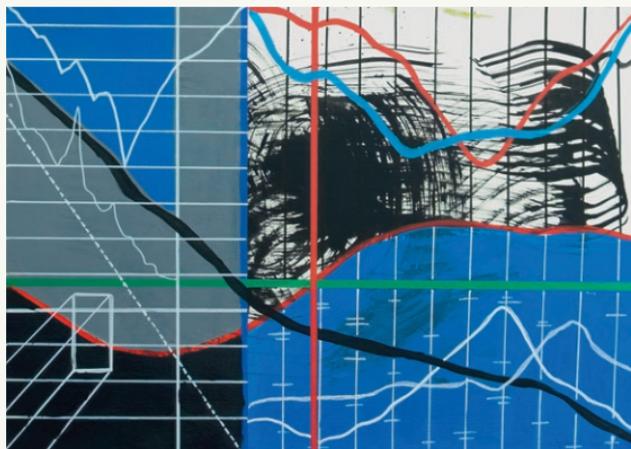


WHILE THE STORM ARRIVES

17.03–19.06.2022



MOUNIR FATMI

WHILE THE STORM ARRIVES

Fernando Gómez de la Cuesta

We can sometimes become fixated on dramatic events, those precise moments when a crisis bursts out into the open—violent, convulsive turning points. While these kinds of extraordinary situations certainly have the power to overwhelm us, grab our attention and shape our understanding of life, these ruptures are also the expression of a whole series of existing circumstances that have suddenly broken through the surface without ever revealing what triggered their release. The causes of this conflict are engulfed by the magnitude of what emerges from this volcanic eruption, hidden behind an enormous, unstoppable explosion that gives no clue as to its origins and offers no hint of the effects yet to be caused by the mass of interlinked structural problems lying beneath the destructive surface of the lava.

Although “While the Storm Arrives” might initially seem like a somewhat audacious, even provocative, title for a project set in a context as complex as the one we have become caught up in, its gutsy character might well draw its strength from a premonition, a forewarning from a time and place that has pushed us to the very brink of catastrophe, left peering into an even more perverse chasm of ruin and crisis than our current tense reality. Creators such as mounir fatmi are brave visionaries, keen-eyed observers who look at new places from fresh perspectives and open our own eyes along the way, while showing us that one-off events tend to be far less traumatic than a critical reality stretched out over time. In this fragile world of ours, where everything is interconnected, we have now reached a breaking point with no return, that moment when we face decisive questions on transcendental matters that threaten our very existence. A state of utter uncertainty that calls for answers designed

mounir fatmi, *Before the Storm*, 2019-2022 (detail).
Acrylic on paper. Series of 12 paintings, 84 × 118 cm each.
Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Londres /
Johannesburg

to change this unsustainable situation in which, however powerful they may be, the first raindrops, the first gusts of wind, are mere heralds of the coming storm.

In this exhibition, fatmi explores the emergence of all these accounts and commentaries we increasingly have to bear—physically and intellectually violent narratives that have marked our past and are now shaping our future. Around the large central installation *Inside the Fire Circle 02* (2017-2022), the artist forges a metaphor of the construction of history, the factors conditioning it, the interests governing it and the grasping tentacles sent out by the dominant power, while still leaving a chink of hope that this hamstrung, unhinged and indolent society might somehow rouse itself to search for change that has never been needed so urgently. *Inside the Fire Circle 02* is a sculptural installation made up of a number of vintage typewriters arranged on the gallery floor, interconnected by a strange thicket of tangled black and red jump leads, of the kind used to jumpstart a car. Clamped in the jaws of several of the clips at the end of the cables is an enigmatic sheet of paper.

At first sight, this piece bears a certain resemblance to the chaotic panel of an old telephone switchboard: the jumbled mass of connected cables appears to be ready to jumpstart a venerable, complex communication apparatus designed to retransmit a recurring story dictated by power and accepted by an unwitting people who repeat their mistakes far too often. However, the white sheets of paper and the machines' accessibility aim to invite spectators to short-circuit this perverse mechanism by emboldening them to hack the system and rewrite a story to bring about a now inevitable change. This work brings together many regular concerns in fatmi's research: the idea of writing, rubbing out and repeating and the use of text and outdated technologies, along with his three-pronged urge to use these elements as archaeological documents, archives of events and works of art in their own right. *Inside the Fire Circle 02* can be seen not only as a transmitter and receiver

of information, history and accounts of history, but also as a means of transformation, a tool for forging new paths.

Three pieces have been specially created for this project. *The Point of No Return* (2022) is a fragile work that explores the idea of a world invaded by information, where everything has been turned into often complex and incomprehensible data, graphs and symbols that synthesise and transmute our relationship with reality, conditioning us and manipulating our behaviour. It takes shape as a delicate clay vessel decorated with a series of visual motifs illustrating the grim state of disarray in which we find ourselves. The artist's choice of material and technique serves two basic purposes: to represent the fragility of a structure built on very shaky social, economic and ecological foundations; and to champion simple, traditional forms of craftsmanship and popular culture in a deliberate attempt to seek out our origins, an improved return to an idea of a sustainable equilibrium, in contrast to all the perverse degenerations produced by an alienating globalisation that keeps us in a state of collapse.

In *Before the Storm* (2022), mounir fatmi continues in the same formal and conceptual vein to create a large painted installation on the outside wall of the gallery. Both this and the previous piece follow a line of research started in 2008 with *Calligraphy of the Unknown* (2018-2020), a series that drew from a number of the artist's previous formulations. By incorporating clear references to the decorative tradition in Islamic art—geometric patterns, signs, symbols and references to nature—fatmi has created a disturbing set of polychrome arabesques that become a cutting metaphor of the tense times we are currently living through: a chronological context that finds itself prisoner of an unending global network of confusion, (non)communication and (dis)information that keeps us both subjugated and oppressed. This complex, abstract alphabet is made out of graphs, data curves, calculations, percentages and statistics—all set against a black background with lines in primary colours

that hark back to early computers—reflecting the ups and downs of all those socioeconomic algorithms whose cryptic schematics contain transcendental data that can have devastating effects on our lives. Here, driven by his endearing fascination with language, fatmi sets signs representing different variables against another devilishly complicated and often unreasonably inaccessible language: the language of contemporary creation. fatmi once again examines the role of the artist in a society in crisis, while also questioning the limits of storytelling, memory and communication through the key factors of concealing, censoring, manipulating and invisibilising.

Poems: The Missing Show (2022) is the third of fatmi's recent pieces being presented in this show. Created as an elegant but hard-hitting series of poems shown on a screen on the gallery wall, it explores aspects related to the fear of others, exclusion, xenophobia and the flagrant danger of the stereotypes, prejudices and intransigent positions that flow from the slogans created by the hegemony of empire. In September 2017, a mounir fatmi exhibition opened at the Jane Lombard Gallery in New York. Through the reading of two texts—a personal letter addressed to his gallerist and a set of poems—the artist explained his decision not to travel to the United States, thereby relinquishing any opportunity to gain a firsthand perspective of his show. In doing so, fatmi sets himself up as a critical, political voice informing us about a divided, subjugated and stupid world, while also questioning the construction of current discourses based on an absurd dialectic of opposing blocks. This poetic declaration, shorn of any rhetorical flourishes or excuses, stresses the unshaking position of the text that makes up the piece, a work that performs an explicative and sincere function with a sharp, radical and emotional edge. Starting with personal testimony and autobiography to communicate his own experience, fatmi then embarks on a search that touches on such transcendental matters as recognising one's own identity.

These new works are accompanied by two existing pieces. *The Angel's Black Leg* (2011)—a set of three photographs taken from a wider series entitled “The Blinding Light”—is inspired by Fra Angelico's 15th-century painting *The Healing of the Deacon Justinian*. In this scene, the martyred saints Cosmas and Damian—Arab physicians and brothers who converted to Christianity when they started to practise medicine, a vocation which would ultimately cost them their heads—come back to life to perform an operation to graft the black leg of a recently deceased Ethiopian onto the white deacon. This strange, unexpected artwork, at once beautiful and sinister, combines life and death, religion and science, pure and mixed races, origins and evolution, in a liminal space where everything rubs up against everything else with far from friendly intentions. Based on this powerful underlying iconography, fatmi once again explores concepts such as identity, the sense of belonging and feelings of exclusion, as well as altering nature, the danger of extinction as a species, the ambiguity of certain scientific advances, controversial genetic modifications, bionic mutations and technological change, for better and for worse.

Printed onto a backlit transparent surface, the three photographs take on the aspect of a strip of negatives or monochrome X-rays combining a halo with dematerialisation, the immaterial, the spiritual and the ghostly. In the centre of the composition, a close-up of a jumbled tangle of VHS videotape—a recurring material in fatmi's work—gives the images the appearance of cropped stills that ended up on the cutting room floor in the process of making a film, telling a story, thus revealing the artist's interest in things jettisoned by official accounts and everything related to retro technologies. An almost archaeological search that becomes a critical symbol of the swirling mass of the digital world, the dizzying pace of progress, industrial collapse, alienating capitalism and untrammelled consumerism, while hinting at less obvious questions such as

the transmission of information and its malicious manipulation, that fateful post-truth that vies to shape all our movements through biased, limited and instrumentalised knowledge.

Finally, the black-and-white video *History Is Not Mine* (2013) shows a man whose face is never seen striking the keys of a typewriter with a hammer in each hand. In contrast to the general monochrome tone, the ink ribbon appears as a beautiful, bright, blood-red colour. The piece appears to afford spectators a double role, as witnesses to what is happening and as accomplices to this violent writing of history, an aggressive task that makes a startling rhythmic noise as uncomfortable as the inexorable percussion of the passage of time. However, as with the installation *Inside the Fire Circle 02* at the core of this show, here fatmi once again wants us to think about our personal response to history as something that belongs to all of us. Having clearly set out his own position in the name of the video, he now invites us to take sides, based on our culture, ideology, sensitivity and experience, to roll up our sleeves to write, and stanchly defend, our own alternative accounts. A complex endeavour that requires us to repurpose the violence wrought on us by power, to overcome the paralysing uncertainty generated by the imminent coming storm.

MATERIALS & FORM

Lillian Davies

Playful and provocative, multidisciplinary artist mounir fatmi employs the materials and tools of communication and trade. His work unfolds as a story, a poem at times, that speaks of the generative energy of cultural transfers. Born in Morocco in 1970, fatmi works today between Paris, Los Angeles and Mallorca. He was briefly enrolled as an art student in Casablanca and Rome, but one of his most formative experiences in visual arts seems to have been when he was a boy, helping his mother with her clothing stand at Casabarata, the flea market in his native Tangier. He loves to tell this tale of his first encounter with Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. There, between vendors' displays of plastic kitchenware and used clothes, was *La Joconde*, smiling her mysterious smile, in spray painted acrylic on a velvet-reen rug. And a goat, as goats are wont to do, was devouring her. Comically vulnerable to the jaws of livestock, in fatmi's childhood eyes, a cultural icon became a material, soft as a wad of chewing gum. fatmi's curiosity was ignited but art school in Morocco at the time was not what it would soon be in Tétouan, so he headed to Italy and enrolled in life drawing.¹ But that wasn't what he was looking for either so he returned to Tangier, working in advertising for several years, developing his own practice in the meantime. And so his work can be interpreted via popular visual culture or media studies, as well as through art history, literature and politics, subjects he often appropriates as mediums in themselves.

As a young man, like many others of his generation, fatmi was inspired by writers of the Beat Generation. He read Brion Gysin and met Paul Bowles during his final

1. Montazami, Morad (ed.). *Volumes Fugitifs: Faouzi Laaitiris et l'Institut des beaux-arts de Tétouan*. Rabat: Fondation nationale des musées du Maroc and Kulte Editions, 2016.

years in Tangiers. The movement's renegade publications inspired fatmi, not only in terms of content but also in terms of creative process. As were the Beats' publications, often their very methodology was subversive. Gysin, for example, together with fellow Beat William Burroughs, appropriated the Dada technique of the cut-up. Razor blade in hand, Burroughs once said: "When you cut into the present, the future leaks out." Slicing and recombining, as in the fold-in technique the pair adopted for *The Third Mind* (1978), they imagined that something new, something other from each original, could be created. fatmi has used the cut-up technique for more than two decades. With scissors, razor blades, rotary saws, the curving script of Arabic cut from steel and sharpened to an edge, fatmi formally engages methods of reconfiguration and confrontation.

Most of fatmi's earliest works were in photography and video, but he also worked in painting. In his works on canvas from the mid-1990s, the artist's battle with the medium's preciousness and its stubborn adhesion to existing art history narratives is palpable. For the series "Obliteration Memorizing" (1996) and "No Witness" (1995–1996), for example, fatmi covers his figurative student work with washes of white paint. Youthful embarrassment? Or the desire to make a radical break? Quickly, fatmi turned to sculpture, installation and performance, often appropriating, as if to test, objects or motifs canonized as sacred by art history, or through the rituals of religion and contemporary politics.

To Palma, fatmi brings his project *The Missing Show*, with a new selection of poems made in cut-up. Like a caricature portrait of the United States, waking up in the hangover of Trump's election, it's not the first time the artist has squarely addressed the country at a moment of collective trauma. One of the most well-known works in fatmi's oeuvre is perhaps *Save Manhattan* (2003–2005), a rendition, in found objects, of the Manhattan skyline before the Twin Towers fell. In some versions fatmi's skyscrapers are made of two volumes of the Koran, in others, it's speakers,

playing ambient sounds the artist recorded on the streets of New York. Like the poems here, *Save Manhattan* is a memorial in collage.

Language is a material for fatmi, a dynamic substance he places at a distance, fluid, malleable, at times even suspect. Here in Palma, language, indeed, languages, their production, translation and dissimulation, take center stage. Typeset lettering is hammered by the artist on a vintage Royal typewriter, scribbled by visitors on scraps of blank paper, or presented as a video piece mounted on one of the white walls. Text becomes malleable (always chewy), practically sculptural, as fatmi approaches it by means of a surgical process not unlike the grafting of a human limb onto another's body, leading to the creation of an entirely new body (of work). He is acutely aware that the history and form of each language are plural, and liable to multiply.

In an ever-evolving linguistic cacophony driven by commerce and belief, Spanish, Catalan, and English, together, of course, with fatmi's mother tongue, Arabic, along with so many other languages and dialects, have brushed up against one another along the shores of the Mediterranean Basin for centuries. In the repetition of trade routes and transactions, connections between nascent civilizations first grew as a primarily maritime web. This network of cultural exchanges spun a sort of tapestry, as richly colored and coherent, one imagines, at times, as the tightly knotted prayer rugs fatmi has often appropriated in his work. For *Maximum Sensation* (2010), for example, the artist fitted swaths of the rugs to trick-ready skateboards. The resulting mash-up, a formalized culture clash, engages the shorthand of visual marketing to pose a scenario of *altérité*—doubled. For *Oriental Accident* (2011), fatmi brought a Persian rug into the gallery. For this installation, he left the weave uncut, covering it instead with speakers, their cones filled with nails, playing the recorded uproar of an Arab Spring protest. Words are indecipherable, it's a shattering noise. An audible unraveling, if you will.

fatmi formally embraces this chaos, and an almost inevitably potential for violence, in his work. Messy knots of social entanglement and political upheaval are made plastic in fatmi's installations, which incorporate semantically charged material such as heaps of unspooled VHS tape. Adopting the material for one of the first times at the 2009 Biennale de Lyon for his installation *Ghosting*, it is an important motif in fatmi's work. A sort of dinosaur-age technology nowadays, one I have to explain to my children, and perhaps even to you, dear reader: developed in the 1950s for consumer use, VHS tapes are analog video cassettes with two spools of magnetic tape. Their rigid black cases are roughly the size of a hardback novel; the black plastic boxes are synonymous with popular distribution of the moving image. For *Ghosting*, fatmi lined the walls of the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon with hundreds of them, flooding the space with reams of unspooled tape as if it were bleeding from the walls. Xerox machines, positioned like sentinels, malfunctioning, only flashing light. "Mehr Licht!" reads white serif lettering on a wall painted black. In an explosive short circuit, fatmi rendered these technologies for mass communication impotent.

"My reflections around VHS tapes began at the beginning of the 90s," fatmi has explained. At that time, "the tapes served as a way to disseminate propaganda in Morocco that was coming from Saudi Arabian preaching."² As a teenager, at a wedding video shop where he worked day shifts, fatmi stayed after hours making illegal copies of these tapes. Radical Koranic exegesis, it was belief—in language, sound and moving image—that was on the black market. Later, for fatmi, Bin Laden's infamous tape would even further charge this material with destructive power.

VHS tape unspooled—no longer viewable, and silenced, as it were—appears here as the central image of

2. mounir fatmi as quoted in the author's *Suspect Language*. Milan: Skira, 2012, p. 48.

fatmi's photographic triptych *The Angel's Black Leg* (2011). It is a detail photo of a bundle of the black plastic ribbon positioned between a doubled scene of the twin saints, Cosmos and Damian. Patrons of surgeons and pharmacists, for this work, fatmi borrowed an X-ray image of Fra Angelico's early 15th century painting *The Healing of Justinian*. The resulting black and white palette amplifies the pairs' revolutionary procedure. They had succeeded in grafting an Ethiopian man's black limb onto the white body of a suffering Roman Emperor, who would build not one, but two sumptuous churches in the saints' honor.

fatmi's ongoing research and formal translations of complex social and religious circuitries echoes Beatrice Joyeux-Prunel's idea of "transnational networks". For the French historian, the "social, transnational and pictorial space" is where the avant-garde rises, where a conceptual rupture occurs, where the rumblings before a storm can be heard, if we are to follow fatmi's metaphor here.³ Joyeux-Prunel asserts that in the birth of an avant-garde, it's not a temporal break that is decisive, but first and foremost an action within a web of contemporary geopolitics. Precisely where fatmi's practice is situated. And very much how fatmi's practice takes shape. Since the beginning, fatmi has brought VHS tape, electric cables, even hookah pipes, into his work, very often building a circuitry that can be seen as a formal mapping of a kind of transnational network.

If Joyeux-Prunel's theoretical circuitry describes the formal structure of fatmi's work, it is the "cultural transfers" theorized by Michel Espagne that provides the electric current, its charge, if you will. One of the dynamics

3. Beatrice Joyeux-Prunel, author of *Les avant-gardes artistiques* (Gallimard, 2017 & 2021) in her lecture "Moderns and avant-gardes versus 'Classics': a history of space more than time" at ARVIMM (Groupe de recherche sur les arts visuels du monde musulman), Conférence at École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, February 2018.

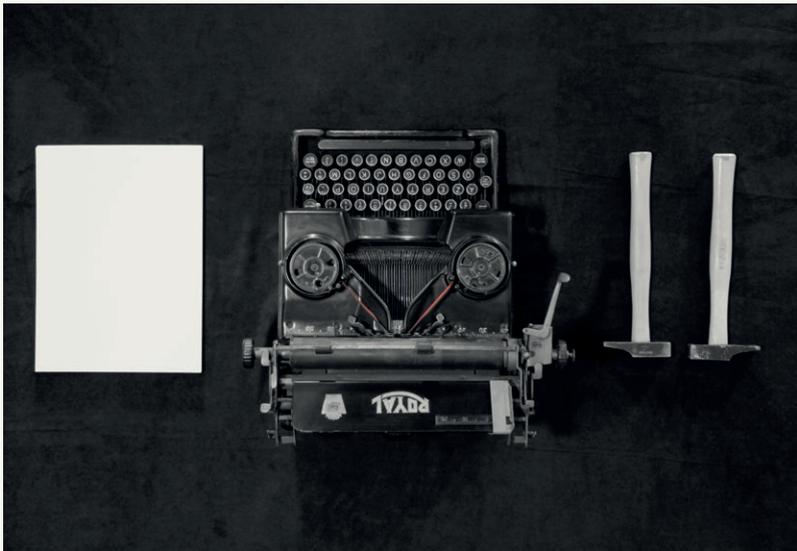
that can be observed in fatmi's work, it is a concept coined by the historian to describe the network of transmission that grows from those crystallizing moments when an object, idea or a word, long considered a given in its home, runs into another, in a faraway place. Espagne identified religious missionaries and sea merchants as some of the first agents of this sociological phenomenon and names the importance of language in the process. "All passages of a cultural object from one context to another has as a consequence a transformation of its meaning," Espagne writes, "that we cannot completely recognize unless we consider the historic vectors of its passage."⁴ A transnational, linguistic circuitry, then, that is at times playful, others, more menacing.

Like VHS tapes and electrical cables, typewriters are also a motif in fatmi's practice. A modern machine that debuted at the dawn of the 20th century, it dominated in the production of written type for decades. fatmi's short video, *History Is Not Mine* (2013), played here on loop, pictures the artist himself, in a dark suit, seated before a vintage Royal typewriter. Hammering away at the keys with the clawed peens of two actual metal hammers, what we might cynically see today as a dramatically "social distanced" approach, fatmi hits at random. Punching their unbackspaceable imprints onto a white page, after each phrase of percussion, when the machine gives its signal ring, fatmi pushes the platen back to its starting point and begins again. He does not lift the carriage return lever, so black lettering piles up thick like the mounds of VHS film in some of his other works. If only in its title, here fatmi's *Inside the Fire Circle 02* (2017) is incendiary. But in this installation and film, fatmi only alludes to the possibility of destruction through a juxtaposition of media and the quickening pace of film cuts. In both cases, he also creates a sonic network, a haunting

4. Espagne, Michel. "La notion du transfert culturel". In *Revue Science/Lettres*, 2012. <<https://journals.openedition.org/rls/219>>



mounir fatmi, *Inside the Fire Circle 02*, 2017 (detail). Installation. Typewriters, starter cables, papers. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Conrads Gallery, Berlin



mounir fatmi, *History Is Not Mine*, 2013, France (video still).
HD Video, single-channel, colour, stereo sound. Duration: 5'.
Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg



mounir fatmi, *The Angel's Black Leg*, 2011. Duratrans photograph
on lightbox, 70 x 100 cm each (trptych). Courtesy of the artist
and ADN Galeria, Barcelona



mounir fatmi, *The Point of no Return*, 2022.
Ceramic, 37,5 × 21,5 cm Ø, socle with matt black paint,
30 × 30 × 80 cm; glass showcase. Courtesy of the artist
and ADN Galeria, Barcelona

silence, or a noise that is almost as aggressive as in *Oriental Accident*. These works witness the potentially destructive forces of human and machine.

So tightly bound in their own internal logic, it is sometimes difficult to contextualize fatmi's works in relation to other works of modern and contemporary art. And, of course, his quasi-outsider status (he holds no degree from any art institution) complicates the matter of situating his practice within a historical art narrative that would provide anchoring in a specific temporality or philosophical movement. Meanwhile, the audience is not always at ease in front of fatmi's works. And over the years, his work has been censored multiple times.⁵

Nonetheless, fatmi's engaged and inquisitive approach allows numerous possibilities for meaningful connection. Jean de Loisy, for example, opened his exhibition *Traces du Sacré* at the Centre Pompidou (2008) with fatmi's wall painting *Hard Head* (2005–2008), a black and white skull in profile, filled with Koranic verse in lush Arabic script. For this show, Loisy also included spiritual works by Wassily Kandinsky and Henri Matisse's work for the Chapelle du Rosaire in Vence, installing them not far from fatmi's *Brainteaser for a Moderate Muslim* (2004), a line of Rubik's Cubes painted black and white in a schematic rendition of the Kaaba in Mecca. This proximity emphasized, and perhaps exaggerated, the young artist's concern with representations of the sacred. In his work, fatmi is not taking the position of a believer. More significant connections for fatmi's practice in that show may have been with Bruce Nauman's neon *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing*

5. fatmi's film *Sleep Al-Naim* (2005–2012), a digital recreation of Salman Rushdie asleep, was censored by the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris. His projection *Technologia* (2010), featuring verse from the Koran spinning like Duchampian rotoreliefs, was censored by the contemporary art festival of Toulouse, Printemps de Septembre.

Mystic Truths (1967), and Damien Hirst's triptych of canvases covered with black flies *Forgive Me Father for I Have Sinned* (2006). The provocative, sarcastic tone of these closer contemporaries connects to fatmi's pursuit of critical distance, all the while toying with nearly every one of the world's religions—capitalism included.

More recently, Abdellah Karroum, curator and former director of Mathaf (Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha), included fatmi's work in his exhibition "Our World is Burning" (2020), which opened at Paris's Palais de Tokyo just weeks before the world shut down in the face of the COVID pandemic. fatmi's *Everything Behind Me* (2018), made of a diplomatic summit-length table wrapped in white coaxial cables and antenna, was dramatically installed in the high-ceilinged industrial space, adjacent to works by Younès Rahmoun, Asli Çavuşoğlu and Monira Al Qadiri. A representative work of fatmi's oeuvre, Karroum mobilized fatmi's artistic position towards a wider investigation of post-colonialist capitalism gone wrong. Hanging just opposite was *The Place of Stone* (2018), Çavuşoğlu's eighteen paneled fresco that traces the history and distribution of lapis lazuli found in the artist's native Afghanistan. The mineral necessary to make ultramarine pigment, the symbolic color of the Virgin Mary, for centuries Western speculators scoured the country for the precious good. Rahmoun's *Nafas* (2001) is a group of seventeen black plastic bags inflated with the artist's breath. The work echoes fatmi's palette, his use of common materials, but the details of Rahmoun's installation, aligned with Mecca and numbered according to Islam's daily prayers, speak to the artist's position as a believer. Monira Al Qadiri's series of levitating 3D printed sculptures, *OR-BIT* (2016–2018) spun nearby. (How interesting it would be to show these works alongside fatmi's controversial *Technologia*, for example.) The Berlin-based Kuwaiti artist coats her sculptures, replicas of petroleum drill bits, in iridescent spray paint, creating an effect like the glossy surface of diesel fuel. United not only by

geographical and linguistic origins, Qadiri, Rahmoun and Çavuşoğlu share a formal approach. Like fatmi, they appropriate and manipulate objects and circuitries charged with religious or capitalist belief.

fatmi's work had been shown at Palais de Tokyo before. On a Sunday evening in early 2014, I was present for his performance *Holy Water Ice Cubes*. For this work, begun almost a decade earlier, fatmi sets up a cocktail bar, staffed with bow-tied barmen, who, on that night mixed a drink called Adam's Apple. Vodka, apple juice and splash of vanilla flavored Galliano, the drink becomes fatmi's signature when it's shaken with ice cubes made with blessed water. The event was strangely quiet. Where were all those hipsters who usually hung out at the trendy Parisian institution every evening till just about midnight? Was fatmi's event under-communicated? Or outside of what we expect contemporary art to be?

What James Elkins observed almost twenty years ago in his book *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (2004), that artists grappling with religion in their work are deliberately overlooked, tagged anachronistic or irrelevant, with limited exceptions, still seems to hold true. Like that equally unwieldy subject of motherhood, another ritualized human experience that is so immense yet so invisible in zones of creative production and presentation. And perhaps it is because motherhood is so tightly bound in this religious space, indeed it is precisely where whatever remaining religious feeling of our contemporary age remains, according to Julia Kristeva, that it also remains taboo in contemporary art.⁶

Deborah Levy boarded a plane to Mallorca with her own Smith Corona typewriter in the opening scenes of *Things I Don't Want to Know* (2013), the novel considered to

6. From Julia Kristeva's *Motherhood Today* (Colloque Gypsy V, Paris, 2005), quoted by Deborah Levy in *Things I Don't Want to Know*. London: Penguin, 2013.

be the writer's manifesto. George Sand had famously spent a winter on the island more than a century before, with her two young children and her lover Chopin. So why not? At the height of a personal crisis in London, Levy left her husband and children and "booked a flight to somewhere I did actually want to go". Seat 44 of an EasyJet direct to Palma. She had to escape what she names a "Societal System", driven by the "world's nostalgic phantasy of the mother".⁷

While fatmi's practice is not aimed at dismantling the cult of motherhood, he is chiseling, quietly, at the beliefs that shape it. And as Chris Ofili infamously did in elephant dung and glitter on canvas (*The Holy Virgin Mary*, 1996), fatmi has also appropriated the figure of *La Vierge Marie* in his work. fatmi's bas-relief *Sequence sculpture: La Pietà* (2007–2010) is drawn, after Michelangelo's marble *Mater Dolorosa* (1499), with white coaxial cable stapled to a wood panel. In Michelangelo's, as well as fatmi's work, any trace of Çavuşoğlu's lapis lazuli-based ultramarine has been drained from the Virgin's cloak. Like fatmi's early painterly erasures, the High Renaissance original is dramatically reduced, existing only, really, in its effacement. More recently, for one of the works in his *Fourth Cover* series, fatmi chose to frame an edition of the French art magazine *Connaissance des Arts*, covers out. On the front of the monthly publication, Fra Angelico's *Virgin with Child* (1450), a masterpiece of an exhibition that would open at a major French museum, is juxtaposed, via fatmi's simple gesture, with a Louis Vuitton advertisement, the so-called fourth cover. But what fatmi collides with the image of Fra Angelico's icon is not just any handbag, any ad campaign. It is Angelina Jolie, at the height of her mediatized magical maternity, snuggling next to a monogrammed piece of leather as if it was her firstborn.

Again and again, fatmi pulls religion, that most powerful of belief systems, into view. He insists on an examination

7. Deborah Levy, *Things I Don't Want to Know*. London: Penguin, 2013, p.21.

of belief, belief in the stories (circuitries built in language) we tell about the world and about ourselves. When fatmi participated in this first Lyon Biennale, the young artist Aurélia Zahedi was growing up in a village not far from the city, and she too would soon take on the Virgin Mary. She is currently planning to plant the footprints of the Virgin Mary in the desert surrounding Jericho. With the animals she encounters in the dunes, their eyes as if electric in the headlights, Zahedi plans to make a *bestiaire*. Where she makes room for a da Vinci eating goat.

LETTER TO JANE LOMBARD

mounir fatmi

Dear Jane,

As you can see, it's been hard for me to write this letter. I had to wait until the last minute. I needed an emergency. The same emergency that drives me to create art in any circumstance, like an ambulance that takes every possible risk in order to save a life. In this case, it's my life I'm talking about.

I left Morocco for good in 1999 in search of a freedom of speech I couldn't find at home. I had to cut off all ties with my father, my family, my neighborhood and ultimately my country. I wanted to take a step back, to get as far as possible from my cultural context. I wanted to experience the world. Meet people. Read the forbidden books. Discovering the Beat generation and its authors allowed me to get away. My encounter with Paul Bowles in Tangiers was decisive. Reading Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, discovering Brion Gysin's calligraphy... All this nourishment allowed me to live, to hope and to dream of a better world.

While I was studying in Rome, I discovered Fra Angelico's small painting from the 15th century, *The Healing of the Deacon Justinian*. In the painting, the brothers Damian and Cosmas graft the leg of a black man onto the white body of Deacon Justinian. After just one look at this painting, I understood that I was that black leg. I was surprised that everyone around me only saw the perspective, the light and the composition in the painting. I was the only one to see this black leg. This alien element has been living within me and made me who I am today. A survivor. An immigrant worker. A permanent exile.

I haven't changed nationalities. I still travel with my Moroccan passport, which is a work of art in itself. That passport is filled with visas from several countries where I've shown my work these last few years. Traveling with a Moroccan passport is an adventure. I'm never sure I'll get

through customs. In addition to the fatigue of traveling, I have to face the stressful interviews by customs agents. One of the most traumatizing experiences I've had was with American customs, a few years back. After three hours of questioning and getting my fingerprints and my picture taken, the agent presented me with a bible and asked me to swear that everything I had told him about me and my relatives was the truth. I told him that the reason I was in this situation in the first place was because I'm supposed to be a Muslim and therefore I didn't see why he was giving me a bible to swear the truth.

Without acknowledging the remark I had just made, he asked me again to swear on the bible, looking straight at me this time. I put my hand on the bible. He asked me to raise the other hand and say: I swear. I swore. I just didn't want him to send me off to Guantanamo under any pretense. That instant was for me a moment of extreme lucidity. No more illusions. I live in a world I am not able to understand.

Of course the customs agent was only doing his job, and his job required him to be afraid of me. His fear wounded me, and I carry it like a scar to this day. I wanted to help him, but I couldn't. The more I tried to reassure him, the more suspicious I grew to him.

Dear Jane,

I know that I am just a speck of dust in this machine. A black leg grafted on the body of another man. What I'm relating in this letter is nothing compared to what thousands of refugees endure, dodging death as they hope for a better world for them and their children. I've always believed that America could be a part of that world. That heart capable of welcoming us all and warming us. My illusions were shattered the night the result of the latest election was announced. My disappointment was huge. I realized that we may never see again this free world we dreamed of so much.

Today, I don't have the strength nor the courage to offer myself to a terrorized customs agent faced with a poor Arab artist. I know the situation of immigrants in the USA has gotten worse since the latest immigration laws. That getting through the border is more and more difficult. This time I would be incapable of swearing on any holy book or of accepting any more humiliations. I must protect whatever little hope I have left. That hope is my survival.

I trust you in presenting my work to the gallery's public. I hope one day I can find the courage to come and see you.

This text was written by mounir fatmi in response to the invitation of Jane Lombard to come to New York to attend the opening of her personal exhibition "Survival Signs". From September 7 to October 21, 2017.

While the Storm Arrives

mounir fatmi

From 17th March
to 19th June 2022

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Contemporani de Palma

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Imma Prieto

Curator

Fernando Gómez de la Cuesta

Exhibition Coordination

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