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Why Artist Kader Attia Is Having an Art World Moment

In "Reason's Oxymorons," the artist rearranges the office furniture of the Western mind.

Christian Viveros-Fauné (<https://news.artnet.com/about/christian-viveros-faun%C3%A9-374>), January 27, 2017



Kader Attia, *Reason's Oxymorons* (2015). Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

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According to the dictionary an oxymoron is a figure of speech in which seemingly contradictory terms are syntactically conjoined, like the words "alternative" and "facts," often to ridiculous effect. The French-Algerian artist Kader Attia, has explored similarly strange juxtapositions in his latest multimedia exhibition at [Lehmann Maupin](http://www.artnet.com/galleries/lehmann-maupin/) (<http://www.artnet.com/galleries/lehmann-maupin/>), a gallery on the Lower East Side. In a video installation titled *Reason's Oxymorons*, Attia presents



eighteen interviews with a number of remarkably erudite men and women. Their insights, incongruously, are found inside a maze of soul-sucking cubicles.



Kader Attia, *Untitled* (2017). Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

It's fair to say that Kader Attia is having a moment. The Paris-born artist, who is known for his work on the legacy of colonialism, was awarded the prestigious Prix Marcel Duchamp (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/marcel-duchamp/>) last October. His second exhibition at Lehmann Maupin coincides with his work being on view at Paris' Centre Georges Pompidou, as well as with a solo show this month at the Block Museum of Art in Evanston, Illinois. Additionally, the artist recently unveiled his own "independent" art space in a well-known immigrant neighborhood in Paris, while simultaneously organizing a special curatorial project for the 13th Sharjah Biennial in Dakar, Senegal. Also, he is due to open a solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in April. One more event and the man will be forced to clone himself.



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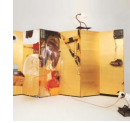
Attia considers himself primarily a sculptor, but he has long used unconventional materials to explore how non-Western people construct their identities in the face of the West’s cultural hegemony. Last May at New York’s Guggenheim, Attia built a scale model of the historical Algerian city of Ghardaïa using nearly eight hundred pounds of couscous. Shown alongside portraits of the architects [Le Corbusier](http://www.artnet.com/artists/le-corbusier/) (<http://www.artnet.com/artists/le-corbusier/>) and Fernand Pouillon—as well as a UNESCO document designating Ghardaïa a World Heritage Site—his boiled pasta sculpture exposed the raw deal the West routinely offers so-called “subaltern cultures.” Despite the fact that Ghardaïa inspired some famous French apartment blocks built by the celebrated modernists, neither the city nor its architecture received so much as an ounce of credit. (In an ironic twist, those same apartment blocks now house mostly North African immigrants.)



Kader Attia, *Ritual #1*, 2017 mirror with fabric. Photo: Max Yawney. Courtesy the Artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

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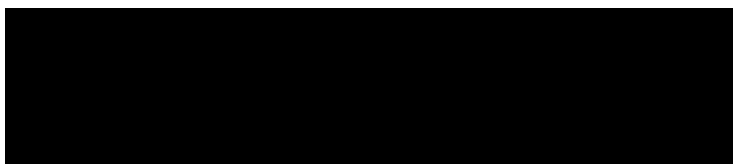
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Besides architecture, Attia frequently employs various fields of learning, including medicine, philosophy, psychoanalysis, history, and political science, to reveal the invisible yet stubborn strands that lash together Western and non-Western cultures. His aim, as relayed to curators and journalists throughout his career, is to help repair social injuries that are both centuries old and planetary.

Like Ta-Nehisi Coates, the author of *Between the World and Me*, Attia makes an argument both for “repair” and reparations. Besides financial restitution, the artist also aims to address wounds that are psychic, historical, linguistic and personal. In his latest show, Attia locates a number of these conflicts within the lockbox of language. As a result, he suggests that many of the contradictions (or oxymorons) bedeviling Western and non-Western societies manifest themselves at both the root and branches of knowledge.

Reason’s Oxymorons is introduced by a half dozen conventional-looking sculptures made from found materials. Arrayed on two floors, they use cast-off elements like mirrors, plywood, old shoes, cotton fabric, rebar, and traditional masks to express the powerful transference that occurs when, say, African or Latin American makers integrate Western components into their objects. For Attia, mixed or patched objects like these symbolize resistance and ingenuity. “Repair and hybridization are the terrain where many cultures begin to take back their liberty,” the artist told *The New York Times* in 2013. Besides sounding perfectly cutting-edge, Attia also echoes the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade—the father of postcolonial aesthetics and author of the 1923 “Cannibal Manifesto.”



Kader Attia, *Reason’s Oxymorons*, January 13 – March 4, 2017 201 Chrystie Street.
Photo: Max Yawney. Courtesy the Artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

The exhibition’s *pièce de résistance* is, of course, the show’s title work, which Attia presents for the first time in the U.S. (the installation was originally exhibited at the 2015 Biennale de Lyon). An expansive video library shoehorned into the cramped hell of multiple office cubicles, it contains eighteen videos that feature interviews with philosophers,