

Mona Hatoum's Psychological Surgery

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[Eileen G'Sell August 9, 2018](#)



Installation view of *Mona Hatoum: Terra Infirma*, Main Gallery (© Mona Hatoum, courtesy of the artist and Pulitzer Arts Foundation, photograph © Alise O'Brien Photography)

ST. LOUIS — A floating cube of barbed wire. A circle of sand combed by steel teeth. A food mill with a shredder scaled to the size of a human body. In Mona Hatoum's *Terra Infirma*, on view at the [Pulitzer Arts Foundation](#) through August 11, form colludes with a violent function; the domestic menaces, materiality imperils. From a glass bassinet that would shatter were an infant placed inside of it to a magic lantern projecting a series of Army soldier silhouettes, what seems pedestrian or ludic is soon to unsettle — our wonder summoned only to be swiftly darkened by dread.

Her first major US solo show in 20 years, originally organized by the Menil Collection in Houston, *Terra Infirma* — a titular play on the Latin phrase for “solid ground” — reveals Hatoum's enduring interest in what shakes us from below, above, and within. While the Beirut-born artist's 40-year career has consistently invited interpretation based in institutional critique and the real-world tumult so many of her works reference, it is equally constructive to consider her work from a psychological, rather than political, vantage — one driven by pathos much more than polemic.



Mona Hatoum, "Misbah" (2006–07), brass lantern, metal chain, light bulb, and rotating electric motor, dimensions variable (Rennie Collection, Vancouver, © Mona Hatoum, image courtesy of Fondazione Querini Stampalia Onlus, Venice, photo by Agostino Osio)

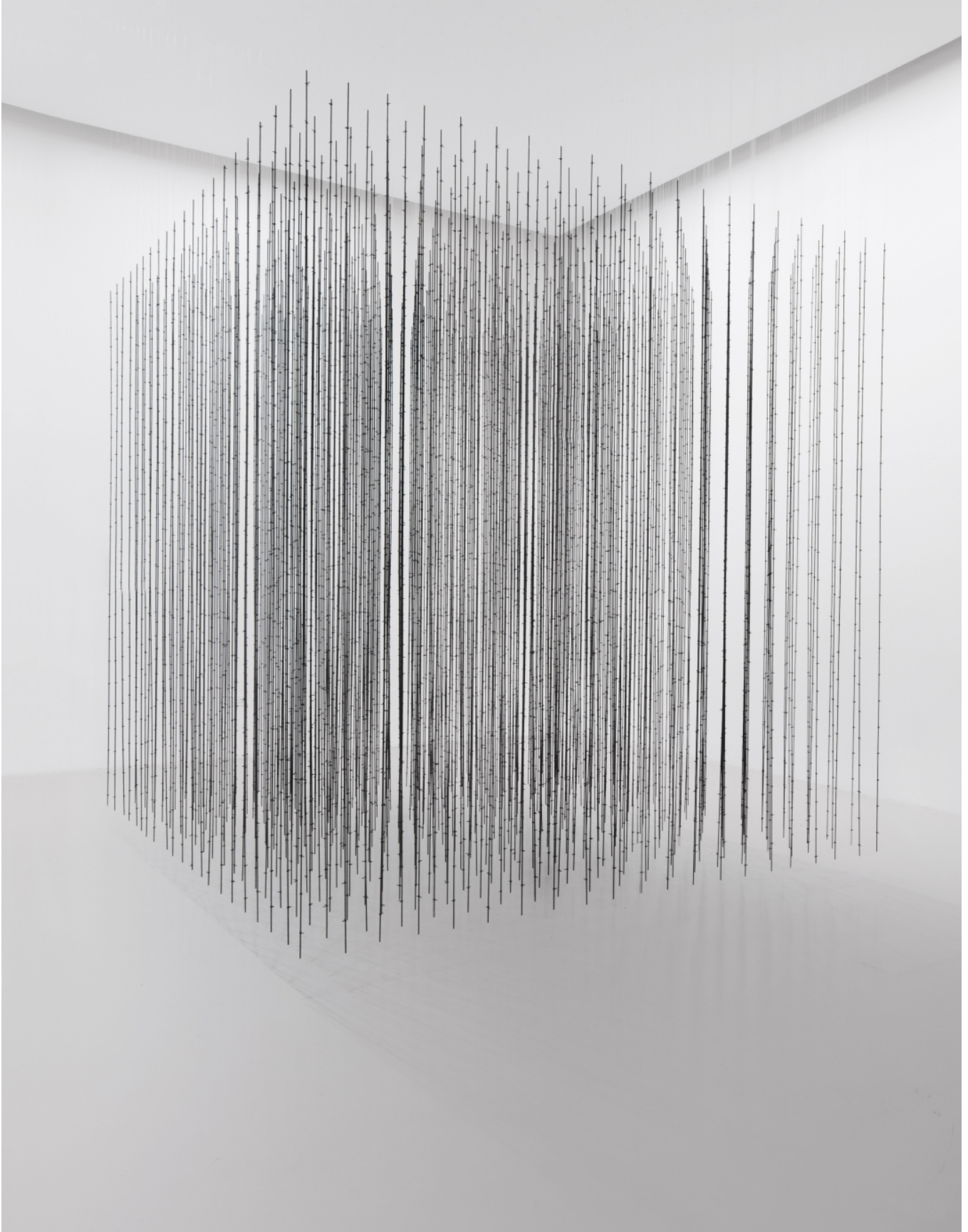


Mona Hatoum, *Homebound* (2000) (detail), kitchen utensils, furniture, electrical wire, light bulbs, dimmer unit, amplifier, and two speakers, dimensions variable, installed at Pulitzer Arts Foundation, 2018 (Rennie Collection, Vancouver, © Mona Hatoum, courtesy of the artist and Pulitzer Arts Foundation, photograph © Alise O'Brien Photography)

Here, the lens of poet and critic Maggie Nelson proves helpful in excavating just what is so arresting — and subtly terrifying — in *Terra Infirma*. Exploring what she deems the “full-fledged assault on the barriers between art and life that much 20th-century art worked so hard to perform,” Nelson’s 2011 book *The [Art of Cruelty](#)* reckons with the process — and purpose — of aestheticizing violence, and how “cruelty” might be experienced as a productive mode of both introspection and intellectual discourse. Are “there certain aspects or instances of the so-called art of cruelty ... that are still wild and worthwhile,” Nelson asks,

“now that we purportedly inhabit a political and entertainment landscape increasingly glutted with images — and actualities — of torture, sadism, and endless warfare?”

If more subtly, and perhaps insidiously, than most of the work Nelson covers (for example, the paintings of Francis Bacon, the video art of Chris Burden, the installations of Ana Mendieta) *Terra Infirma* conducts an ongoing dialogue with the question. Rather than inflict a full-fledged assault to the senses, Hatoum beckons the viewers' attention, then slowly, but surely, threatens direct engagement. The floating cube of “Impenetrable” (2009) is beautiful, but turns out to be barbarous; “Hair Mesh” (2013) appears to be a delicate quilt of monochrome squares, but up close it is woven out of human strands of hair; the kitchen utensils arranged in “Homebound” (2000) transform into “modern electrical appliances,” daring the viewer to imagine picking one up at the risk of an actual zap.



Mona Hatoum, "Impenetrable" (2009), black finished steel and fishing wire 118 1/8 x 118 1/8 x 118 1/8 inches (300 x 300 x 300 cm), installed at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, 2014 (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; purchased with funds contributed by the Collections Council; international Director's Council, with additional funds from Ann Ames, Tiqui Atencio Demirdjian, and Marcio Fainzilber, 2012,

© Mona Hatoum, image courtesy of Mathaf, Arab Museum of Modern Art; photo by Markus Elblaus)

Building upon Antonin Artaud's notion of a "pure cruelty, without bodily laceration," one that signifies "rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination," Nelson is attracted to "this precision, sharpness, this rigor," and it seems Hatoum is as well. The works of *Terra Inferna* inflict a gradual, yet calculated type of pain in the mind of the human witness, slicing into the psyche with the precision of a hidden scalpel.

Take "Cells," a piece from 2014 constructed of zinc-plated steel and hand-blown glass. While at first gleam from across the room, it evokes scarlet Chihuly vases, it come to resemble visceral organs padlocked in metal cages. Although certainly recalling the reality of global organ trafficking, the physical approachability of the chest-high sculpture, along with the luster of its trapped glass objects, invite onlookers in only to alarm and repel. "I often like to introduce ... contradictions on a material level," the artist explained [in an interview](#) with the Menil. "There is a tension between what you are looking at — very seductive, very attractive — and the implications." Such tensions compound within the open, light-filled galleries of the Pulitzer building, its architecture at odds with the content of the show, though sharing a similarly minimalist aesthetic.



Mona Hatoum, "Cells" (2014) (detail), zinc-plated steel and hand-blown glass 53 1/2 x 47 3/4 x 25 3/4 inches (136 x 121 x 65.5 cm) (courtesy of the artist and Alexander and Bonin, New York, © Mona Hatoum, photo by Joerg Lohse)

Perhaps most uncanny — and implicitly “cruel,” in the Artaudian sense — is a work that likely concludes one’s visit, at the bottom of the stairs of the lower gallery leading to the exhibition’s exit. A stainless steel wheelchair propped in the corner, “Untitled (Wheelchair II)” (1999) could be easily mistaken for museum property until one notices that its handles are twin serrated blades. What should aid in human mobility becomes a weapon against the imagined caregiver — fraying the nerves of both unsuspecting

palms and the part of our brain that responds to physical injury. "Sometimes ... cruelty stays within the confines of a page or the gallery wall [...]," writes Nelson. "Other times, the cruelty seeps out to the viewer more directly, further troubling the ethical waters." With "Untitled (Wheelchair II)," Hatoum seems to do both, suggesting the vulnerability of our bodies within an art space and the permeable boundary between self and structure, harm and instructive unease.

[Mona Hatoum: Terra Infirma](#), organized by the Menil Collection, Houston and curated by Michelle White, continues at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation (3716 Washington Boulevard, St. Louis, Missouri) through August 11.