

**Bodily Identifications: *Mona Hatoum* at Tate Modern, London,
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In 2012 I went with Kirsty Hall to the Louise Bourgeois exhibition at the Freud Museum. We had a long and (characteristically for Kirsty) diverse, wide-ranging and allusive conversation afterwards (in Giraffe, surrounded by incredibly noisy children) and then Kirsty wrote her review (*Sitegeist* No. 8).

I was reminded of this enjoyable way of thinking dialogically about art and went with a young art historian to Mona Hatoum.

The visit was an opportunity for me to be in the presence again of art which I first encountered at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford (now called Modern Art Oxford) in 1998. Those installations have been part of the structure of my mind ever since. And the current exhibition also has many other works made since then. This is a major retrospective of a major artist. And by going to see it with someone very different from me, I hoped for new insights as well as new experiences. My companion is of a different generation and gender from me and an expert in contemporary art, which I am not. In what ways would a young woman see Hatoum's work differently from me? Would her knowledge support or undermine my amateur enthusiasm? How would we both (white British) respond to the themes of racial and national displacement and of political violence in the work?

The exhibition presented an extensive collection of the performance work and videos, the sculpture and installation works by Hatoum over the past 35 years. The Director of Tate Modern writes (in the exhibition guide) that this work 'places Hatoum at the forefront of intellectual contemporary practice.' There are many reasons why Hatoum's work is particularly interesting to psychoanalysis, which I will try to convey in this review, but initially I will try to give an idea (without commenting at first) of what visiting the exhibition was like. The first thing you meet in the exhibition is *Socle du Monde* (*Base or Pedestal of the World*). It is a black cube standing 6 ft. high and looking like hair or fur or intestines. It

is in fact composed of iron filings held in their swirling patterns by powerful magnets. Through several rooms of video installations, which I'll come back to later, you come to a collection of tiny frail pieces of paper the size of old-fashioned writing paper, but mainly plain or with burnt or embossed images. They are variously made of woven human hair (a recurrent theme) and also skin, nails, urine and blood. Further on a studio flat in a (large) corner of one exhibition room (called *Homebound*) is furnished with tables, chairs, lamps, kitchen implements, electric fires etc. all of which are wired together and connected to a powerful electricity supply which is turned up every few minutes so that the whole room audibly fizzles with terrifying but invisible energy. *Hot Spot* is a globe standing more than 7 ft. high with red neon outlining the continents and picking out places of military or civil unrest. It indelibly shows a world (our world) that, as Hatoum says, is 'continually caught up in conflict and unrest.' (From the exhibition guide).

What doesn't Hatoum's work cover? From the intensely physical and personal (pubic hair, her mother in a shower) to major statements about political displacement such as *Quarters* or *Light Sentence* and often with a delightful sense of humour (the pubic hair forms the seat of an ornate wrought-iron chair called punningly *Jardin Public*. What they all share is an intensely thought-provoking and profoundly visceral confrontation with being human. And as my companion put it 'thinking through materials.' They are about alienation, about being de-centred, about Being-towards-death. It is no surprise that in the essays in the exhibition book (Van Assche & Wallis, 2016) many references will be familiar to readers of *Sitegeist*, including Merleau-Ponty, Irigaray, Kristeva and Foucault.

In the short space of this review I can only hope to convey a brief impression of the fascination and corporeality of Hatoum's work for those readers who are unfamiliar with it and to urge you to seek it out (the exhibition next goes to Helsinki) at its main homes at Tate Modern and Centre Pompidou, Paris. Meanwhile, I will try to comment briefly on the impact this exhibition had on a middle-aged psychoanalyst and a young art historian.

My friend was most of all interested in the connections. Indeed, there was a narrow corridor room containing a great variety of materials, inspirations and made objects—a simulacrum of the artist's studio—which she called 'the connection room'. We also discussed together how some of the sounds or smells of installations preceded them or lingered after visiting, not just in the mind but literally. My companion spoke about how the enormous bench-sized cheese grater had not made sense to her when she first saw it alone in another museum, but here it was contextualized and powerful. The 'bodily identifications' grow stronger with exposure.

For my companion the most memorable piece was the one called *Present Tense*. A room is floored with square pale Palestinian soap bars, whose olive oil scent fills the surrounding galleries. Picked out on the soaps, as if embedded—as happens to soap bars—is a pattern in pink. On closer inspection, it is not body tissues this time, but glass beads. They show a map of the Occupied Territories. Hatoum, we learn, bought the soaps in the souks of Jerusalem Old City just as one might buy them in an East London corner shop, feeling support for the Middle Eastern conflict. The intimacy of the soap—its smell, its function—exposes the struggle and ephemerality of the Palestinian people's plight. And so many ideas cling to the room—a soapy floor, sketchy map like a body, scent, handcrafted merchandise, tradition, recent history... The identifications take a bodily presence.

For me, one of the most powerful of all of the works was one of the video installations, *Corps Etranger (Foreign Body)*. You stand in the dark inside a tall circular hut only big enough for two or three other people. The floor is a TV screen so you have to huddle against the wall to look down at it. Showing is a film, made with specialist medical cameras, which explores, probes and penetrates the artist's body. Sliding over skin, negotiating patches of hair, plunging deeply into each orifice, in full colour and with body fluids and sphincters pulsing with life, we travel over and into her body. It is as though the caverns of Lascaux have come to life, or as if we have shrunk beyond Brobdingnagian dimensions to a virus. It is prurient, horrifying, disgusting, fascinating, invasive, unfor-

gettable. I have thought and talked about it a lot in the 18 years since I first saw it, but could hardly bear to stay with it this time. Most other people, I noticed, could only bear it for a second or two. Being all alone in there might not be so bad, but to be inside Hatoum's body standing beside strangers is difficult. Certainly, my companion did not enter it with me. So many psychoanalytic thoughts burst from this experience: following the skin inside and outside the body, the erogenous sites but also the ego; seeing what we should not; seeing what our own body must (approximately) look like; surveillance; the uncanny and abject forced into our mind; the intimate and familiar made strange...

Hatoum's works fill the mind and all the senses but they do not shout. My companion and I found the huge exhibition was not exhausting, and though we had clearly had very different experiences in there, our discussion—over a meal in a Polish restaurant this time—was quiet and calm. Just as she often uses skin and surfaces as ideas and as materials, Hatoum's work gets thoroughly inside one's awareness.

Reference

Van Assche, C. and Wallis, C. (Eds.) (2016) *Mona Hatoum*, London: Tate Publishing.