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An art of disrupted continents and hair

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By **Jim Quilty**
The Daily Star



"Turbulence" (detail), 2012, clear glass marbles, 4x400x400 cm. (Photo by Stefan Rohner, courtesy Kunstmuseum St. Gallen)



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DOHA: For many who have stumbled upon it, Mona Hatoum's "Impenetrable" (2009) is an abiding meta-phor of the Palestinian condition.

This 300x300x300 cm cube hangs suspended some 10 cm above the ground, its density appearing to shift as it's approached. A closer look reveals the work to be made of lengths of barbwire, hung from strands of nearly transparent fishing line.

A "cube" without exterior structure, the perilous thicket at once invites and forbids entry. What from a distance looks like a purely aesthetic expression of form resolves into a geometry of forced containment.

This reading is conditioned in part by knowledge of the artist's biography. Based in London since 1975, Hatoum was born in Beirut in 1952 to Palestinian parents. For worldly observers, her work gestures to the security measures imposed upon Palestinian refugee communities.

There are limits to such biographical insight.

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STORY SUMMARY

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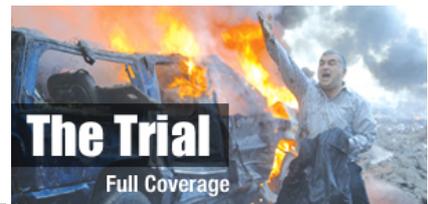
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an avalanche from the ceiling to form a structure you can actually walk through," she recalls. "I did the opposite.

"What I like about ["Impenetrable"] is the ethereal feeling about it. It's a cube, the minimalist geometrical form par excellence, if you like. ... Yet the material it's made of is very heavy, heavy with connotations too.

"I like to work with these kinds of oppositions. Something that looks pleasingly aesthetic and elevating at the same time has a reference to borders and barriers. When those two things come into the same work, it's very exciting."

"Impenetrable" is one of 70-odd works now on show in "Mona Hatoum: Turbulence," a retrospective spanning some 30 years of creativity, hosted by Doha's Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art. Curated by Art Reoriented's Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, the show has a characteristically nonchronological structure, clustering Hatoum's work thematically to highlight formal continuities and shifts in her practice.

Hatoum acknowledges that political awareness underpins a lot of her work, but she dislikes being pigeonholed as a Palestinian political artist.

"It's a bit narrow minded," she says, "because an artwork really functions on many different levels. I never go out of my way to illustrate anything about Palestine. It's never my starting point.

"Very often my starting point is what I can do in [a given] space. People don't believe this, but the political significance is often something I think about after the work is completed."

The importance of formal considerations in Hatoum's practice is clear as she recounts the gestation process of "Impenetrable," which she created especially for her 2009 solo show at Venice's Querini Stampalia.

"There was a piece called 'Cube 9x9x9,' made from stacks of barbwire cubes, [that] I really wanted to show in that space but, being an old palazzo ... there was no way we could actually fit that cube into the space.

"That," she gestures, "is when I devised 'Impenetrable.'"

This show embraces the shifting contours of Hatoum's practice, and as the title "Turbulence" suggests, one of the elements that has characterized her work is movement.

Movement, albeit latent, is evident in the eponymous work "Turbulence" (2012), which deploys a cunning tripwire to discipline thousands of transparent glass marbles into a 4x4-meter square. To depart slightly from Art Reoriented's reading, the work resembles a cluster of organic cells, restive within the formal restraints of the geometry that tentatively contains them.

Movement, along with confinement, was also a theme of the provocative performance works Hatoum took to the streets in the 1980s. The artist herself sees continuities linking her performance and visual art.

"I was a student, and I'd started to work with political content," Hatoum recalls, "and performance itself seemed like a revolutionary, experimental form.

"It didn't have all this tradition weighing it down, so it suited the kind of improvised work I wanted to do. It was political, but I was still working within the visual, using the body as a symbol of society."

In "Roadworks" (1985), for example, the barefoot Hatoum trudged through the streets of Brixton, dragging behind her a pair of Dr. Martens laced to her ankles. Evoking the preferred footwear of London's coppers – and racist skinheads – the piece was staged not long after the notorious race riots that tore through the London district.

"Roadworks' wasn't delivering a political message in a very direct way," she says. "There was something surreal about it, something humorous, needed to deflate some of its heavy connotations.

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"[Performance] also suited ... the fact that I was very poor, that I couldn't afford a studio. But then performance itself shifted to become a much more established and entertaining kind of thing, more staged ...

"Then I was named a senior fellow in fine arts at [Cardiff University](#) for three years, a job that came with a studio. When I found myself with the means and the space, I went back to playing with materials.

"I suppose ... I don't know, I was maybe feeling insecure about not having anything to show for the work I was doing. Maybe I had matured a little and wanted to experiment with work in the studio first and then show it in public.

"When I shifted back to making works relying on [media], I became more interested in exploring the material quality of the forms and the [dimensions] of the space.

"That's when I started making large installations."

Traces of Hatoum's performance practice are evident in her installations and kinetic sculptures, though their formal expression varies.

"Interior Landscape" (2008), for instance, resembles an abandoned bedroom. The only item on a metal bedframe is a pillow, upon which a map of [Palestine](#) has been embroidered using human hair. On the bedside table is a takeaway food tray, the cardboard's grease smears outlined in pen, so they resemble a map's political boundaries. Two more maps hang from a coat rack – a hanger reshaped to represent Palestine's historic borders and, hanging alongside, a pre-occupation map – its historic village names obliterated and separated by the scissor work that transformed the map into a mesh shopping bag.

If "Interior Landscape" resembles a room littered with the detritus of past performance, "Light Sentence" (1992) moves through an ever-present loop of the contemporary.

A U-shaped sculpture, formed from stacks of wire-mesh storage lockers, it measures 198x185x490 cm. An invisible motor incessantly lowers and retracts an electrical wire, at the end of which is a bare light bulb, the room's sole source of illumination. As the light bulb rises and falls, the skeletal shadows cast by the mesh cubes elongate and contract – creating a vertigo-inducing simulacrum of the passage of time.

"'Light Sentence' was about activating the whole space," Hatoum recalls. "The work itself is performing something, but I was also concerned with the body of the audience member and how it becomes enmeshed with the installation when entering the room.

"When I devise my work, I still think about the spectators' bodies, as they walk in and encounter the work, how they see it from a distance and how it changes as they approach."

"Turbulence" embraces the wide range of media Hatoum has taken up in her move from performance to visual art, drawing upon amusingly lighthearted work as much as the profound pieces for which she's best known.

It samples her photography, delicate handcrafted works (paper, woven objects), sculptural forms and installations (stationary or not, at times mechanized, miniaturized, life-sized and gigantic, found and fabricated). The forms' materials range from robust steel and barbed wire to glass, the epitome of fragility.

Revisiting these materials festooned Hatoum's oeuvre with motifs – from handmade paper to kitchen tools, to electricity – coursing with audible menace through some of the works – to human hair.

Then there are the maps.

"Very often maps give you the impression of a stable environment. I wanted to work with is this idea of unstable geography, the fact that things are, well, shaky."

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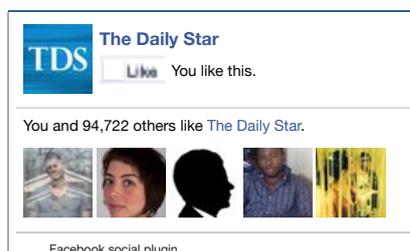


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Hatoum's mouth relaxes into a distant smile. "I was in Jerusalem, working on a residency for Gallery Anadiel, when I discovered this map of the Oslo Agreement. I reproduced it on 2,200 squares of olive oil soap, with little glass beads pressed into the surface. It was called 'Present Tense' [1996].

"That was the first map I made, basically because when I saw the [post-Oslo] map I thought it was totally ridiculous that any mind would think that this so-called country, with a border that's so penetrated and broken, has any integrity.

"The next work I made was completely the opposite – a world map made of glass marbles on the floor.

"As you walk in," she smiles, "you disrupt the continents."

"Mona Hatoum: Turbulence" is on view at the [Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art](#) until May 18. For more information, please see www.mathaf.org.qa.

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on February 13, 2014, on page 16.

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