

The National



Some of the most important works by the Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum are at Doha's Mathaf

Anna Seaman

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If you were to hurry through Mona Hatoum's show that opened at Mathaf museum in Doha this month, you might miss the significance of the piece from which the exhibition took its name. Turbulence is an installation of thousands of clear, glass marbles laid on the floor in a square and when compared with some of the larger installations such as Suspended, which is a room full of swings bearing street maps of 35 cities, or Home which is a set of kitchen utensils connected with buzzing electric wires, it could possibly have less of an effect.

But Sam Bardaouil, who co-curated the show with Till Fellrath, would urge you to think again.

"When you look at the marbles, they change colour and shape depending on the light and your position," he says. "Although they are solid objects, they are never static, and so this is a very good gateway into understanding the dichotomies and contradictions within Mona's work."

Bardaouil explains that the key to comprehending Hatoum's art is grasping the tension and ambiguity that she intends. "There is always the familiar and the unfamiliar, the large and the small, the soft and the hard and, hence, a sense of turbulence."

Born into a Palestinian family and raised in Lebanon, Hatoum clings firmly to her nationality. Although she has lived in London and other European cities – mostly in voluntary exile from her home – she consistently tries to express both the physical and emotional realities that most of us would otherwise ignore.

In the exhibition Turbulence, Hatoum's newer, large-scale installations are juxtaposed with early works such as performance videos, to show both the linear progression of her art as well as to bring home her message.

It opens with Bunker, a series of tube structures that reference real buildings in Beirut that have been witness to a history of conflict – they are riddled with holes to represent the bullets of war. Roadworks, a video from 1985, plays alongside. In it, Hatoum walks through the streets of London barefoot with Dr Martens boots tied to her ankles at a time when there were riots and government protests. Although the situations are totally different, they both deal with form of turbulence or friction that people come to accept as normal in their daily lives.

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The exhibition is made up of five large gallery spaces and several smaller rooms that house 80 pieces of work spanning more than 30 years.

One room is full of giant kitchen utensils of black finished steel that could also function as furniture. Day Bed is a cheese grater that looks like a bed and Paravent is a three-part grater that resembles a room divider.

With their massive sizes and sharp, accentuated edges, the pieces are menacing and seem to scream about both the absurdity of the mundane and, perhaps, the forced constraints of domesticity onto women – a feminist tone that is not immediately obvious in Hatoum's work.

Light Sentence is a room full of empty wire lockers with a light bulb swinging in the centre, causing the shadows on the walls to sway and shift in an unsettling way.

The original was made in 1992 and is a permanent fixture in the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

"Mona was observing how we as modern citizens live within confined spaces and so are, somehow, sentenced to a life of imprisonment, almost without air," explains Bardaouil. "It reflects on the modern man within an urban setting, the obstruction of space and mobility."

Bearing that in mind, when observing the rest of the works in the show, the sense of absurdity of the most mundane elements of our existence becomes crystal clear.

From Natura Morta, a medical cabinet filled with beautiful, handcrafted Murano glass grenades, to Silence, an infant's cot made from fragile glass tubes, the overriding feeling is one of internal questioning about the daily choices we make.

A mirror bearing the words "You Are Still Here" in Arabic is where I stop and realise that the artist is talking to us, reminding us that this world she is showing us is not a dream, it is very real and we are, in fact, still here and living it day by day.

In the last room are two of her most powerful pieces. Hot Spot (on the cover), a globe made from glowing orange neon tubes to depict a world continually caught up in conflict, stands next to Impenetrable, a suspended cube of barbed fishing wire that seem to offer no way through to a place of resolution.

Perhaps the simplest way to summarise the show is with Hatoum's video in the exhibition titled So Much I Want to Say. She repeats this sentence using her own hands to muffle the sound and it acts as a mantra for her show: she has a lot to say and, in many ways, is still trying to find ways to say it.

• **Turbulence runs until May 18 at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. For more details, visit www.mathaf.org.qa**

aseaman@thenational.ae