

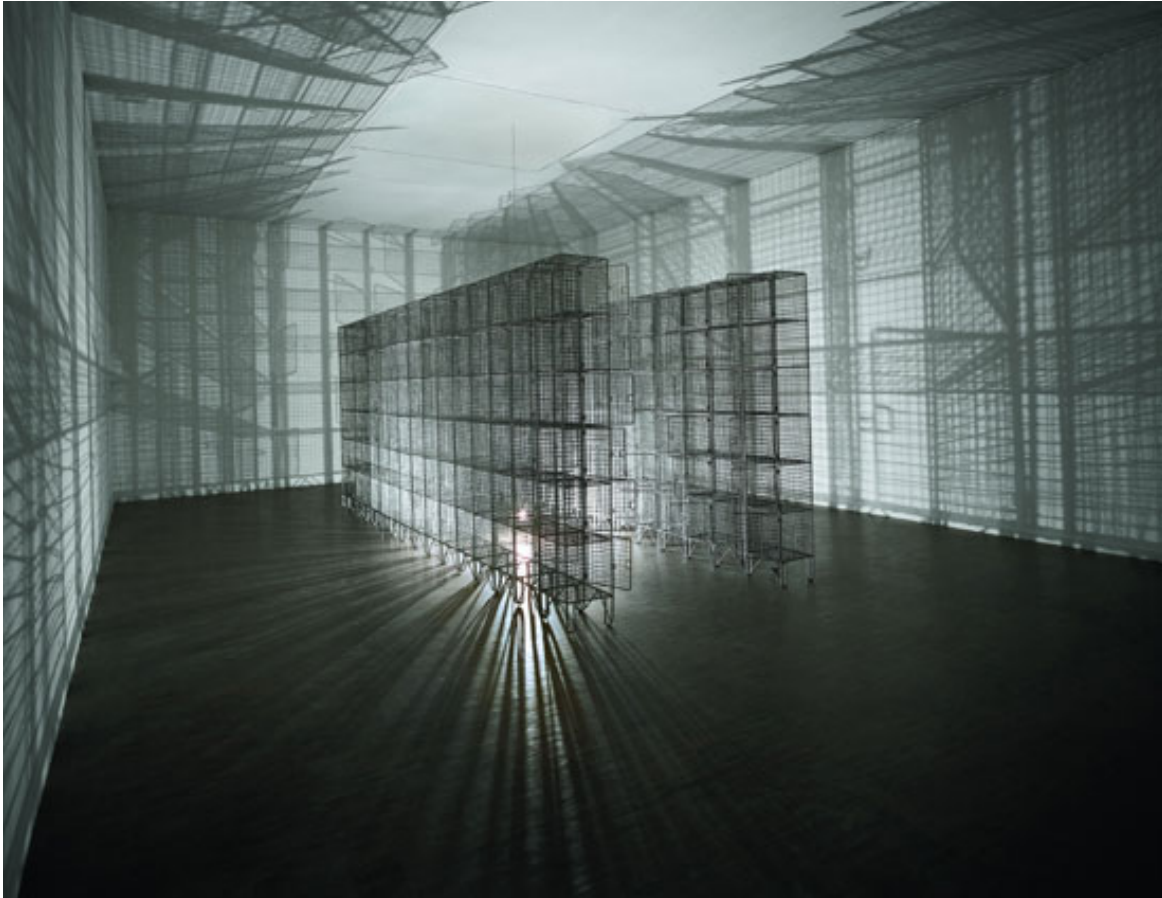
# Mona Hatoum – Tate Modern

AUGUST 10, 2016 *By* intsculpturectr *in* ON VIEW *Tags:* WILL GRESSON LEAVE A COMMENT



Over My Dead Body, 1988. Inkjet on paper. 204 x 304. © Courtesy of the artist.

I first encountered Mona Hatoum's work in Berlin in 2010 when she was awarded the Käthe Kollwitz Prize by the Akademie der Künste (Academy of Arts). Her large sculptural works with their mix of both delicate and industrial materials was intriguing, and the underlying tension which is often so central to her practice fascinated me. Two years later I was fortunate enough to see her survey "You Are Still Here" at Arter – Space for Art in Istanbul. [1] Here Hatoum's dense and poetically loaded works were an engaging and perhaps pointed contrast to the largely commercial surroundings on Istiklal Caddesi, the pedestrian avenue visited by as many as three million people during weekends in the popular Turkish city.



Light Sentence 1992. Galvanised wire mesh lockers, electric motor and light bulb. 198 x 185 x 490. Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris: Mnam-CCI / Dist RMN-GP. Photo: Philippe Migeat. © Mona Hatoum

As I walk through her retrospective at Tate Modern in London, I recognise a number of works from these two previous exhibitions. The familiar hallmarks in terms of both materials and thematic concerns are all here, however in this setting perhaps it's the artist's personal background that most obviously comes most to the fore. Hatoum was born to a Palestinian family in Beirut in 1952, and in 1975 she settled in London as the Civil War in Lebanon broke out. This geographic mix feels potently present at Tate Modern, which addresses conflicts in the Middle East as well as British political issues, both foreign and domestic. Distance and pull, gender and race, Hatoum's work shies away from none of these topics, yet even the most understated documentary pieces reveal a keen awareness with the contemporary art historical concerns of their day.

Typically, Tate Modern retrospectives tend to work on a chronological basis, mitigating the curation somehow into a developmental narrative. This can be instructive but occasionally renders some sections of the exhibitions uneven for the sake of being 'complete.' Here however, the curators have instead developed the exhibition as a series of juxtapositions that aim to better explore Hatoum's thematic concerns and creative strategies. The result is a retrospective that seems less indebted to nostalgia and reverence and succeeds in framing the artist's work as it should be viewed – relevant and contemporary in 2016.

# OVER MY DEAD BODY

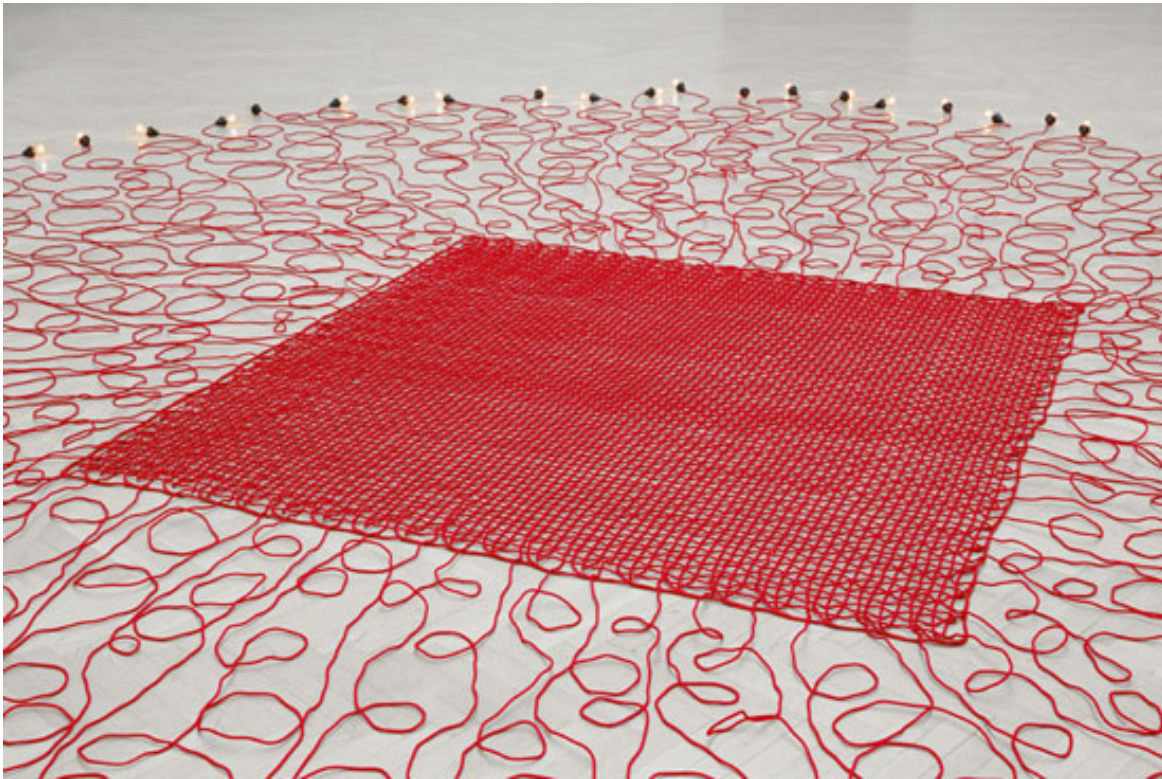


*Over My Dead Body*, 1988. Inkjet on paper. 204 x 304. © Courtesy of the artist.

Undoubtedly, her large scale sculptural and installation works are still the most immediately recognisable, encompassing everything from specially designed and fashioned pieces to domestic objects and furniture. Grids and geometric shapes often seem to inform these works such as *Hot Spot* (2013) or *Light Sentence* (1992). In the former, a large steel globe is detailed with red neon, the title a reference to spaces of military or civil unrest. By presenting the whole world as burning red light, the suggestion here is clearly that the whole globe is wrought with conflict. As with other works, there is the suggestion of organised chaos, carefully orchestrated disorder.

The latter work is a beautiful room sized installation, containing a three sided structure of wire mesh lockers surrounding a single light bulb. As the light slowly rises and falls in the centre of the room, it casts beautiful, seductive shadows across the walls of the space that seem to loom and melt away with their own particular rhythm. As viewers slowly walk around the outside of the piece, they cast more shadows, vaguely identifiable as people that almost adds a performative element to work.

Perhaps one of the strongest sculptural works in the entire exhibition is *+and-* (1994-2004), a large circular sandpit with a motor-driven arm that sweeps across the sand, one half drawing lines while the other comes around to erase them. In an abstract sense, these two forces are oppositional, a kind of post-industrial yin and yang. The cyclical nature of the work neatly encapsulates the idea of continuity, creation and destruction, drawing and redrawing figurative 'lines in the sand.'



Undercurrent (red), 2008. Electrical wires covered in fabric, with light bulbs and dimmer switch, variable dimensions. Photo Stefan Rohner, Courtesy Kunstmuseum St. Gallen. ©Mona Hatoum

More explicitly the work also connotes the constant redrawing of borders in the deserts of the Middle East, something which touches on both Hatoum's personal history but also more significantly addresses the role of the British government in many of the conflicts through their clumsy and self-interested partitioning of the region. It's difficult not to view this work within the prism of the Balfour Declaration of 1917, where the British Foreign Secretary James Balfour wrote in favour of the establishment of Palestine as a "national home for the Jewish people," a seismic moment in the development of what we now know as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. [2]

This conflict is also referenced in *Keffieh* (1993-9), named for the traditional Arab headscarf that has become synonymous with the Palestinian struggle and here rendered in embroidered human hair. While + and – addressed international borders, here Hatoum is interested in subverting the politics of gender, blurring the lines between the typically masculine connotations of the struggle and the feminine ties to both the materials used and embroidery in general. This is further raised in *Twelve Windows* (2012-13), a collaborative project between Hatoum and Innash, The Association for the Development of Palestinian Camps (described in the exhibition text as 'a Lebanese NGO founded in 1969 to provide employment for Palestinian women in refugee camps in Lebanon'). Here twelve regions are represented through their different designs, organised in a slightly chaotic fashion on steel cables across a small room to highlight the divided and territories they represent.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of the exhibition can be found in the smaller documentary pieces which detail Hatoum's performance work. No less politically oriented than the larger scale works, here the artist's body itself became a material that bore the weight of the conflicts they alluded to. The two



Hot Spot III, 2009. Stainless steel, neon tube. Photo: Agostino Osio, Courtesy Fondazione Querini Stampalia. Onlus, Venice. ©Mona Hatoum

starkest examples of this are *Under Siege* (1982) and *The Negotiating Table* (1983). In the former, the performer's body is held in a tall confined space covered in clay. As she tries to stand she continually falls down, leaving traces across the glass, while revolutionary songs in different languages play alongside news reports and statements all tied to the conflict in Palestine. The work is an expression of living in 'a constant state of siege,' a notion which appears with even greater significance in her later work. [3] In *The Negotiating Table* the artist lies on a table, wrapped in plastic and covered in blood, her face hidden with surgical gauze. A sacrificial lamb on the altar of global political struggle, the work is sound tracked by the voices of Western leaders discussing the ongoing crisis in that part of the Middle East. (In this video, a brief re-enactment can be seen from 1:26 – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGMw5WNugUI> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGMw5WNugUI>)).



Homebound, 2000. Kitchen utensils, furniture, electrical wire, light bulbs, dimmer unit, amplifier and two speakers. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Rennie Collection, Vancouver. © Mona Hatoum

From her earliest works until the most recent commissions, there is a consistent focus in Hatoum's oeuvre that perhaps predictably reminds me of Emily Jacir's exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery last year. [4] [5] Certainly the two artists are linked by a shared narrative as Palestinian women in exile, but their work is also imbued with the startling ability to reflect not only the struggle but the melancholy of their circumstances, and the complex depth of the conflicts they reference. Hatoum's works here are notable for the way they illuminate the universality and circularity that is so evident in the ongoing tensions in the Middle East, something which we are clearly still a long way from negotiating with any nuance and finality in the West.

By Will Gresson (<https://blog.sculpture.org/will-gresson/>).

[1] <http://www.artier.org.tr/W3/?iExhibitionId=38> (<http://www.artier.org.tr/W3/?iExhibitionId=38>)

[2]

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/the%20balfour%20declaration.aspx>  
(<http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/the%20balfour%20declaration.aspx>)

[3] <http://www.reactfeminism.org/entry.php?l=lb&id=65&e=t>  
(<http://www.reactfeminism.org/entry.php?l=lb&id=65&e=t>)