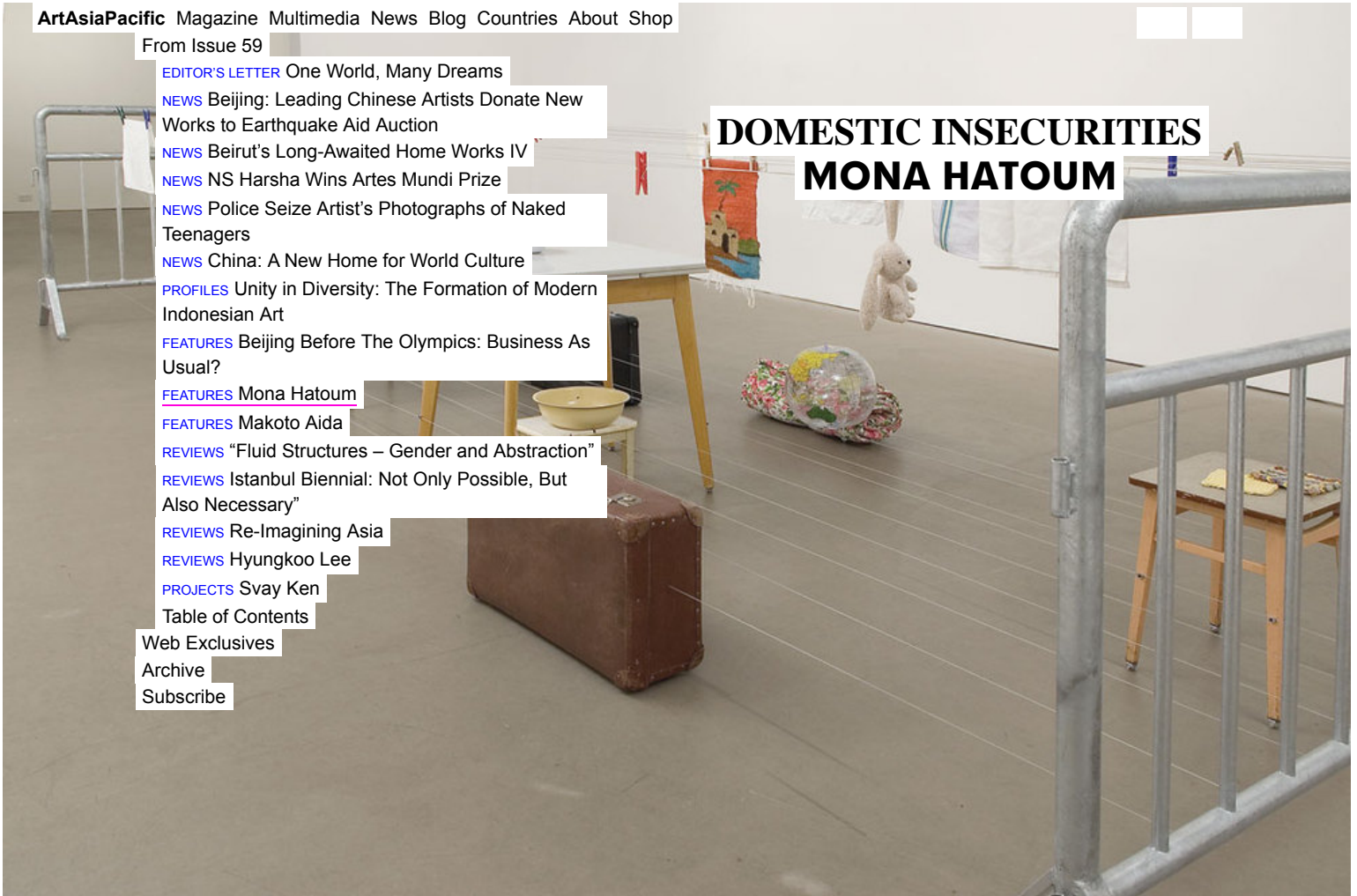


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DOMESTIC INSECURITIES MONA HATOUM



MOBILE HOME, 2005, furniture, household objects, suitcases, steel barriers, three electric motors and pully system, 1.2 x 2.2 x 6.7 m. Courtesy Alexander and Bonin Gallery, New York.

FEATURES BY HG MASTERS FROM JUL/AUG 2008

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LOOK NO BODY!, 1981, photo documentation of the

Newspapers around the world announced escalating violence in Lebanon in the first week of May: “Day 2: Violence Intensifies, Spreads to More Areas.” (The Daily Star, Beirut); “Battle for Beirut” (The Times, London); “Strike Turns Violent, Disrupting Lebanon” (The New York Times). The violent clashes that erupted in Beirut this year were the outbursts of long-standing rivalries, the headline-grabbing manifestations of inter-factional disputes that rage behind the scenes in political and religious arenas out of sight of the international media.

A similar underlying current of violence runs through the formally pristine sculptures of Mona Hatoum, who is not Lebanese but was born in 1952 and raised in Beirut in a Palestinian family. *Nature Morte aux Grenades* (2006-07), displayed at Galleria Continua’s booth at Art Dubai in March, appears to be a tabletop of colorful crystal tchotchkes; upon closer inspection, the sculpture is an array of hand grenades splayed out on a stainless-steel surgical table. *Untitled (Wheelchair II)* (1999), a stainless steel four-wheeled chair—more Bauhaus than hospital—has large-toothed, serrated knife

performance at Basement Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1981. Courtesy the artist.



UNDER SIEGE, 1982, photo documentation of the performance inside a wooden structure, with plastic sheeting and liquid clay. Photo by J. McPherson. Courtesy Galleria Continua, San Gimignano/Beijing/Le Moulin.

blades for handles. In *Incommunicado* (1993), a carbon-steel baby's crib, also on four wheels, Hatoum replaced the mattress frame with taut cheese-slicer wires, implying bodily harm rather than security. In Hatoum's sculptures, intimations of violence imply that nothing is as safe as it appears, or as it should be.

Mona Hatoum's complex life-story raises questions about how—and whether at all—an artist's work reflects her biography. Her family was forced to flee their home in Haifa in 1948 during the Arab-Israeli War. They made their way to Beirut, where her father took a position at the British Embassy, after his career as a British civil servant in Palestine. His job permitted family members to hold British passports since their Palestinian national identity documents were no longer recognized following the end of the British Mandate in 1948. Though Hatoum always wanted to be an artist, her father couldn't support her through art school, so she studied graphic design in Beirut and then took a job in a local advertising agency and attended evening art classes. She was traveling in the UK in 1975 when the Lebanese Civil War broke out, preventing her from returning home. Stranded in London, Hatoum seized the opportunity to enroll in the Byam Shaw School of Art. The civil war worsened and Hatoum's exile in London became a permanent condition. After finishing at Byam Shaw, she enrolled in graduate studies at the Slade School of Art in 1979 and has lived in London ever since, now splitting her time between London and Berlin.

Hatoum has previously said: "I think artworks are rooted in one's history and life experience. So inevitably there is a sense of conflict, threat and instability in my work, but it is not meant as an illustration of my own experience." Her artworks, while rarely autobiographical or explicitly topical, communicate many of her life's experiences: an outrage at the entrenched racism and sexism in liberal democracies; the condition of exile; the plight of women; and a wariness of state-sponsored surveillance.

While at the Slade, Hatoum became involved with feminist and political action groups, an experience that markedly influenced her work from these years. She veered away from traditional art-making materials. In a series of untitled sculptures, which, in hindsight, were prototypes for many of her later works, Hatoum conducted 240 volts of electricity through a series of household objects—scissors, spoons, colanders, metal rulers, corkscrews and bull-dog clips—suspended in a strand; passing through these objects, the current illuminated a light bulb at the bottom. Evading school officials and fire marshals concerned about the live current, Hatoum "performed" these sculptures in private, half-hour sessions for an invited audience. This led to full-out performance works that confronted the viewer and artist alike with potential risk and discomfort.

At that time, Hatoum picked up the video camera and discovered how invasive and confrontational the lens could be. In *Don't Smile, You're on Camera* (1980), Hatoum surreptitiously mixed live images of audience members with footage of naked bodies, making it appear that the camera could see through the audience's clothing; people got up and left. Shortly after, Hatoum encountered further institutional resistance. *Waterworks* (1981), in which she

envisioned positioning two cameras in the London Institute of Contemporary Arts' toilets, broadcasting people using the restrooms to monitors outside "to challenge the hierarchical structure which is placed on the orifices of the body," was banned. The work's liberated agenda ran afoul of the very social taboos Hatoum sought to transgress.

Following graduation, Hatoum took her performances on the road. In *Under Siege*, first performed at Aspex Gallery in Portsmouth, England, in May 1982, Hatoum erected a tall transparent box in which she confined herself covered in clay and smeared the walls with the abject-looking material as she struggled to stand up and move around. An aural bricolage of news reports and revolutionary songs accompanied her actions. Hatoum toured North America in 1983 and 1984, performing at the Niagara Artists' Centre, at the Western Front in Vancouver and in New York at the legendary Tribeca performance space, Franklin Furnace. The Western Front—where Hatoum was an artist-in-residence in 1984—hosted her most overtly political performance, *The Negotiating Table* (1983). Lying motionless on a table illuminated by a single light, Hatoum wrapped herself in plastic and gauze and was bound by rope at her feet and covered in blood and entrails while excerpts from Western leaders' speeches about peace blared around her. Hatoum recently reflected to ArtAsiaPacific: "My performance work at the time was not necessarily a response to events in Lebanon and the Middle East (with the exception of *The Negotiating Table*), but dealt with the generalized issue of the relationship between the "Third World" and the West."

Presaging a shift in her work from confrontation to presentation, the moving autobiographical video *Measures of Distance* (1988) delves into the story of Hatoum's family. In the video, conversations between Hatoum and her mother are overlaid by Hatoum reading aloud letters sent by her mother, who recounts a recent visit by "my dear Mona." One letter relates an incident in which Hatoum's father walked into the bathroom to discover Mona, naked, taking photographs of her mother, also naked, in the shower. In the video, these photographs are overlaid with close-ups of the Arabic text of her mother's letters; inadvertently or not, the text resembles barbed wire, symbolically ensnaring her mother. The entire narrative is told from her mother's perspective: how her outraged husband cannot understand what happened and dismisses the incident as "women's nonsense," while feeling "as if you [Mona] had trespassed on his property." Hatoum's mother also expresses her own anguish at the family's life of exile in war-ravaged Lebanon: "We were living on our own land [in Palestine], in a village with all our family and friends around us...It was paradise compared to where we are now."

The mature period of Hatoum's career, when she established herself as an iconic artist whose sculptures embodied the urgent social concerns that she had previously addressed in her performances, began in 1989 with *The Light at the End*, exhibited at the Showroom Gallery. Six electric heating elements, suspended vertically from an iron frame resembling prison bars, gave off a palpable, menacing heat. The work was a turning point for Hatoum as the raw energy of her politically charged performances was sublimated into imposing objects. Hatoum explained to AAP:

“What changed is that instead of my delivering a message to the audience through my actions as a performer, I decided to set up situations where viewers could experience for themselves feelings of danger, threat, instability and uncertainty through the physical interaction with the work.”

Up to this point, Hatoum had exhibited largely in group exhibitions curated around feminist and political themes. In the early 1990s, as post-colonial theory changed the cultural landscape, Hatoum appeared in exhibitions such as “Interrogating Identity” at New York University’s Grey Art Gallery. The categorization of Hatoum as an identity artist culminated with her inclusion in the curated exhibition, “Identity and Alterity,” at the Italian Pavilion of the 1995 Venice Biennale.

Hatoum’s most impressive and seminal sculptures also date from this period. She channeled the intensity of her earlier performances into objects whose formal austerity captures the harsh realities experienced by marginalized individuals in public and private spaces. Hatoum appropriated the appealing formal language of minimalism and rejected its renunciation of all overt subject matter, instead imbuing her work with symbolic meaning. She told *AAP*: “I liked the minimal aesthetic because of the economy of form and the emphasis on the material reality of the work. At the time, it felt important to use the language of minimalism but also to fill it with signs that refer to the world outside, as opposed to keeping it non-referential.”

The cube is minimalism’s signature form and Hatoum has riffed on the minimalist affection for mute, orthogonal shapes. Whereas the minimalists disavowed the embodiment of meaning in their sculptures, Hatoum uses their forms to evoke the body. Hatoum’s *Socle du Monde* (“*Base of the World*”) (1992-93), echoes not only Tony Smith’s steel cube, *Die* (1962), but Piero Manzoni’s own *Socle du Monde* (1961), in which the title is written upside down on an iron monolith. Hatoum’s *Socle* is covered in iron filings held by magnets inside, which create a textured surface that resembles a mass of entrails. The reticular pattern results from the magnets’ natural polarity. Dialectical forces reappear in *+ and –* (1994), a circular bed of sand four meters in diameter, in which one half of a motorized arm makes circular ridges in the sand and the other hand wipes the sand flat. These bold geometric shapes evoke, rather than resist, interpretation.

Both *+ and –* and *Corps Étranger* (1994)—two of Hatoum’s signature works—were holdovers from her student days at the Slade. Though she made a miniature prototype of *+ and –* in 1979, the realization of *Corps Étranger* required the backing of France’s Centre Pompidou. Returning to the performative aspect of her early works, Hatoum underwent an endoscopy and coloscopy, plus an echography to record her breathing and heartbeat. Shown in a circular white room, the resulting video is projected onto the darkened floor. The camera passes over Hatoum’s skin before entering various orifices, traveling through the body’s passageways; it’s not an easy watch for squeamish viewers. In conversation, Hatoum balked at the suggestion that *Corps Étranger* could be seen as a kind of extreme pornography, in which the camera literally penetrates the female body, saying: “There is nothing seductive

about seeing green slime flowing inside the intestinal tubes, so it is in parts quite disgusting and frightening. For me it was more about issues of surveillance and how we are watched and scrutinized constantly and how our boundaries are constantly invaded.”

In 1995, around the time of her appearance at Venice and her shortlisting for Britain’s Turner Prize, Hatoum embarked on her furniture sculptures: domestic objects transformed into sinister look-alikes. *Silence* (1994) is an infant’s cot recreated in clear glass, rendering it fragile and nearly invisible—a potential hazard in the gallery or the home. *Divan Bed* (1996) is anything but a cozy sofa; made of steel tread plates, its proportions and low height make it resemble a coffin. Hatoum explained: “I was interested in using pieces of furniture in my work because they are objects that we encounter in our everyday life so we already have an established relationship with them. They are also very much about the body, so they can refer to the body even when it is absent. And when those familiar objects are transformed in such a way that they become strange and sometimes threatening and dangerous objects—revealing an undercurrent of hostility, danger and threat—by implication they make reality itself questionable and full of uncertainties.”



HOMEBOUND, 2000, mixed-media installation with kitchen utensils, furniture, electric wire, light bulbs, computerized dimmer unit, amplifier and speakers. Installation view at Duveen Galleries in Tate Britain, London, 2000. Photo by Edward Woodman. Courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua, San Gimignano/Beijing/Le Moulin.

Home has become the explicit subject of Hatoum's works in the current decade. *Homebound* (2000), shown at documenta11 in 2002, is an amalgamation of many earlier works. Behind a taught lattice of wires is a room of stripped-down household objects: a bed without a mattress, empty chairs and bedside tables. Electrical wires run throughout, connecting lamps and lights positioned inside or on the objects. The metal furniture is electrified by the current (viewers are protected by the wire fence) and the lights are on a dimmer, turning on and off at irregular intervals. The perils of the domestic are reprised in *Cage-à-deux* (2002), literally a "cage for two," which resembles a prison cell-sized bird cage, except that the two sinks inside suggest that this is a home for two and that the home—and marriage—is a kind of prison. Hatoum's itinerant life takes shape in *Mobile Home* (2005), displayed in a solo show at her New York gallery, Alexander and Bonin. Between two metal police



CAGE-À-DEUX, 2002, mild steel, painted medium-density fiberboard, 201.5 × 315 × 199.5 cm. Photo by Hugo Glendinning. Courtesy Galleria Continua, San Gimignano/Beijing/Le Moulin.



NATURE MORTE AUX GRENADES, 2006–07, mild steel, crystal, rubber, 95 × 208 × 70 cm. Courtesy Galleria Continua, San Gimignano/Beijing/Le Moulin.

barriers are a suitcase, various tables, children’s toys and fabric swatches, all attached to taut motorized wires that pull the objects back and forth, connecting stability at home with law and order.

In several major solo exhibitions in the first half of 2008—at Chantal Crousel gallery in Paris, the XIII Biennale Donna in the Palazzo Massari in Ferrara, Italy, Galerie Max Hetzler in Berlin and the Parasol Unit in London—Hatoum revisited many of the motifs and strategies from the past decade. Her exhibition at Max Hetzler was called “Unhomely,” the literal English translation of the German word *unheimliche*, or “uncanny.” Building off Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay on the uncanny, Hatoum acknowledges, “home and the uncanny, or the familiar turning unfamiliar, is the basis of so many of my works. Whether playing with scale by enlarging harmless kitchen utensils until they become threatening or passing electricity through everyday objects and investing them with a kind of animism, or using incongruous materials that make the objects or furniture unusable or dangerous, this is all about the uncanny.”

The exhibition’s centerpiece was *Undercurrent* (2008), a new version of a work Hatoum has shown elsewhere in the past four years. The work is a circular array of red, cloth-covered wires woven into a square tapestry in the middle of a circle. The wires flow out along the ground to form the circle’s perimeter, demarcated with light bulbs that fade off and on. As in her untitled, electrified sculptures from nearly 30 years ago, electricity stands as a metaphor for a danger lurking underfoot and overhead in every modern home.

Though the civil war in Lebanon prevented Hatoum from returning to Beirut in 1975, it alerted her to the instability that can infringe upon domestic security because, or regardless, of political turmoil. As Hatoum’s exile in Europe has stretched into decades, she has transitioned away from artworks directly inspired by real-world events to artworks that address the ubiquitous and often banal dangers of bourgeois life.

Hatoum’s reputation for stern, ruminative sculptures may have cost her the celebrity bestowed on younger artists as the art world has moved on from the politically strident 1980s and 1990s. However, in spite of the art world’s shifting fashions, the government of Denmark conferred the country’s most important cultural award, the Sonning Prize, on Hatoum in 2004—the first time the prize was given to a visual artist. The award was previously conferred on the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson; playwright and Czech president Václav Havel; Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman; feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir and political philosopher Hannah Arendt—truly distinguished company united by unwavering ethical standards. Though Hatoum adopts the cause of the dispossessed, the exiled and the oppressed, she said many years ago: “I am not a pacifist. I think that people who are pacifists accept the idea of nations as they are at the moment. They are the privileged ones who have an interest in keeping things as they are.”

Tools
