

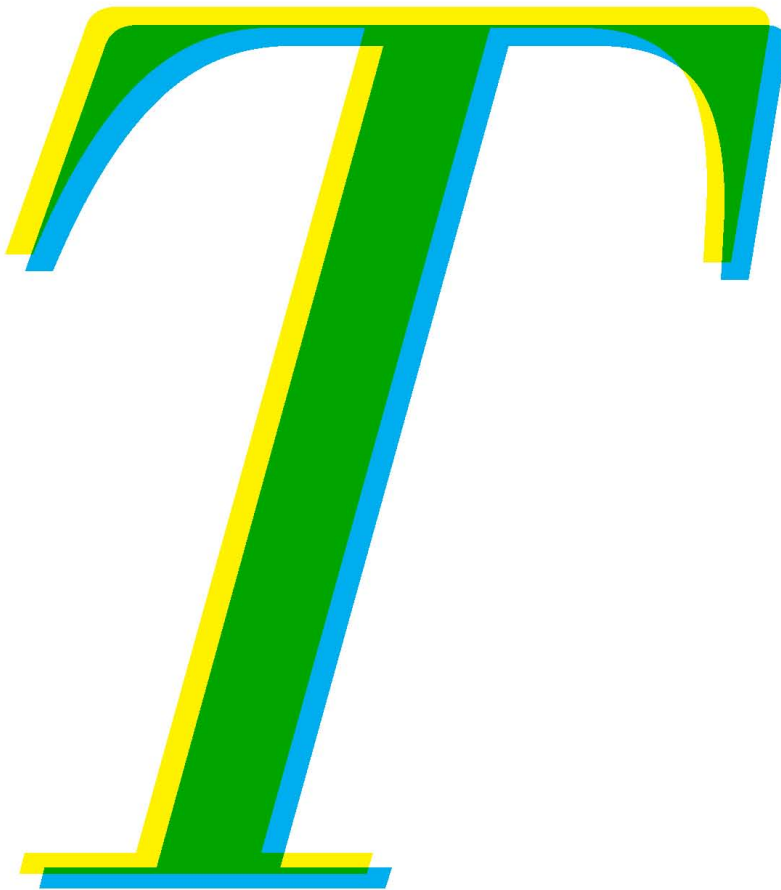
# BREAKING THE CHAINS

MOUNIR FATMI

## PROFILE

Provocative and uncompromising, Moroccan artist Mounir Fatmi takes no prisoners. His direct style tackles difficult issues head-on, leaving us in no doubt that this is a man who has things to say – whether we like them or not. **Nour Wali** meets Fatmi in his adopted city of Paris to ask why.

*Opening spread: Assassins, 2010.  
Installation: Hookahs of various sizes  
and colours. Variable dimensions.  
Photography by Zharloul. Courtesy  
artist and Galerie Hussenot, Paris.*



he first image that springs to mind when describing Mounir Fatmi's artistic vision is that of a modern-day Robin Hood. Provocative yet benevolent, Fatmi's works seek to unearth injustices buried by history, to challenge repressive authority and offer a platform to those marginalised by society. His aim is to invite us to question the world around us in a quest for a more just, liberal and unprejudiced global society – free of censorship, constraints and barriers, whether economic, social, political or religious.



*Connection, 2004. Digital print, 106 x 150 cm. Photography by mouzir fatmi. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Conrads, Düsseldorf.*

**"Art for me is, above all, a battle, a combat, that motivates me to wake up each morning."**

## POSING QUESTIONS

Born in Tangiers, Morocco in 1970, Fatmi moved to Paris in 1999. He now leads a peripatetic lifestyle, a natural consequence of the need for him to keep in close contact with his dealers worldwide and to attend a busy programme of exhibitions, ranging from biennales in Venice, Dakar and Gwangju to shows as far afield as the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. As we sip Perrier at the Libre Échange café in Fatmi's local 17th Parisian arrondissement, he explains his driving force. "Art for me is, above all, a battle, a combat, that motivates me to wake up each morning. At the same time, one must not forget aesthetics, which is a struggle in its own right." Fatmi emphasises the duality of violence and beauty in his work, citing a clear example of his multi-edition sculpture, *The Machinery*, which recently sold above its high estimate for \$30,000 at the Dubai Christie's sale in October 2009. The work consists of a circular steel saw with sharp and threatening teeth, painted over in glycerol black paint, revealing at its heart in shiny metallic Arabic calligraphy, a quote from the Qur'an. It states, somewhat paradoxically, "God is beautiful, He loves beauty".

What is Fatmi telling us? A answer: simply to lay down our preconceptions. On seeing the aggressive saw, one could presume the text would offer a hostile message. Instead, one finds a peaceful phrase, one that is perhaps incongruously pasted on the saw, and perhaps quite suitably contextualised considering the ubiquitous acts of horror perpetuated by religious fundamentalists. Either way, Fatmi does not impose his own opinion. He simply uses his *Machinery* as a tool to instigate debate and allow us to delve into our own conscience.

Another work in the series reveals a similar circular saw, this time literally piercing through the white plinth beneath it, in a symbolic display of calligraphy creating a fissure and penetrating art history. The cited Qur'anic verse warns, "And if you judge people, try to be just!". The medium for Fatmi's "combat" is his art – comprising installations, slogans, video, sculpture, photography, performance and painting. His tactics? Representations that are often shocking, at times violent, perhaps downright politically incorrect and yet so irresistibly entrancing, simple and bold as to forge a lasting impression on one's memory.

His New York gallery, Lombard-Freid, insists that Arab collectors as well as Europeans and Americans are purchasing Fatmi's work, especially museums and public institutions. For example, *Save Manhattan 03*, an installation of speakers recreating the New York skyline pre 9/11, was acquired by the Hessel Foundation for the Bard Museum in New York. It had originally featured at the 52nd Venice Biennale. Fatmi concurs that there is no discrepancy in terms of works preferred by his Western and Arab supporters, adding: "Many Arab collectors enjoy showing my works in their homes to emphasise a visionary outlook, using my art as a kind of envelope to convey messages to their entourage."

## THE CONSTANT QUESTIONER

Stepping into Fatmi's studio a few minutes' walk away from the café, I was stunned at the mass of books piled from ceiling to floor on shelves that flanked both sides of the room, which had an aura of an office-cum-library-cum-living room. Placed next to the series of uncurtained windows was a

meeting table and chairs, seemingly ready for a brainstorming session. Close by was a sofa facing a TV. Underneath were stacks of CDs and DVDs, which I surmised were compilations of Fatmi's own video works. I recalled his film work, shown at Tate Modern's *Paradise Now* 2008 programme featuring "a night of revolutionary political film".

Snapping me out of my musing, Fatmi points to a large photographic work, about a metre high, leaning against the wall. He explains, "Similar work from this series has also been acquired by private Arab collections." The work is one of Fatmi's *Connections* (a series interpreted through photography and installations), showing an eclectic amalgamation of books by international authors, all interlinked with cables.

Fatmi shares an anecdote about this ongoing series, which he began in 2003: "I have always been fascinated by links between things. I

and religion, religion and the state, calligraphy and Western artists such as Jackson Pollock – as unsynchronised with contemporary debates. The unfortunate events of 9/11 soon proved them wrong. Similarly, Fatmi's recent works highlighting the FBI's former espionage and censorship activities against the revolutionary African-American Black Panther Party have become increasingly topical since Barack Obama became President.

Fatmi's insatiable desire to challenge authoritative institutions and the limitations they impose was kindled during his youth in Tangier, within an over-restrictive domestic, political and artistic community. From 1989, Fatmi started conceiving his first of myriad manifestos, beginning with: "My father has lost all his teeth, I can bite him now." This slogan now appears on Fatmi's website homepage, with his name written free of capital letters, heralding liberty from all conformity.

**"Many Arab collectors enjoy showing my works in their homes to emphasise a visionary outlook, using my art as a kind of envelope to convey messages to their entourage."**

believe we can't read the Qur'an out of context, but should also be reading Bataille, Deleuze, Hegel etc, to get a balanced view, even if the authors have contradictory theories. Many years ago, I looked at my shelves and wondered, 'Why do I have books on calligraphy, French philosophers, American Beat Generation authors etc?' I proceeded to link up certain titles and books. This helped me understand my self and interests. I captured it all in photographs and that's how the first *Connections* started. Gradually, I incorporated the Qur'an and other religious texts."

Most of Fatmi's works begin as intimate questions, later evolving into universal investigations concerning society. His vision seems to be consistently ahead of the rest of the world. Fatmi explains that 10 years ago, he faced opposition by those who deemed his themes – regarding art

media. Criticising the state's expectation for artists to auto-censor their art, in 1996 Fatmi launched his *Witnesses* series. Inviting individuals to view a piece of cloth by appointment at his studio, Fatmi would promptly seal it and render it visible only in the viewer's memory. The 'souvenir' of the performance was immortalised through the name and photograph of each consenting witness.

Fatmi's Avant-garde approach impressed the Director of the Cultural Centre at Mantes-la-Jolie in Paris, who offered the artist a residency so he could create work that responded directly to issues concerning the predominantly immigrant local community. Inspired, Fatmi dedicated 2001–04 to living there and developing the *Oval Project*. Through videos, interviews and events broadcast both in France and in the immigrants' native countries, Fatmi promoted a fresh, more

## ENTWINED ALLEGORIES

In 1993, after only three months of teaching at the École des Beaux Arts de Casablanca, Fatmi resigned. He then obliterated in white all the paintings he had created and declared himself symbolically "dead" to the



*The Monuments, 2008, 150 x 150 x 90 cm. Helmets with philosophers' names. Photography by Mounir Fatmi. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Conrads, Düsseldorf.*

balanced perspective of the immigrants, who were hitherto stigmatised by French media coverage as uncivilised hooligans. Fatmi stresses the significance of the *Oval Project* residency as: "One of the best experiences of my career. It's there that I understood the dilemma of architecture. In one single district, I was confronted with social, religious, economic, communication and architectural questions, all intertwined. I began challenging ideas extolled by the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier and all those symbols of a radiant architecture".

Fatmi's cynicism of ostentatious monuments has been repeatedly expressed through his *Skyline* wall installation, presented at the Biennales in Sharjah (2007), Brussels (2008) and Lyon (2009). Composed of countless black VHS cassettes, a mesh of magnetic tape leaks eerily from the metropolis structures and pours onto the floor in a pool of disarray. Fatmi's use of VHS tapes since 2004 undoubtedly references the recordings used by Osama Bin Laden to disseminate propaganda and disrupt powerful cities. Yet *Skyline* may equally be challenging polluting nations as they speed

up global warming or create nuclear weapons in their desire for political dominance.

As with the use of VHS tapes, so with TV antenna cables, photocopying machines and typewriters – Fatmi has a predilection for materials charged with symbolic content that signifies technology fast becoming outdated. With the disappearance of these tools the images they once portrayed will linger like ghosts, alongside the fears and fantasies they provoked.

Considering the endless flow of catastrophes in our contemporary world, Fatmi enthuses at the boundless opportunities to be reaped: "We are in a fascinating period of our history, one ripe with ideas to debate! Architecture is in crisis, theories are in crisis, jobs are in crisis. Either we stare at the door before us in hopelessness or we break it down and go through. One must not be afraid of breaking open locks" 🗝

For more information, visit [www.mounirfatmi.com](http://www.mounirfatmi.com), [www.lombard-freid.com](http://www.lombard-freid.com) and [www.paradiserow.com](http://www.paradiserow.com)

**"I began challenging ideas extolled by the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier and all those symbols of a radiant architecture."**