

Making the Ordinary Anything But: Mona Hatoum on Her Unnerving Sculptures, in 2005

[The Editors of ARTnews](#)



[Mona Hatoum](#), *Hot Spot*, 2013, stainless steel, neon tube.

JÖRG VON BRUCHHAUSEN/©MONA HATOUM AND GALERIE MAX HETZLER, BERLIN AND PARIS/COURTESY THE ARTIST

With two Mona Hatoum shows happening this year (one currently on view [at the Centre Pompidou, in Paris](#), the second coming [to the ICA Boston](#) next week), we turn back to May 2005, when [Pernilla Holmes](#) profiled the Lebanese-born artist for ARTnews. In the profile, Hatoum discusses the political strife that led to her disturbing, often oversize sculptures.

The piece follows in full below.

"Making the Ordinary Anything But" **By Pernilla Holmes**

Mona Hatoum transforms domestic objects into unsettling sculptures that hit viewers in the gut

Last summer, walking up and down the grand, central staircase at the Kunstmuseum Bonn, visitors found themselves in a disorienting situation. Looking down from the staircase—built as a series of half circles, with a clear space in the middle—they were confounded by a mirror installed in the center of the bottom floor and by a text on the ceiling that in German read "Du Bist Hier," meaning, "You are here." But where? Up there, where the words were written, or down there, where they appeared reflected, as if in a well? The viewer, positioned somewhere in between, did not quite belong to either "here." It's a feeling that Mona Hatoum, the artist who created this work, understands.

Born in 1952 in Lebanon to Palestinian parents, who had to renew their residency annually, Hatoum grew up with a sense of not quite belonging. As she recalls, "The Palestinian accent is distinctly different from the Lebanese one, so if you are the only Palestinian family at your school, children will make fun." But Hatoum's father worked at the British embassy, entitling the family to British citizenship and enabling her to visit London in 1975, when she was 23. At that point, civil war broke out in Lebanon, and Hatoum was unable to return home. It was almost a decade before she saw her family again. Though London has since become her base, she travels constantly and participates in artist-residency programs in different countries. "I think best on the move," Hatoum says, describing herself as a nomad who feels both "at home and alien at any place."

Two years ago she accepted a British Academy residency in Berlin; when it was over, Hatoum got an apartment there and began dividing her time

between Berlin and London, where her husband, a musician, lives. As with many people for whom moving is a way of life, identity becomes a complicated issue. “Lebanese, Palestinian, British—I am all of these things at the same time,” she says. “It doesn’t matter to me anymore.”



Mona Hatoum working on a sculpture.

ANDRI POL

Still, the social and political dynamics of her life have almost certainly contributed to leitmotifs in her work: issues of power relationships, dislocation, and human interactions, whether related to war, refugee status, or domestic unrest. In Hatoum’s hands, seemingly familiar objects—kitchen utensils, office lockers, scarves, beds—are transformed into extraordinary and often menacing sculptures. They may be enlarged to gargantuan proportions, composed of incongruous materials; or their practical function may be obfuscated.

“You can’t take things for granted,” Hatoum explains. “You have to look behind the surface. I want people to have a gut reaction to the work first, and after that initial experience, they can start to think about what it might mean.”

La Grande broyeuse (mouli-julienne x 17), from 1999, is a case in point. During a 1998 visit to Lebanon, Hatoum found in her mother’s kitchen a *mouli-julienne*, a three-legged tool from the 1940s that shreds vegetables with blades worked by a rotary grinding arm. Hatoum re-created the tool in a couple of versions, magnifying its dimensions in this one to about 19 feet wide and 11 feet high. The steel is reminiscent of industrial materials used by Minimalist artists such as Donald Judd, but in Hatoum’s work it is laden with expressive potential. Though elegant and beautiful, this version of the piece dwarfs and sends shivers through passerby, as it appears to

be just about the right size to process a human body. Depending on the viewer's background, it can be read as anything from a housewife's nightmare to a symbol of great genocidal machine. Striking at the heart of the domestic and the familiar, Hatoum builds a strong sense of vulnerability and danger.

Since Hatoum graduated from London's Slade School of Fine Art in 1981, her reputation has grown steadily, at first in response to her tough, politically charged performance pieces, and then, beginning in 1988, for her provocative sculptures. "This is my year," she says, sitting in the pristine meeting room of her primary London gallery, [White Cube](#). In New York, she is represented by [Alexander and Bonin](#), where her works sell for between \$76,500 and \$335,000. The artist has a vast survey of more than 60 works that began in Hamburg, traveled to Bonn and Stockholm, and is currently at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, through the 29th of this month. She recently won the prestigious Swiss Roswitha Haftmann Prize for contemporary visual art and the even more impressive Danish Sonning Award for her contribution to European culture. The first visual artist and the first non-European to win the Sonning, she joins such previous recipients as Bertrand Russell, Simone de Beauvoir, Jürgen Habermas, Günter Grass, and Alvar Aalto.

"I'm not very much a studio person," she confides, discussing the site-specific works she made for each location of her touring show. "I prefer to work in different situations, react to the different places I am in. I cannot stare at a blank wall for inspiration. I like to walk around markets and put things together." She smiles and adds dryly, "I suppose you could call me a poststudio artist."

A striking woman with dark hair bobbed at her chin, Hatoum is an intellectual, as well-versed in politics and philosophy as in art. And though she clearly does not suffer fools gladly, she does try to strain out the interesting aspects of people's otherwise banal observations. "People

interpret any artwork according to their own background or situation,” says Hatoum. “I dislike wall labels that dictate meaning for that reason. I choose my titles to give direction, but, ultimately, a viewer’s own experience is extremely important to the reading of the work.”



Mona Hatoum, *Keffiyeh* (detail), 1993–1999, hair on cotton fabric.

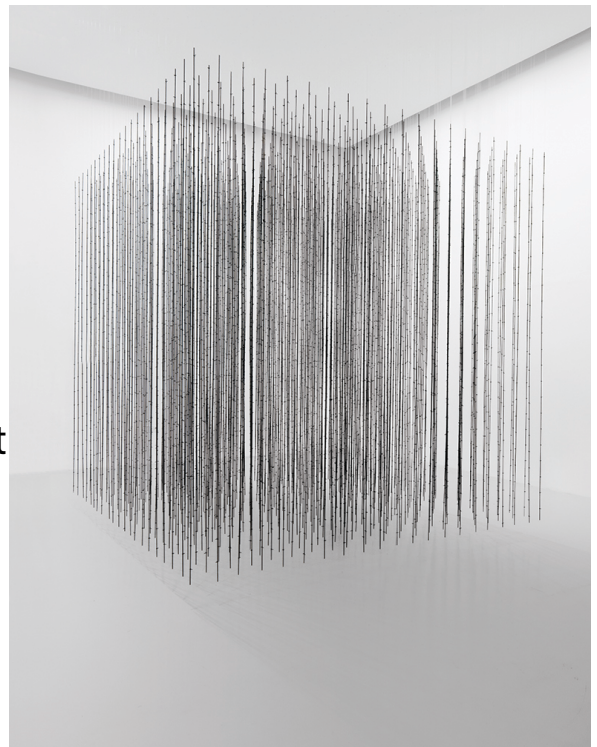
HUGO GLENDINNING/COURTESY COLLECTION AGNÈS B. AND WHITE CUBE

Hatoum’s initial performance pieces are difficult to watch. She made her first, *Under Siege* (1982), when she was just out of art school. “With the early performances, I saw myself as a marginal person in the art world, and it seemed logical to use performance as a critique of the establishment,” she says. The work consisted of Hatoum nude and encased in a container of semi-transparent polythene sheets for seven hours, struggling to free herself but repeatedly slipping and falling on the

muddy clay floor. "Partly it related to how difficult I was finding it to show my work," she says. "I felt like every door was a wall. At the same time, it is a piece about being threatened. I was trying to talk about a life of limits, about not being able to make any moves in any direction."

The performance pieces often drew attention to the conflict in Lebanon and to the plight of the Palestinians. For *The Negotiating Table* (1983), she lay naked on a table surrounded by three chairs, with raw kidneys strapped to her head. Speakers boomed out the disembodied voices of Western leaders discussing the war in Lebanon. "I was using narrative and trying to make people aware of the existence of wars and tensions in other parts of the world," she explains. "In the West, people kept talking about maintaining peace; the peace movement assumed that the world was at peace and we should keep it that way. I had been aware of the war since the day I was born. These are the things I was dealing with in my work."

Perhaps Hatoum's most personal work is the seminal video *Measures of Distance* (1988), which traces the relationship between her and her mother over time and across geographical and cultural distance during the artist's years of exile in London. Hatoum filmed her mother in the intimate moment of taking a shower at her home in Beirut, but she is barely visible behind a veil of Arabic letters arranged so that viewers seem to be looking through a barbed-wire fence. Accompanying the image is Hatoum's voice, reading in English from letters in which her mother expresses how much she misses her. And as the image fades to black, Hatoum continues reading,



Mona Hatoum, *Impenetrable*, 2009, barbed wire, fishing wire.

MARKUS ELBANUS/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MATHAF: ARAB MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

revealing that the family's only link to the outside world, the local post office, had been hit by a bomb.

In that same year, 1988, Hatoum shifted from performance art to sculpture and installation-based work, typically relating the pieces in scale to the human body. "I've continued to work with many of the same issues as in the earlier work," explains Hatoum, "but less personally and in a much more subtle way. The delivery is less direct." And arguably more terrifying.

In *Incommunicado* (1993), for example, Hatoum reconstructed a child's hospital cot made of steel but with the mattress and base replaced by sharp metal wires. Reactions to the work varied: "Some people saw themselves as the abusers," says Hatoum. "Many parents came up and said how dreadful they felt looking at this work, while others identified with the abused." Which did she have in mind when making it? "I will not say," she responds.

Equally unsettling are *Doormat* (1996), a mat with the word "welcome" spelled out in pins; and *Wheelchair* (1998), a steel chair fitted with knife blades in place of handles. Nevertheless, with their austere, slick esthetic, the objects are oddly beautiful. "People always say that beauty and politics can't work together, and I think that's rubbish," says Hatoum. "I feel that form and content are part and parcel of the same thing."

Hatoum's first kitchen-utensil piece, *No Way* (1996), was conceived when she took an artist residency at a Shaker community in Sabbathday Lake, Maine. *No Way* is a stainless-steel soup skimmer, but its holes are plugged with a series of blunt studs, undermining its functionality and making it look like a weapon. "It was in the Shaker community that I started examining this issue of home and what it means," she explains. "It was quite an eye-opener. They were so unsettled and so identified with their land; it made me reflect on my nomadic life and how very undomesticated it is." But with works like *La grande boyeuse* and *The*

Grater Divide (2002), a human-size cheese grater, the tools assume a more violent posture, hinting at an even darker discrepancy between the ideal of home and its reality in times of trouble.



Mona Hatoum, *The Grater Divide*, 2002, mild steel.

IAIN DICKENS/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND WHITE CUBE

Hair has also been a recurring material and motif in Hatoum's oeuvre, relating to identity, class, and morality. Unlike her vast sculptures and installations, fabricated by technicians such as Mike Smith (who has constructed the work of such artists as Damien Hirst and Rachel Whiteread), the hair pieces are made exclusively by Hatoum. "I like making this," she says. "I really need that engagement." She has been collecting hair for years—it took six years' worth to make *For Recollection* (1995).

For her 2000 exhibition at Fig. 1, London—a temporary art space

sponsored by Jay Jopling of White Cube—Hatoum exhibited a *keffieh*, or Arab headscarf, that she made out of women’s hair. In an accompanying pamphlet, she wrote, “I imagine women pulling their hair out in anger and controlling that anger through the patient act of transcribing those strands of hair into an item of clothing which has become a potent symbol of the Palestinian resistance movement.” Hatoum continued: “What was a perfectly familiar everyday article of clothing has undergone a transformation and turned into an unfamiliar object with a strange twist. There is a moment of uncertainty as we approach the object because we are not sure if we can trust the information our eyes are conveying about it.”

Hatoum is clearly excited about her latest site-specific works, made for each venue of her survey exhibition. They seem to indicate a new direction. For the Hamburger Kunsthalle she worked with the transcendental aspect of the oldest part of the museum—a dome originally created to direct the attention of the people inside up to the heavens. “I put three surveillance cameras on the outside of the building, facing onto the street,” she says. “The images are projected live inside, on three large, nine-meter screens.” Inside, amid noises recorded from the street, the viewers’ shadows fall over the images. “What I did was to turn the dome upside down and make it more of an observation tower,” she says. Viewers can witness their everyday reality and experience it in a new, shifting context—one in which they might even find their own place.