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Mona Hatoum Restrospective

at Centre Pompidou, Paris

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Cellules (Cells), 2012-2013, mild steel and glass blown in 8 parts

Mona Hatoum is a Lebanese-born visual artist, who mostly works in the genres of video and installation. Her installations depict such themes as political commentary, gender issues, and discussion of installation in regards to space. A quote by Hatoum reads "Each person is free to understand what I do in the light of who they are and where they stand." At the recent retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, audience members can experience this while also getting a taste of Hatoum's perspective as a Middle Eastern immigrant who moved to a Western country.

Hatoum's life began in Beirut in 1952. Birthed by Palestinian parents, they traveled to London in 1975, only to be kept there to avoid the violence of the Lebanese civil war. I viewed various pieces from the exhibition online, and one I found most striking was a video installation of her 1985 performance, titled *Roadworks*.



Roadworks, video still, 1985

In the piece, Hatoum walks around London's neighborhood of Brixton, which had, at the time, been met with race riots and increasing tension between police and the black community. Hatoum is dressed entirely in black, walking barefoot, but with heavy duty army boots tied to her ankles. The piece, a possible commentary on the difficulty of living in a police-controlled state, was met with some laughter and criticism from those she walked by. In an interview with *The Guardian*, she states "In fact, a lot of people would smile when they saw me go by. They were right, because I wanted a touch of humour, slightly surreal humour. It didn't prevent people from understanding what I was up to. At one point someone asked: 'But what's wrong with her?' An old black woman on her way home from the shops answered: 'Can't you see? The police are chasing her.' People laughed, which was exactly what I'd hoped." It was interesting to see how many of Britain's issues in the 80s were resurfacing in the United States today. Additionally, the piece could describe a feminist struggle, and with the current state of affairs regarding reproductive healthcare for women in the United States, it is safe to say that the piece deserves a place in the retrospective.

Many of the works in the retrospective reminded me of some of my favorite artists, such as David Hammons and Barbara Kruger. The photos of the retrospective alone describe how Hatoum has worked with a variety of mediums and artistic styles.



Over My Dead Body, 1998 - 2002, inkjet on PVC with eyelets

The above piece in particular reminded me of the work of Barbara Kruger in particular. Although Kruger has a graphic style that is all her own, this piece depicts how graphic art has been used to describe political uprising. Many artists have worked with this idea, and the style is symbolic of feminist art in particular, with groups such as the Guerilla Girls making posters featuring a similar relationship between text and composition.

Keeping these similarities in mind, it is important not to clump Hatoum's work together in the genre of "feminist art". Doing so is mere compartmentalization, which is far too often how exhibitions are critiqued in order to make them palpable for readers. Hatoum's style may find similarities with other artists who discuss similar political themes, however, due to her background, it is safe to say that Hatoum's work is all her own.



Cellules (Cells) [full view], mild steel and glass blown in eight parts

Hatoum's work was inspiring to me, due to the fact that she successfully purged her experiences as an immigrant into artworks that stuck. A difficult question artists (and art school students) attempt to answer is "How can we make money off of our work?" Mona Hatoum is an excellent example of an artist doing just this, by providing her own unique perspective into the cards she was dealt. Hatoum's work is didactic and inspirational, and undoubtedly deserves a retrospective exhibition.

[VIDEO: Hatoum talking about the exhibition]

Bibliography:

- **Dagen, Philippe. "Mona Hatoum: 'Each Person Is Free to Understand What I Do in the Light of Who They Are and Where They Stand'." *The Guardian: Art and Design*. The Guardian, 28 Aug. 2015. Web. 5 Nov. 2015.**
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- **"Mona Hatoum, 'Performance Still' 1985, 1995." *Tate*. N.p., Oct. 2013. Web. 05 Nov. 2015.**

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