



A VISCERAL VOICE

F Doha's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art hosts Mona Hatoum's *Turbulence*, the Palestinian artist's first retrospective in the Middle East. **Rania Habib** reports.

First, there is *Bunker* – an installation of six scorched replicas of iconic Beirut buildings ravaged by Lebanon's Civil War. Then there are *Daybed* and *Paravent*, two life-size cheese graters and *La Grande Broyeuse*, a food mill amplified to 17 times its original size. These steel pieces turn everyday utensils into intimidating black giants. Heavy stuff. By the time I reach the halfway point of *Turbulence*, the retrospective exhibition of Mona Hatoum's work at Doha's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, the artwork after which the show is named – an installation called *Turbulence* – comes as a welcome relief. Thousands of clear glass marbles are packed into a 400 x 400 cm square on the floor. Their luminescence is soothing at first, but upon closer inspection, the marbles look like they are coming to a rolling boil, threatening to burst out of their fragile container. Despite its menacing title, *Turbulence* is the 'softest' work in the exhibition, which comprises close to 80 pieces spanning 30 years of Hatoum's career.

Rumour has it that Qatar Museums Authority (QMA) Chairperson HE Sheikha Al-Mayassa Al-Thani has been keen on a show by the Palestinian artist for some time. The works in this retrospective have been gathered from international collections, both public and private, including the Centre Pompidou and the Musée National D'art Moderne in Paris and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. Other pieces are on loan from the artist's studio or from galleries, such as White Cube in London. Recent exhibitions by QMA have seen the organisation acquire works, however, its representatives declined to comment on whether any by Hatoum have been bought.

ANXIOUS AESTHETICS

Co-curator Sam Bardaouil of Art Reoriented says that the many contradictions found in *Turbulence* are purposeful and befitting of Hatoum's *oeuvre*. "This is what it [her practice] is about," he explains. "She takes you to a familiar place but as you get closer, you realise that something has changed – sometimes in a subtle way and sometimes in a more pronounced way." This unsettling feeling is exemplified here from the start. Once one has seen mundane objects transformed under Hatoum's direction, it is difficult to un-see them, causing a great sense of discomfort. *Untitled (Wheelchair II)* is set in the corner of a room with *+ and -*, *Over My Dead Body* and *Silence*. Though the patient's plight is obvious in *Untitled (Wheelchair II)*, so too is that of the caregiver: the steel hospital chair's handles are blades. "You see familiar objects, but they are transformed so much that you don't know what to do," says Bardaouil. "You are attracted to them, but cautious."

This page:
Below: Sam Bardaouil, Mona Hatoum and Till Fellrath in front of *Bunker* at Mathaf.
Right: (Detail) *Turbulence*. 2012.
Clear glass marbles.
4 x 400 x 400 cm.

Facing page:
(Detail) *Interior Landscape*. 2008.
Steel bed, pillow, human hair,
table, cardboard tray, cut-up
map, plastic rack and wire hanger.
Variable dimensions.

Photography by Rania Habib.



Interior Landscape, from 2008, follows on the politically charged *Over My Dead Body*, a wall-based work that features Hatoum staring down a toy figurine of a soldier. The former is housed in a room of its own, isolating the viewer to provide an all-encompassing experience. It is comprised of a rusted steel and barbed wire bed, a bedside table and a clothes hanger. Maps of Palestine appear in different forms throughout the room: a distorted clothes hanger is shaped to look like the outline of the country and poignantly, a map of Palestine is sewn out of human hair on a pillow strewn across the uninviting bed. Though politics resonate loudly, Hatoum's practice steers clear of obvious references. "One of the most important things *Turbulence* demonstrates is how an artist can create a work that is aware of the social, political and historical realities that overlap in the region without making a work that is so simplistic that it becomes a platform for activism," says Bardaouil. "Mona doesn't worry about being political because you can feel it throughout her works – it is part of her *raison d'être*. Her experiences and biography eventually manifest themselves without her having to state them all the time."

TURBULENCE AHEAD

Peppered between Hatoum's large-scale and show-stopping works are smaller, less obvious pieces such as *Hair Receiver*, *Stream* and *Hair Grids With Knots*, which highlight the artist's recurring use of human hair, a material she works with to feel close to her art while skilled craftsmen execute her larger installations. Videos of her earlier performance art are also interspersed throughout *Turbulence*, including the haunting *So Much I Want To Say*, which sees Hatoum gagged, and the stomach-churning *Variation On Discord And Divisions*, in which the artist presents raw kidneys to members of the audience. Though the show is a retrospective, Bardaouil and Till Fellrath did not employ chronological curation and instead adopt a thematic approach, in an exhibition that is designed to stir mental turbulence in the viewer. "A lot of people think they know her work, but you really don't know Hatoum's work until you see it," says Bardaouil.

The curators worked with the artist for two years before inaugurating the Mathaf exhibition. "We saw every show she has held in the last two years," recalls Bardaouil. "It was important to see

the works installed in various places in order to understand their spatial quality and adapt them to the context of Mathaf." Indeed, the pace of the exhibition is breathable and effortless and by the end of it, it was hard to believe that I had just seen close to 80 artworks. This is where Bardaouil and Fellrath's strength lies: by presenting a thematic cross-section of Hatoum's diverse and complex practice, they have offered a comprehensive and visceral view into one of the region's most important artists. *Turbulence* ends on a spectacular note with *Hotspot* and *Impenetrable*, the first a stainless steel globe covered in buzzing red neon lights delineating the borders of countries, and the second a three-metre-high and wide installation of black finished steel and fishing wire. *Impenetrable* looks delicate and inviting from a distance but up close, the work is true to its title, once again subverting first impressions and stopping one in their tracks. 📍

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