emotion*. (Image: Hayward Gallery, London).

Attia riffs on the pedantic order in which ethnographic museums would display varieties of flora, insects and animals. They stand in a glass case that also holds a small image of a scientist who smiles while carrying a struggling cheetah cub—a juxtaposition that answers Attia's earlier question about what was gained: There was no point, after all. The absurdity of the resulting environmental and

cultural wreckage is made ever clearer.

The installation *Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* (2012) warrants serious study. Taking up an entire gallery, the work resembles museum storage where hundreds of objects ranging from old books, newspapers, devotional objects, vintage photographs and African masks are arranged next to sculptures of World War I soldiers with disfigured faces. The sculptures were commissioned by the artist and executed by craftsmen in Carrara, Italy. Alongside them, wooden busts created by craftsmen in Senegal, West Africa depict an African ethnic group in Africa known for body modifications such as facial scarring.

Coupling western notions of repair (the soldiers are heavily patched up and sutured) with intentional scarring by the Africans, the installation presents different attitudes about the repair of the human form. Along with the notion of the west's obsession with the physical repair of broken objects, Attia proposes the idea that psychological trauma can be healed through the depiction of human experiences.

He continues to explore trauma in *Shifting Borders* (2018), which discusses the collective social trauma of civil conflict in Southeast Asia, focusing on the student protests in South Korea in 1989. A three-video series consists of academics discussing the psychological and sociological effects on protesters and the psychologists who treat them. Alongside the screens are sculptures of prosthetic limbs. The phantom limbs are eerie reminders of the intangible scars left behind by the conflict. The shadow of an amputated limb is akin to the African mask taken far away from its original home: Trauma can be both seen and invisible. Kader Attia's art can be seen as a first step toward healing them.

Kader Attia: The Museum of Emotion runs at Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre until May 6th 2019 in London, England.

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