

# MONA HATOUM

## *Over My Dead Body*

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Mona Hatoum, a British artist of Palestinian/Lebanese heritage, unites in her work aesthetic and conceptual tendencies that might otherwise seem diametrically opposed. Thus, examples from the last ten years of Hatoum's practice as represented in the exhibition *Over My Dead Body*, graft highly emotional narratives of distress and violence onto the post-Duchampian sculptural object. The results vary. In fact, in many of Hatoum's works there remains an irresolvable tension between the materiality of the works themselves and the often overlaid references to political and institutionalised violence that they are made to carry. Certainly, within the context of Hatoum's practice in general this tension can be rewarding and productive. At other times though, the sheer weight of their literality denies particular works an additional compelling complexity.

This seemingly contradictory tension is evident even in some of Hatoum's early performances. In *Variation on Discord and Divisions*, a performance piece from 1984, the visceral invocation of mediated violence is made wholly explicit. Here the artist hooded and in black overalls, pulls herself face down along the floor of a gallery covered with newspaper headlines. There she proceeds to scrub with a reddish liquid from a bucket that appears to be blood. In retrospect, the overt metaphoricality of this work seems heavy-handed and its invocation of a codified iconography of violence over-circumscribed. Nevertheless, the work is marked simultaneously by a very formalised, even minimalist series of simple performed actions: crawling, unwrapping, scrubbing, kneeling and cutting. It is the ritualised ambiguity and obsessiveness of these gestures that effectively challenge audience expectations of how violence is represented en masse. However, the very literalness of the visual symbolism in this work with its recourse to standardised imagery of state-sanctioned violence and incarceration, weighs it down in over-saturated *a priori* meanings. Another performance from this same period, *Roadworks* [1985–95] functions very differently however. In this work, a barefoot Hatoum is dragged through crowded city streets, a pair of standard issue army boots, tied to her ankles.

In this instance, the work succeeded because the iconographic simplicity of the action retained its openness to a variety of interpretations. At the same time though, it did not forego more specific suggestions of the complex ethical and emotional burden incurred by societies supporting military conscription.

The contained conceptual elegance of this last performance appears in many of Hatoum's sculptural objects as well. For example, *Untitled [Wheelchair]* from 1998 is literally as the title suggests, a replica of a wheelchair. However, the uncanniness of this object resides in the fact that all the wheelchair's planar surfaces have deliberately been tilted and skewed. Rendered in clinical stainless steel, *Untitled [Wheelchair]* repudiates the sense of care normally associated with this familiar object, imbuing instead with implications of a calculated, insidious aggression and precariousness. Nonetheless, other works in this object series again become



Top: Mona Hatoum, *Grater Divide*, 2002  
Photo courtesy the artist and Jay Jopling/White Cube, London  
Bottom: Mona Hatoum, *Light Sentence*, 1992  
Photo courtesy the artist



overlaid with inflated metaphors. Therefore, works like *Untitled [Crutches]* [1991–2001], consisting of a pair of flaccid crutches cast in rubber and *Doormat II* [2000–01]—a 'welcome' mat formed from long upended pins—leave little room for conceptual ambiguities that might otherwise render such works truly unnerving. Between these polarities are yet other works, such as Hatoum's human-sized cheese grater *Grater Divide* [2002], whose awkwardly self-conscious title—in the guise of a clumsy pun—fails to undermine the object's aggressively literal physicality.

Perhaps the most successful of Hatoum's works are also her most ambitious. On entering the exhibition, *Corps étranger* [1994] is a work combining minimalist sculptural tendencies with a disconcertingly visceral dimension. *Corps étranger* consists of a claustrophobically constructed cylindrical space—video imagery of the artist's body is projected in extreme close-up onto the floor. More than this though, here the video apparatus also enters the

body, blurring divisions between the assumed imperviousness of outward appearances and the supposed inviolability of individual biology. In this work, Hatoum suggests that both are prey to systems of persistent and unrelenting scrutiny that renders all aspects of the body perpetually accessible to controlling media representation. A smaller related work, *Testimony* [1995–2002] is a more or less life-sized image of a palpating scrotum, contained within a neatly delineated circle, projected onto the museum wall. This work is especially affecting, regardless of its modest scale, for its deliberately myopic focus on a part of the anatomy regularly targeted by torturers. The subtly invoked psychology of torture and fear present in the last work also surfaces in *Homebound* [2000], a formally simulated domestic interior strewn with various household objects, all electrically wired. Light bulbs surge as the current passes through the objects, while the amplified hum of electricity bespeaks an ever-present danger. The entire ensemble is fenced-in with wire rope, simultaneously suggesting an electric fence. *Homebound* resonates with a sense of unease, all the more effective as it refuses the notion that even under the most brutalising political conditions, the home remains a place of solace and refuge. Alternatively in this installation, the home is nothing but an intensified conduit for the fear of potential social persecution that transforms the private domain into a space of unending containment entirely devoid of repose.

All these works are undeniably effective in their ability to combine a formal sculptural language with that of a politicised emotional sensibility. Finally however, there is one piece in this survey that stands alone for its seamless intertwining of the formal and the deeply personal. The video *Measures of Distance* [1988] is significant in Hatoum's oeuvre as it is the artist's sole, expressly autobiographical work. In it, Hatoum is heard translating aloud letters from her mother in Beirut. Visually, the arabic text of these letters forms a grid over the surface of the video and functions as a distancing mechanism, like prison bars or barbed wire. Rather than merely descriptive however, *Measures of Distance* provides individual testimony to the palpably real distance separating the artist from her mother, as well as the place and culture of her upbringing. More generally, it testifies also to ongoing global circumstances separating the countless individuals of various diasporas scattered around the world, whose daily experience of dislocation remains insoluble as the very stuff of personal and collective identity. In precisely the same way, the formal qualities of *Measures of Distance* as a work of 'art,' fail to contain its narrative elements, making satisfactory closure of the work impossible. Here, Hatoum's recognition of the considerable limits of art to resolve lived tensions, grants her work a singular poignancy and emotional power.