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CONTEMPORARY ART OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA](#)

Kader Attia

OVERVIEW

In 2000 I discovered that Ghardaïa, the Algerian city represented in my installation, is totally made of clay; an adobe city in the middle of palm trees. I was also fascinated to find that this city influenced Le Corbusier.⁷

Kader Attia (b. 1970, France) grew up in Algeria and the suburbs of Paris, and takes this experience of living as a part of two different cultures as a starting point for his work. Attia takes a poetic and symbolic approach to exploring the wide-ranging repercussions of Western domination and colonialism on non-Western cultures.

For *Untitled (Ghardaïa)* (2009) Attia modeled the Algerian town of Ghardaïa in couscous, a regional food staple originated by the Berber people of North Africa that is now popular worldwide. Almost a thousand years old, Ghardaïa is located in northern-central Algeria, in the Sahara Desert. Accompanying the artist's fragile construction are photographs of famous architects Le Corbusier (1887–1965) and Fernand Pouillon (1912–1986), and a copy of a 1982 UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) declaration that identifies the town as a World Heritage Site.

Le Corbusier visited Ghardaïa in 1931, just three years after becoming a French citizen, and made sketches of its buildings. The style of those drawings strongly resembles that of the modernist architecture he subsequently advocated in his treatise on urban planning. That a noted French architect should take inspiration from an Algerian town may seem like a historical footnote, but as Attia notes, “architecture has first to do with politics, with the political order.” As Attia is a child of Algerian immigrants and grew up partly in a Parisian suburb, this statement has a particular resonance.

The use of couscous as a “building” material is symbolic, showing the impact of the artist’s native culture on that of France, Algeria’s former colonizer. The work highlights the cultural impact of the colonized on the colonizer, reversing traditional thinking about the direction of influence.

7. “Kader Attia with Noah Simblist,” Coronagraph, November 2014.

ARTIST: KADER ATTIA
SUBJECT: SOCIAL STUDIES, VISUAL ARTS
DISCIPLINE: INSTALLATION

VIEW AND DISCUSS



Show: *Untitled (Ghardaïa)*, 2009

- Make a list of questions about this work, then read the short essay about Kader Attia. How has learning more about the artist and his intentions changed your view of his work?
- Look at photographs of Ghardaïa online. How does seeing images of the place to which Attia is making reference influence your response to this work?
- Couscous has long been a staple of North African cuisine—references to it date back to the thirteenth century, and it remains known as North Africa’s national dish even as its popularity has spread worldwide. In 2011, couscous was voted France’s third-favorite dish.⁸ Attia’s choice of material ensures that the installation will change over the course of the exhibition. Photos of previous installations of this work confirm that it cracks and deteriorates over time and needs to be made anew whenever it is shown. How do the ephemeral, cultural, organic, and nutritional qualities of the work add to its meaning?
- In transferring ownership of this work, Attia also provided a recipe, moulds, and instructions for constructing the sculpture. Imagine that you were part of the museum staff charged with constructing this installation. What

questions would you ask the artist?

8. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Couscous>.

FURTHER EXPLORATION

- Kader Attia has become known for installations that use nontraditional materials. In his 2007 video *Oil and Sugar #2*, Attia poured thick black crude oil over a stack of brilliant white sugar cubes that were configured into a giant block. You can view this short video on YouTube.

Think about how a material can be symbolic, then make a work that uses a nontraditional material or materials to convey meaning in a symbolic way.

[Visual Arts](#)

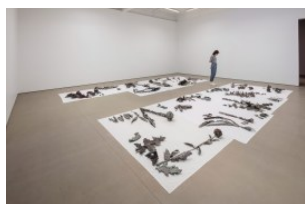
- Relations between Algeria and France span more than five centuries. During this extended period, Algeria has been part of the Ottoman Empire, conquered and been colonized by France, played an important role in both world wars, and finally gained independence. Over time, relations between Algeria and France have suffered as tension between their peoples has increased. Have students research the history of both nations with half the class taking the Algerian point of view and the other half adopting the French perspective. What suggestions do students have for improving relations between the two countries and their peoples?

[Social Studies](#)

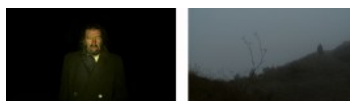
- Set up in 1945, UNESCO strives to establish links between nations, promoting world peace through moral and intellectual solidarity. Part of UNESCO's mission is to build intercultural understanding through the protection of heritage and support for cultural diversity. UNESCO created the status of World Heritage to protect sites of outstanding universal value. To date, UNESCO has named 1,031 World Heritage Sites around the world. You can view and navigate an interactive map of these sites at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list>. Have each student select and research a site and report on its significance to the class.

[Social Studies](#)

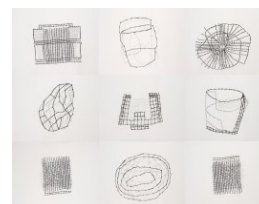
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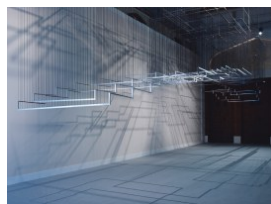
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