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A Reflection of Conflict

Mona Hatoum's work is a study in contrast, while all her pieces exhibited at Mathaf have an underlying theme of turbulence.

BY CONNOR SEARS



CHANNELING CHAOS

Top to bottom, Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum keeps a theme of conflict running throughout her work; "Bunker" (2011) is inspired by the idea of a war-torn cityscape; "Hot Spot" (2013) buzzes with the energy of neon tubes that outline the world's continents; "Turbulence" (2012) uses light and glass to create a work that simultaneously evokes stillness and motion.



FOR DECADES, MUCH OF THE MIDDLE EAST has often been characterized by instability. The string of revolutions and revolts across the MENA region over the past several years is a recent reminder of this theme of turmoil that has existed for ages across this part of the world. Political struggle has been responsible for the despair, displacement and death of countless families throughout the area for decades.

Artist Mona Hatoum is no stranger to instability. She was born in Beirut, Lebanon, the daughter of two Palestinian exiles. As a young adult Hatoum herself was exiled when civil war broke out in Lebanon while she was on a trip to London. She started her art career as a performance artist, using her craft to make statements about her experiences as an Arab woman in London or the political disorder of her home. She then turned her focus to sculptures and installations, still often revisiting this motif of conflict and uncertainty throughout her work. Now, this theme is being deliberately channeled with "Turbulence," a new exhibition of Hatoum's work at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art.

The exhibition features work spanning decades of Hatoum's career, and it includes sculptures, installations and video documentation of her early performance work. The display isn't organized by art form, by material or even chronologically; rather, these elements are frequently juxtaposed within the same room. In one room large, imposing sculptures from Hatoum's recent portfolio are placed beside a small television set showing clips of her early performance art. In another, fragile glass pieces are shown next to a sturdy metal sculpture, which sits across the room from a constantly-shifting piece utilizing sand. These contrasts throughout the exhibition emphasize the running theme of conflict as the pieces create a tense — yet balanced — atmosphere throughout the rooms of Mathaf.

"In very basic terms, we laid out the exhibit by juxtaposing works that always add to the sense of something shifting, something moving, something interrupted from large to small, soft to hard, comforting to menacing," says Sam Bardooui, who, together with Till Fellrath, worked with Hatoum for about two years to curate this exhibition. "So there are always these contradictions that come together to create this sense of turbulence."

In addition to describing this environment of opposition, the name of the exhibition comes from a 2012 work by Hatoum that lies at the center of the display. "Turbulence" consists of thousands of glass marbles arranged in a perfect square on the ground.

"I often like to create work that destabilizes the ground you are walking on and create a feeling of uncertainty in the space," Hatoum says. "This work looks like a liquid ground or something organic like a cluster of cells

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OVER MY DEAD BODY



A PRODUCTIVE CAREER

Clockwise from top left: "La Grande Broyeuse" (1978) takes the form of a kitchen tool used to slice vegetables that has been enlarged to become a threatening presence; "Over My Dead Body" (1985) reasserts Hatoum's confidence as a woman as she stares down the diminutive male figurine; "Suspended" (2010) consists of 35 hanging swings, each depicting a map of a different major world city; "Paravent" (2008) takes another kitchen utensil and enlarges it so that it appears more akin to a piece of furniture.



— a primordial soup — and this turbulence is contained within a formal square. The turbulence which could reflect on the stormy times we live in is dealt with in a material and formal way through the aesthetics of the work."

As the focal piece of the exhibition, "Turbulence" embodies the theme of instability in more ways than one. The spherical marbles look as if they will spill out all over the floor at any second, yet they remain stable in their perfect 4x4-meter square. The way the light reflects off the glass, however, challenges the stability of the piece as a whole. As you move around the exhibit, the light dances around as it begins to bounce off different marbles in different patterns. "Turbulence" grabs your attention for longer than you expect as you start slowly moving around the room, interested to see what the light will do next.

"For a lot of the works, the installation is actually key to them," Fellrath says. "It's really impossible to understand these works when you see them on a two-dimensional sheet of paper or on the Internet. It's absolutely impossible to understand the impact."

According to Fellrath, the exhibition tries to evoke three different levels of turbulence inside the viewer. The first is the political turbulence of the region. The fact that Hatoum is a Palestinian artist, coupled with the often politically-charged inspirations behind much of her work, is meant to remind viewers of the ongoing struggles throughout this part of the world. The second level of turbulence is what he calls the "formalistic" layer, the juxtaposition of the pieces they as curators produced when they arranged the exhibition within the space at Mathaf. The third level of turbulence, he says, is the internal conflict within each viewer. Whether the viewer is angry or sad or confused when he or she enters the museum, these emotions can often be seen reflected in the artwork as Hatoum projects her own personal conflicts through her art.

Turbulence is Bardooui and Fellrath's third time curating an exhibition at Mathaf. Their long process of planning with Hatoum has paid off with the largest exhibition of the artist's work in the Arab world, something that holds significant meaning for Hatoum.

"I made my career as an artist in the West, so it is always very special for me to show my work to people who 'speak the same language,' so to speak," Hatoum says. "The present exhibition at Mathaf in Doha is, of course, the largest I have ever had in the Arab world. I am very happy with the way it all works in the space and with this particular selection of works and the way they create interesting connections." ■

Turbulence will run at Mathaf through May 18.