



📷 MCA curator Rachel Kent with Ghost, a sculptural work by French Algerian artist Kader Attia. Picture: Craig Wilson

Arts

Rolls of foil create Kader Attia's Ghost artwork at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia

Elizabeth Fortescue, Arts editor, The Daily Telegraph
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HAVING your body completely encased in three rolls of scrunchy aluminium foil

is not every art curator's idea of a good time.

It was "a bit claustrophobic and toasty", Rachel Kent admits.

But the chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia was honoured to endure a little discomfort in order to help Kader Attia bring one of his most famous artworks to life in Sydney.

Attia is an acclaimed French Algerian contemporary artist who lives in Berlin, and Kent has visited his studio in the process of curating a 10-year survey exhibition of his work for the MCA.

Prominent among the many striking artworks that will go on view in the exhibition from April 12 will be the one for which Kent modelled.

Called Ghost, it is made up of 160 aluminium foil body casts of women who kneel in an attitude of prayer.

Kent was not the only model — plenty of sculpture students turned up to help — and she can no longer identify her cast among the uniform multitude of casts that now sit row on row in the MCA.

Perhaps this chimes with Attia's preoccupation with human beings' common destiny.

Another of the artist's concerns is presence coexisting with absence. This is also embodied in Ghost, Kent says.

"You approach (the work) from behind, so at first you see the sea of figures.

"They become recognisable as people. But once you come in to the space, you turn around and see the work in reverse, and you realise they're all empty shells. Voids."

Sadly Attia was not well enough to travel to Sydney to help install his show at the MCA. But thanks to a video link, he still managed to oversee the production of the Ghost figures.

It is hoped the artist will see his first major Sydney exhibition later in its run.

Visitors to the 2010 Biennale of Sydney might recall walking across Attia's installation on Cockatoo Island. Called Kasbah, it used sheets of wood and iron to recreate the rooftops of

dilapidated dwellings.

Attia was born in outer Paris to Algerian parents, and is well acquainted with struggle.

As a young man, he worked in war-torn Congo and also helping the homeless.

He grew up with the Koran, but now regards himself as not particularly religious, Kent says.

“He’s more interested in the idea of spirituality and devotion,” she says.

As an artist, Attia’s humanity is evident in his films, photographs, sculptures, collages and installations.

One of the works in the MCA exhibition is *Reflecting Memory*, a 48-minute film that deals with the “phantom limb”. This well documented phenomenon afflicts amputees who report perceived sensations of pain in lost limbs or body parts.

Kent says *Reflecting Memory* is probably the most moving contemporary artwork she has ever encountered. It shows interviews with amputees, psychiatrists, trauma specialists, plastic surgeons and people who make bionic limbs.

“It talks about trauma, the legacy of the Holocaust, it touches on histories of colonialism, of slavery,” Kent says.

“It’s not about dwelling within trauma but about addressing it and moving forward with one’s life. When I saw it in Paris I could hardly speak afterwards. I was so shocked.”

Reflecting Memory deals with Attia’s interest in injury and repair.

“He’ll often talk about the fact that in the west the idea of repairing something that’s damaged or broken is to erase the injury, which of course is impossible,” Kent says.

“It’s a denial of the history and life of the object.

“Whereas in many non western and traditional societies, repairing a broken or damaged object is just part of the life of the object. The repair is evident.”

Attia’s father was a builder, and perhaps this is why one of his artworks — *Asesinos! Asesinos!* (Murderers! Murderers!) — is a series of old doors with silent megaphones mounted on top.

“It’s to do with the silencing and disempowering of people when they’re trapped in a totalitarian regime, for example,” Kent says.

*** Kader Attia, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 140 George St, The Rocks; Wednesday-July 30, free, mca.com.au**