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Mona Hatoum, Red Jesus (Venice) 2003, 2005. Courtesy: Schellmann Art, Munich, New York

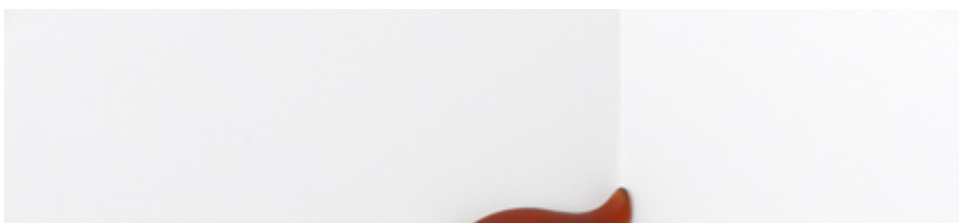
REVIEW — 1 YEAR AGO

# Mona Hatoum—An Artist in Exile

While visiting London in 1975, Palestinian artist, Mona Hatoum, then aged just 23, suddenly found herself forced into exile and cut off from her family in Beirut when civil war suddenly broke out there. Abandoning her plans to become a graphic designer and with the Beirut airport remaining closed for the next nine months Hatoum defied her parents and got a place at London's Byam Shaw School of Art and then the prodigious Slade. Hatoum would not see her family again for another ten years.

That first taste of geopolitical instability, of dislocation and not belonging pervades much of Hatoum's work. Her life was never the same again and having first gotten used to England's cold weather her career has been on an unstoppable rise that has seen her shortlisted for the Turner Prize, exhibited at the Pompidou Centre in 1994 and culminated in a vast retrospective in Tate Modern that opened on May the 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

Hatoum first made a name for herself with her visceral performance art. Highly political, it was often a response to the plight of Palestine and its people. As she says herself she "was venting (her) anger, without caring what people thought." Yet it had a practical purpose too—penniless and without a studio, it was the only means Hatoum had to express her ideas. "I was very restless. I couldn't sit with something for too long, so performance gave me the possibility of work that was immediate, unpremeditated."



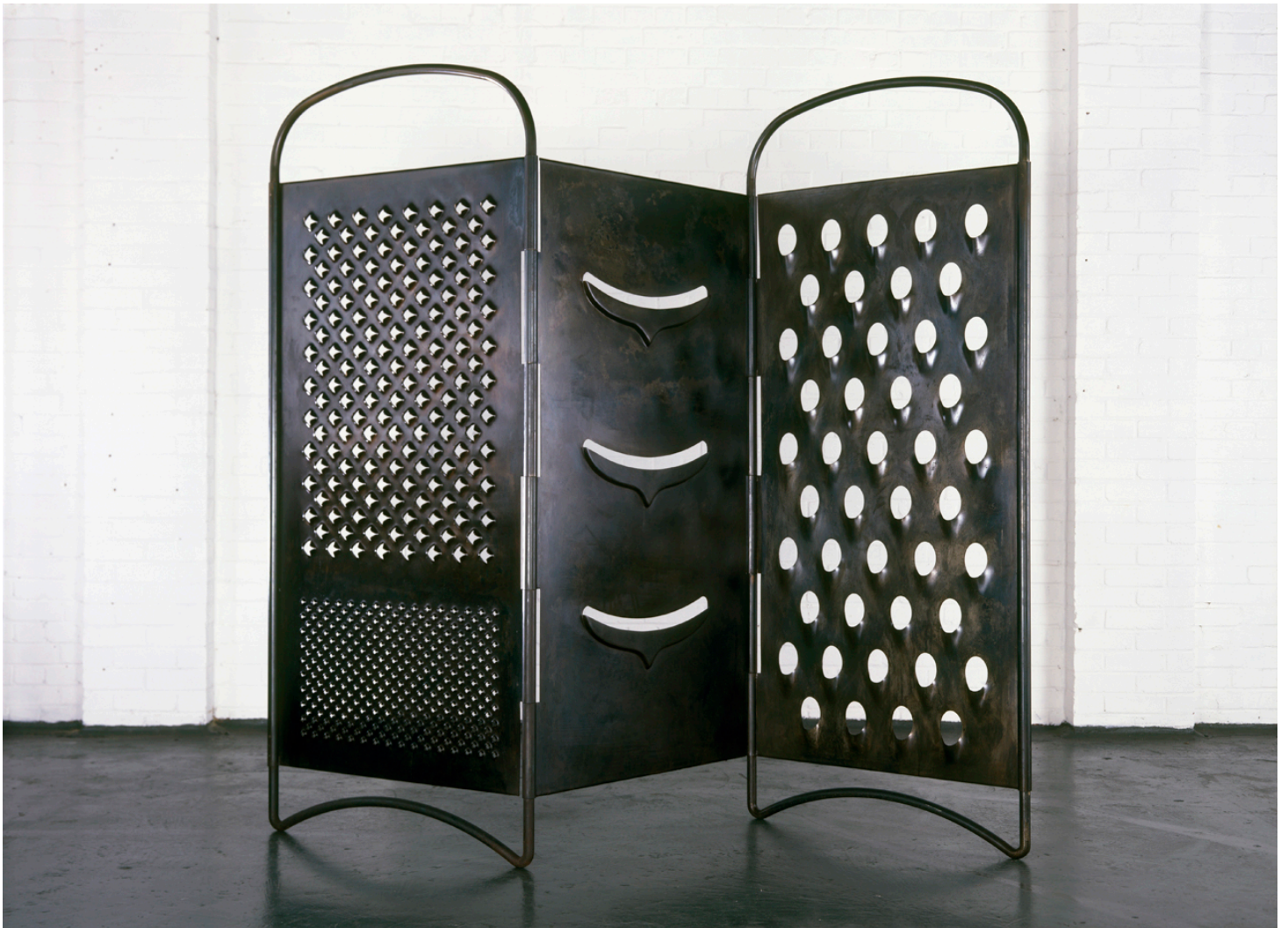


Mona Hatoum, Untitled (Stick), 2011. Courtesy: Edition Block, Berlin

The social and political dynamics of Hatoum's own life have most certainly had a huge influence on her artist output—concerns of dislocation, power relationships, and human relations are entwined in issues of refugee status and domestic unrest. In *Red Jesus (Venice)*, 2003, (pictured top) the artist is intrigued by the close proximity of contrasting ideologies found in a simple everyday street scene in Venice. The Communist symbol of the hammer and sickle, Jesus Christ, and even a sign for the left-wing democratic party coexist

in a short stretch of space, while the men sitting below calmly drink beer.

Yet Hatoum's oeuvre is not confined to reflections on international politics, but increasingly centered on the inherent confines and dangers of the domestic world. Everyday items like chairs or children's beds, items imbued with a sense of dependability and ordinariness, become menacing and horribly lethal in the hands of Hatoum. Her work *Untitled (Stick)*, 2008, is a bent walking stick that is in fact made of spongy silicone. It is simple, playful even, but also spiteful. Its purpose as a support, as a walking aid is supplanted by its role as an instrument of malice.





Mona Hatoum, *Grater Divide*, 2002. © Ian Dickens, Courtesy: White Cube, London

By the 80s and 90s Hatoum had moved increasingly towards large-scale installations which aim to engage the viewer in conflicted emotions of desire and revulsion, fear and fascination. Her Tate Modern retrospective features a two-meter high cheese grater in the form of a room divider—a startling conjunction of both the elegant and the gruesome. Entitled *The Grater Divide*, 2002, the human-sized grater hints at an unsettling discrepancy between the ideal of domesticity and its actual truth in troubling times.

Striking at the heart of the domestic and the familiar, Hatoum builds a strong sense of vulnerability and danger. Like all of her work it demands a double take: "You can't take things for granted, 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."

**Mona Hatoum's exhibition at Tate Modern runs from the 4<sup>th</sup> of May to the 21 August 2016.**

By FAM EDITORIAL

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