

The Many Contradictions of Mona Hatoum

By Farah Nayeri July 7, 2015



Mona Hatoum standing behind one of her artworks. Gian Ehrenzeller/European Pressphoto Agency

PARIS — Mona Hatoum was vacationing in London in 1975 when civil war broke out back home in Lebanon. With Beirut’s airport closed for nine months, she found herself cut off from her family and on her own at age 23.

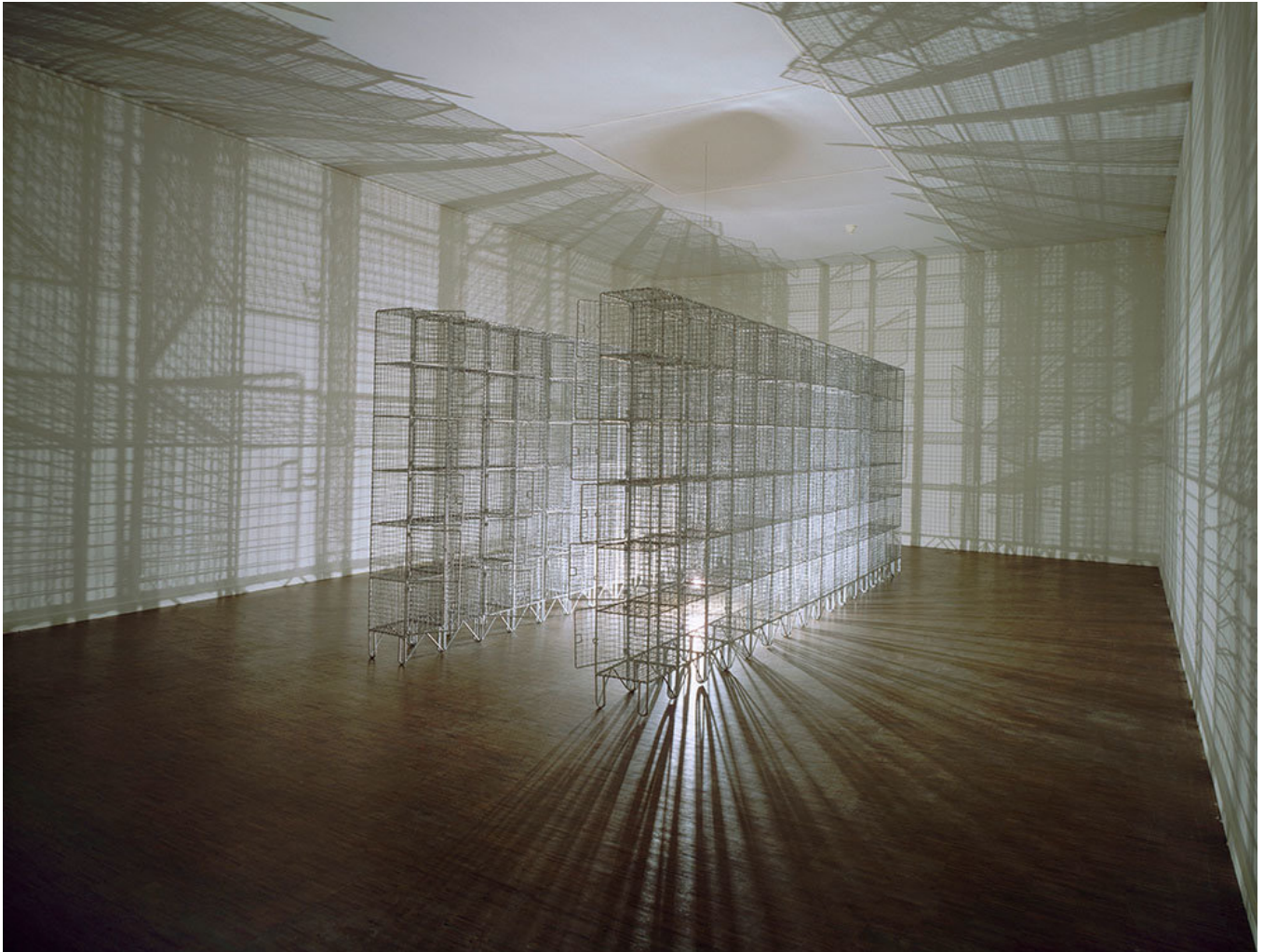
“I was stuck in London,” the British-Palestinian artist said in an interview here late last month. “It didn’t feel lucky at the time, because I was feeling miserable, but also supporting myself, and having to get used to the cold weather.”

That extended holiday proved a pivotal twist of fate. Ms. Hatoum settled in London and, after a few years of doing odd jobs and living “hand-to-mouth,” as she put it, graduated from the Slade School of Fine Art in London in 1981. By 1994, she had a career-altering mini-exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris and in 1995 was shortlisted for the Turner Prize.

Now, Ms. Hatoum has [a solo show](#) of 110 works at the Pompidou, her biggest and most prominent exhibition yet. (It runs through Sept. 28 and travels to the Tate Modern in London in May 2016. A [smaller, unrelated show](#) opens at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston on Aug. 26.) The nonchronological display includes quietly disturbing installations featuring cages and grids, barbed wire, domestic objects, maps and strands of her hair. Her work is inspired by Minimalism, Surrealism and conceptual art. It occasionally also evokes her Palestinian roots, leading some to see Middle Eastern connections in everything she does, to her lingering displeasure.

“What I like about her is her ability to combine different cultures: She was born in one particular place, settled in another, was adopted by it, and has managed to mix everything together in a universal way,” said Christine Van Assche, the exhibition’s curator, who also was the curator for Ms. Hatoum’s first Pompidou show 21 years ago.

Ms. Hatoum was born in Beirut in 1952 — four years after her Palestinian parents had seen their own temporary stay in Lebanon turn permanent in May 1948 after the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli war. Her father found a job at the British Embassy in Beirut, and he got British passports for himself, his wife and their three daughters (Mona is the youngest).



Mona Hatoum's 1992 work "Light Sentence" is at the Pompidou Center. Philippe Migeat/Centre Pompidou, Mnam-CCI, via Dist RMN-GP

Mona loved to draw and make things and was eager to study art, but her father was against it. He preferred "dealing with life and survival," said Ms. Hatoum, 63. "That's true of a lot of Palestinians," she added, "because they lost everything, and they didn't care so much about property and things. They cared more about building the character of their children and making them strong, so they could stand alone."

Ms. Hatoum ended up studying graphic design in Beirut, a field with better job prospects than art, and then worked in public relations and advertising. She was about to continue her studies at a Beirut university, this time focusing on art, when her London trip intervened.

Her first works were dramatic performances that alluded to her Palestinian

origins and drew instant attention from the media and international curators. "Under Siege," staged in 1982 (a year after she graduated) at the Aspex Gallery in Portsmouth, England, involved her repeatedly tripping inside a liquid-clay-smear vertical chamber in an expression of personal turmoil, to the sound of revolutionary songs in Arabic and English recorded during London marches, and excerpts from Western news broadcasts. The clay obscured the fact that she was naked, but the British newspaper *The Sun* howled (according to subsequent reports in *The Independent* and *The Guardian*): "Nude has ticket to writhe," adding, "Taxpayers outraged."

By 1984, she was being given a residency at an art center in Vancouver, British Columbia — where her work was first spotted by Ms. Van Assche, the Pompidou curator. In 1986 came another residency, this time in Seattle.

She then switched to sculpture and installation. Her first Pompidou show and solo exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York followed. Early installations included eerie structures — a penitentiary-style arrangement of steel bunk beds, a giant cube covered with iron filings — and a room filled with clumps and suspended strands of her hair ("Recollection," 1995). In 1996, she started a series of maps of the Middle East and the world, which she has continued.

One early work — on display here — is "Light Sentence" (1992), an enclosure of wire mesh lockers with a dangling light bulb that casts dizzying shadows. The piece is broadly meant to symbolize confinement and disorientation. Yet the artist (who has never lived in Israel or the Palestinian territories) said one viewer took it to represent a Palestinian refugee camp. "They come with this preconceived idea of where I come from," Ms. Hatoum said, "and therefore what I'm putting in my work, and they tend to over-interpret the work in relation to my background."

To be fair, her recurring evocations of Palestinians and conflict can encourage pigeonholing. The first room in the Pompidou show contains her first map, "Present Tense" (1996, recreated in 2011), made of 2,200 blocks of olive-oil soap from Nablus near Jerusalem, marking territories that would have been under Palestinian self-rule if the 1993 Oslo Accords had been implemented. Elsewhere, in "Natura morta (medical cabinet)" (2012), rows of delicate objects made of colored Murano glass turn out to be sculptures of hand grenades.

Tension runs through her domestic depictions, too. "Home" (1999) is a kitchen table covered with shiny steel utensils, some of which occasionally light up and emit ominous crackling sounds.

"Home," from 1999. Jörg von Bruchhausen, Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin

Ms. Hatoum agrees that her works often convey a sense of entrapment. "The basis of it is a feeling of wanting to be free of all those restrictions, whether it's social or political, that are always put on people," she said, "so I can be whatever I want to be."

The Paris exhibition mixes works from all periods and disciplines, emphasizing her breadth. Contradiction runs through the work. Items that seem harmless turn out to be menacing, such as a steel wheelchair with knife blades for push handles ("Untitled (Wheelchair II)," 1999). Her work "manages to combine accusation and poetry with a masterly deftness," the Sunday Times critic Waldemar Januszczak wrote of her 2008 show at Parasol unit, a nonprofit gallery in London.

Ziba Ardalan, founder and director of Parasol unit, said that Ms. Hatoum's installations were suggestive, not openly confrontational. "She doesn't scream at you," she said. "She says what she wants, but in a smart and gentle way."

While Ms. Hatoum's works draw healthy sums at auction, she is not

among contemporary artists whose pieces fetch seven- or eight-figure prices. Her auction record, \$470,500, was set at Christie's New York in 2011 for "Silence" (1994), a child's crib made of glass laboratory tubing.

She is "an artist I've very much enjoyed seeing, but have very little experience selling," said Cheyenne Westphal, co-head of contemporary art worldwide at Sotheby's, who noted that Ms. Hatoum's large sculptural works were often in museums but rarely at auctions.

Ms. Hatoum said that she doesn't monitor her market status. "In order to keep myself sane, I don't focus on those things," she said. But, she added, she sometimes asks galleries to price her work "low enough so that it attracts museums' interest."

Ms. Hatoum, who lives in London and Berlin, said her art often grows out of residencies. A recent stint at the Pinacoteca in São Paulo, Brazil, produced six new works, including one for which she asked women to embroider images from their dreams on pillowcases. This summer, she will make glass works at the Pilchuk Glass School in Seattle.

Ms. Van Assche said Ms. Hatoum still had plenty to say. "She works fairly slowly, and when she's putting together exhibitions and catalogs, she stops creating," Ms. Van Assche said. "Artists who work as slowly as that, and in a concentrated fashion, tend to endure."

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