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Art and design

Mona Hatoum: 'Each person is free to understand what I do in the light of who they are and where they stand'

At a major retrospective of her work at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the artist Mona Hatoum looks back on her Middle Eastern roots, her time in the UK and her use of tension to create remarkable art

'I don't want to pin a single meaning on each one' ... Mona Hatoum Photograph: Gian Ehrenzeller/EPA

Philippe Dagen

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Mona Hatoum is wary of simplistic, ready-made judgments, all the more so because she has often had to endure their extreme brutality. Born in Beirut in 1952 of Palestinian parents, the British artist has often seen her work interpreted hastily. She does not deny that her creative output often has a political edge, but when it does, it's not always to do with the Middle East.

"Each person is free to understand what I do in the light of who they are and where they stand," she says. "I can talk about the origin of my works, but no more. I don't want to pin a single meaning on each one." Indeed, the claim that her work is monotone, inspired by the tragedy of exile and warfare, overlooks the tension she creates between opposing polarities - banal and dreamy, anxious and carefree, serious and playful - which is what makes her art so remarkable.

No Way III, 1996, stainless steel Photograph: Mona Hatoum © White Cube, photo Edward Woodman

As we talk, we wander among the works set out for the retrospective at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. A video recalls Roadworks, one of her first performances, dating from 1985, and one of the most frequently seen. We see Hatoum, dressed in black, at a market and walking along the street in London's Brixton neighbourhood, which had recently seen race riots and tension between the black population and the police. She is barefoot, but heavy, army-style boots are tied to her ankles. She moves slowly and with difficulty.

"Of course, there'd been riots. But look at these two men, here, in front of the shop: they're laughing," she says. "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."

The video can be interpreted in other ways. For example, one might see a young, easygoing woman held back by heavy army boots. It is still a burlesque fable but with feminist connotations.

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"Doing performance art was a way of working well away from the shadow of males," she admits. Hatoum discovered this form at art school in London, starting in 1975. That year she left Lebanon, planning to stay only a short time in London. But while she was there, war broke out in her home country and she could not return. So she enrolled at art school. "At that time I thought being an artist obviously meant being a painter or a sculptor," she explains.

"My teachers introduced me to performance art, about which I knew nothing," she says. "At the same time, I learned how to use a video camera. I thought it was an interesting sideline compared to more usual forms of expression, and its marginal nature suited me very well as I myself felt pretty detached from British society. I immediately saw a connection between video and surveillance."

Mona Hatoum, a retrospective - in pictures

View gallery

One of her first experiments, in 1980, was called Don't Smile, You're on Camera. Sitting in the audience, she pans the camera across herself, while at the same time showing the pictures on a screen. Then she does the same thing to a man sitting next to her, then a woman. Today, we'd say she scanned them. Various ideas recur in this performance and in subsequent works: the prying, invasive eye, and the barriers that must be raised to protect one's privacy.

In 1982, Under Siege caused controversy. Hatoum put herself, naked, in a glass box full of mud, then struggled to stand up. The damp earth sticks to the sides and the artist is barely visible. In 1994 the Corps Etranger (Foreign Body) installation confronted viewers with pictures from an endoscopic examination of her stomach, her heartbeat marking time. Nearby hang sheets of paper she produced, mixing nail cuttings, hair and bodily fluids with the pulp. "I wanted to work with everything that was dirty, everything we think is disgusting," she says. But the result is neither expressionist nor exhibitionist, all a matter of allusion and metonymy. You need to pay attention to grasp all the symbols and suggestions.

To the words as well. A clump of pubic hair adorns an ordinary grey metal garden chair. The piece is called Public Garden. "Because the words 'public' and 'pubic' are close in English. But also because people often treat women like public gardens, open to all glances," Hatoum explains. "And of course it's reminiscent of Le Viol [Rape], by Magritte," a painting from 1934, in which the eyes on a woman's head have been replaced by breasts, the mouth by a vagina.

So is this more surrealism, I inquire. She readily admits that it is. I mention Meret Oppenheim and her Déjeuner de Fourrure and here again she acquiesces. Hatoum's Why Not Squeeze - two balls of fur in a bird's cage - explicitly refers to one of Marcel Duchamp's best-known pieces, Why not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy, which he defined as a "readymade aidé". "I like to work from what I find in the towns I visit. I never know what I'm going to do. It depends on the place, with no previously decided programme. I am just as happy to gather and then assemble, as to make something from scratch," she says.

Mona Hatoum and the 6ft cheese-grater

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The exhibition is an extraordinary mixture: household implements that have acquired a threatening edge by being deformed or enlarged; maps made of glass beads, woven wool or cakes of soap; a globe on which the outline of the continents is highlighted by red neon; pieces of furniture put to other uses; steel cages, though not necessarily prison cells.

There's even a collection of Murano glass grenades in a display you would expect to find in a chemist's. The colours are so exquisite, they look like real fruit. "They are called grenades, because pomegranates [from which the word is derived] project seeds when they open, much as a grenade disperses scraps of metal," she points out. "But you could also see it as a sort of painting, a still life with fruit ... I want to make use of such contradictions, play on ambiguity, never take anything for what it appears to be."

Mona Hatoum is at the Pompidou Centre, Paris, until 28 September

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