



Adel Abdessemed

*Cri*

2012

52 inches

© Adel Abdessemed,

ADAGP Paris 2012

Courtesy the artist and David

Zwerner New York/London

# ADEL ABDESSE SSE MED

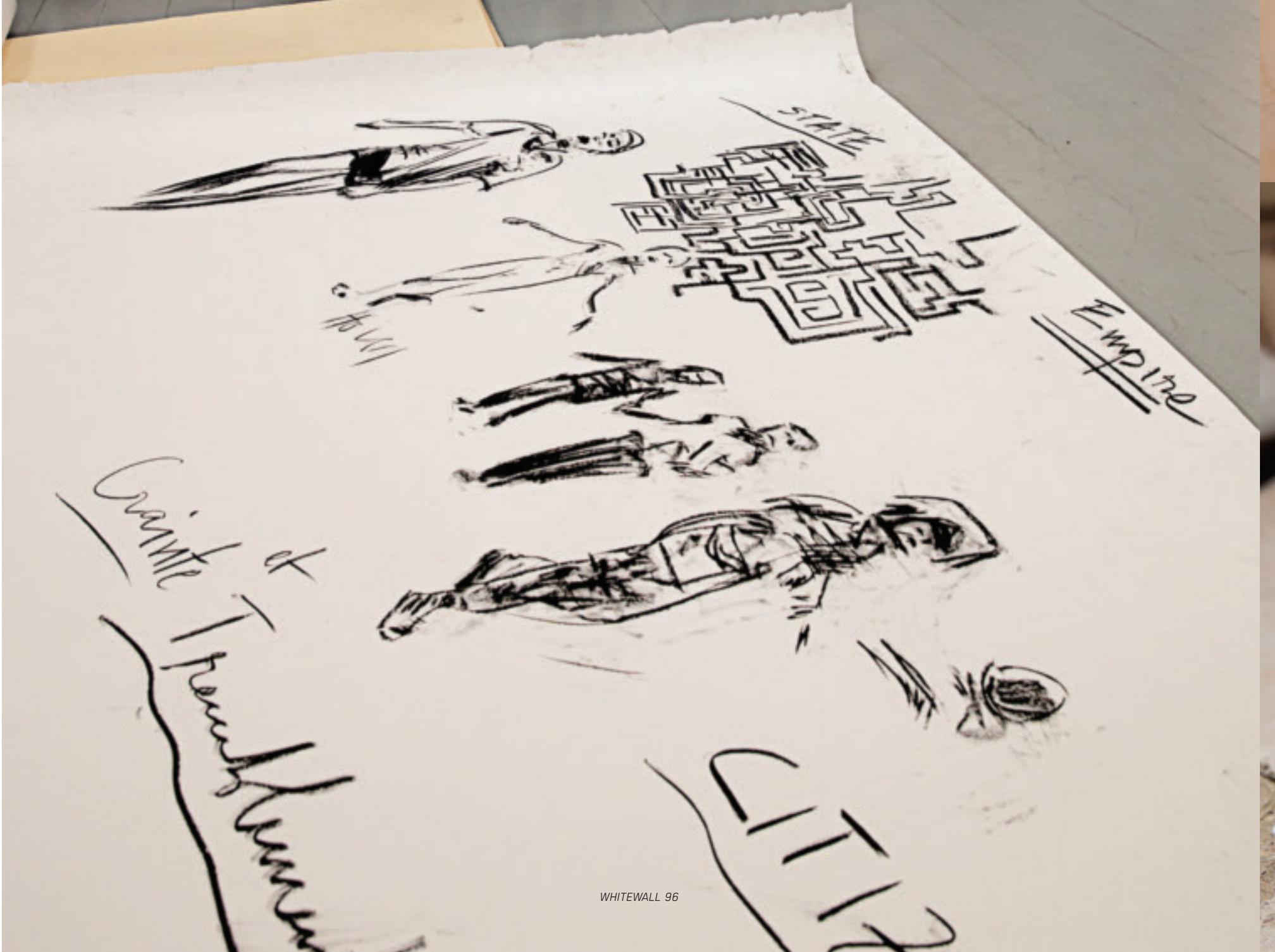
BY MARA HOBERMAN  
STUDIO VISIT AND PORTRAIT BY ROBERT LAKOW

WHITEWALL 93



WHITEWALL 94

No stranger to controversy, **Adel Abdessemed** is known for his imposing works made from unwieldy, often politically charged, materials such as salvaged airplane fuselages, burned-out cars, taxidermied animals, and barbed wire. The poster for his solo exhibition at the Centre Pompidou this past fall plastered all of Paris with a self-portrait depicting him **engulfed by flames**. Undeniably shocking, this photograph (which, incredibly, was staged and shot early one morning right in front Abdessemed's studio) is not altogether surprising coming from an artist whose practice consistently **pushes him to the limits**. In addition to performing self-immolation, Abdessemed has **hung upside-down from a helicopter** to make drawings, been repeatedly blanket-tossed in an attempt to write a complete phrase on a ceiling-affixed carpet, and dangled over the Grand Canyon while **scratching "DEATH"** onto the rock face. However, perhaps the most impressive feat of endurance is the artist's current back-to-back, no-end-in-sight exhibition spree. Following his solo show at David Zwirner's new London gallery (February 22 to March 30, 2013), Abdessemed will open major exhibitions across the globe — including museums in Qatar (2013), Moscow (2014), and Shanghai (2015). During a rare moment of downtime in his airy, loft-like studio in Paris's stylish Canal Saint-Martin neighborhood, Abdessemed debated his perceived role as **provocateur** and discussed his latest works-in-progress.



WHITEWALL 96



WHITEWALL 97



**WHITEWALL:** *Let's talk about the body of work that will be shown at David Zwirner's London gallery. What was the inspiration?*

**ADEL ABDESSEMED:** All of the works in the show relate to the idea of the empire. There haven't actually been that many true empires: China, Rome, the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Empire, the British Empire . . . France was never a real empire: It was a feudal kingdom that turned into a bourgeois republic. The U.S.A. is not an empire: It is a bastard extension of the British Empire. And while I was thinking about all of these conquerors, an artist I like very much, Richard Hamilton, came to mind. Specifically I was remembering his series of paintings about the conflicts in Northern Ireland wherein he represents the subject, the state, and the citizen. One of these paintings depicts a lone British soldier [*The State*, 1993] and the other shows an Irish civilian trapped in Maze Prison [*The Citizen*, 1981–83]. From this jumping-off point, I began to develop more imagery. The first example came very quickly. Inspired by *The Citizen*, I created an animation of a labyrinth made of shit [*The Citizen*, 2012]. It also occurred to me that no one has ever really scared the British, except for maybe the Germans. So I decided I wanted to represent German soldiers. I am calling them "Soldaten." Then there's the throne, which is, of course, an important symbol of the empire. I am having one made out of barbed wire.

**WW:** *A replica of the throne of the Queen of England?*

**AA:** Yes. It's to-scale and as close as we can get to the same design. The next work I made was *Cri* [2012], which represents the cry of the innocents.

**WW:** *Yes, I want to talk about Cri, which is a powerful and disturbing image. But before we turn specifically to the new statue, I want to stay with the*

**WW:** *Clearly there is a lot of suffering and an implied brutality in Cri, but as I look around the studio at your latest works and works-in-progress, I don't see the same levels of aggression and violence that I was struck by in some of your earlier works — many of the ones that are part of your current survey show at the Pompidou, for example.*

**AA:** I hate aggression. I've never made an aggressive work. Violence is something else. It is a part of life and not always negative. Violence can be admirable and, yes, there is violence in some of my work. However, if you know a work of mine that is aggressive, please tell me which one.

**WW:** *I see the distinction you are making between a violent work and aggressive one, and perhaps my word choice was poor or unclear. There is definitely a difference between an aggressive artwork and a work that depicts an act of aggression. A work like Practice ZERO TOLERANCE [2006], for example, is based on the material evidence of an act of aggression. Someone was angry and burned those cars in retaliation. That act was aggressive. Should your artwork, which is based on the two burned-out cars, therefore also be considered aggressive? I think you are right, perhaps not. But aggression is part of the equation.*

**AA:** Look, it's very simple. Right next to the Pompidou Center there are people sleeping; they are living there on the street. That is aggressive.

**WW:** *That's injustice.*

**AA:** And injustice is very aggressive! On the contrary, when you see the burned-out cars made in terracotta or the figure of Christ wrought in barbed wire, those are sensual experiences. Aggression exists, but it is in the streets

## "I HATE AGGRESSION. I'VE NEVER MADE AN AGGRESSIVE WORK. VIOLENCE IS SOMETHING ELSE. IT IS A PART OF LIFE AND NOT ALWAYS NEGATIVE. VIOLENCE CAN BE ADMIRABLE AND, YES, THERE IS VIOLENCE IN SOME OF MY WORK"

*motif of "the cry" or "the scream" for just a moment. This potent expression of pain, which you've referred to before as a "cri" (though not as a title), is present in many of your works. A recent example would be Décor [2011–12], where the cry is manifested in the four open-mouthed crucified Jesus figures.*

**AA:** The cry has never left me, that's true. *Décor* was a cry for all humanity, an expression of human despair. *Cri* marks the loss of innocence. This is a child. She is naked, she is running, and she is crying.

**WW:** *It's an incredibly dramatic image — made even more so by being rendered life-size in three-dimensions. What is the source material? Is it an image from the Vietnam War?*

**AA:** The photograph I used for *Cri* was taken in 1972 and shows this young girl and other civilians running in the street after an aerial napalm attack. The attack was forty years ago this past spring. To commemorate the event, the soldier who dropped the napalm, the photographer, and the girl (yes, she survived) all came together. Everyone was crying.

and in stadiums. An artwork can only be provocative.

**WW:** *Indeed, shock value draws initial attention to many of your artworks. Writing in the Pompidou catalogue, Alfred Pacquement described the impact of some of your works as "punches to the viewer's face." But then, as you are saying, there is always a deeper message following the original upset. Coup de Tête [2011–2012], for instance, which depicts the physical clash between Zinedine Zidane and Marco Materazzi during the 2006 World Cup final. I was doing research in the Pompidou library when the statue was first installed in the museum's outdoor plaza, and so I passed it by every day for a couple of weeks. I saw hundreds of tourists taking photos with your artwork. I also read in the newspaper that Materazzi himself came and had his photo taken there. Is this the reaction you imagined?*

**AA:** I didn't have any expectations for the public reaction. I made something and it was installed at that spot. Boom. Done. I don't know what really happened out there on the [soccer] field — I wasn't there. If one insulted the other's mother or wife or whatever, we didn't see it. For me this is an icon about icons, but it also goes beyond icon through its material and physical encumbrance.

**WW:** *The title of the new show is "Vase Abominable." Where does that come from?*

**AA:** The vase that inspired me is something that I came upon at a flea market. It's a Ukrainian vase and I liked the form. I am making several copies in different materials — terracotta, salt, rubber, gold, and cannabis — all based

on the original form. I wanted to keep the shape and size consistent, though the materials change. If the form were also to change, that would become too narrative. Each vase will be presented on top of an empty military box attached to the wall. The vases are all empty as well.

**WW:** *The original form is quite simple. It's not a particularly decorative vase. It's not a Ming vase, or anything very precious, but, rather, it's something average people might use on a daily basis. It's an ordinary object. There is a strong statement, I think, in the contrast between nourishment (symbolized by water or other liquid that could fill the vase) and destruction (the weapons that once filled the military boxes). Both are vessels, but they are designed to carry opposite contents. Is this another symbol of the empire: civilians trying to feed themselves, while soldiers are blowing things up?*

**AA:** To have these two symbols so close together relates to life and death, perhaps. Life, death, life, death, life, death, life, death . . . It's always like that.

**WW:** *You will be the third artist to show at Zwirner's new London gallery. Were you inspired by the physical space?*

**AA:** Yes, Zwirner's new space is an 18th-century house. It feels colonial in a way, and I was inspired by that aspect. It has a completely different aesthetic from his gallery in New York, obviously.

**WW:** *I want to ask you about your creative process. Do you work alone in the studio? Do you have assistants? How do you collaborate with different fabricators?*

**AA:** Well, I always start with drawings, which I do right here in the studio. I look at references and I make notes. But ideas are also always coming from inside of me — from my dreams, for instance. After that, it's experimentation and alchemy! For the upcoming show I've decided to make a vase out of gold. Now, I've never worked with gold before. In fact, I know very few artists who have worked with this material. So I had to do a lot of technical research to figure out how this could work with my design.

**WW:** *So no matter what the end result — the final size and material of the work aside — it always begins with you in the studio, with your paper and pencil.*

**AA:** At the most basic level, it's really quite simple. It goes back as far as the cave drawings in Lascaux or in the Tassili n'Ajjer. Men were using carbon to draw on the walls. Whether it was their vision of the world or their dreams, we'll never know. But, nonetheless, it's the invention of art. The same thing goes on here.

**WW:** *You just mentioned that inspiration for your work sometimes come to you in your dreams, and I think it was Philippe-Alain Michaud [curator at the Centre Pompidou] who wrote in your most recent catalogue that you almost always dream your artworks. Is that true for this concept of the abominable vase? Would an inspiration like that generally be considered a good dream or a nightmare?*

**AA:** It's true that ideas often come to me in my dreams. Or sometimes I have memories of past dreams that flash back to me. However, I'm not interested in psychoanalysis, so forgive me if I don't answer the last part of your question! The studio is like a dream factory — this is where I come up with the ideas for my works.

**WW:** *Okay, let's return to something more concrete. I can see that for the upcoming exhibition you are working with certain materials you have used before, but which are not otherwise typically associated with art. Barbed wire and cannabis, for example.*

**AA:** Those two I've worked with before, yes, but there are also materials that I am using with for the first time. Gold, as I mentioned, is first for me and so are rubber and salt. Also, *Cri* is made of ivory, which I've never used before.

**WW:** *Yes, I find your choice of ivory interesting because it's a bit of a taboo material, not unlike others you've used in the past. I'm thinking of the taxidermied animals in *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf* [2011–2012], in particular. Isn't it illegal to buy and sell ivory?*

**AA:** Well, this particular ivory came from a mammoth. We weren't even around at that time! So there's no problem; it's authorized. It's very costly, and I have to have a certificate. But, no, it's not illegal.

**WW:** *Some of your works have art-historical references. The Christ figure in *Décor*, for example, is based on Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece [1512–1516] and *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf* has the same dimensions as Picasso's *Guernica* [1937]. Any specific art-historical references in your latest body of work?*

**AA:** I am very conscious of art history, but I'm not indebted to it. It was Gerhard Richter who said that he had a debt to art history that he had to settle. But he is, at the core, a European artist and art history is a European concept. I am not European. I am Mediterranean.



**Adel Abdessemed**

*Je suis innocent*

2012

Digital C-print

90 x 69 inches

© Adel Abdessemed, ADAGP

Paris 2012

Courtesy the artist and David

Zwirner New York/London



WHITEWALL 100



Opposite page, bottom:  
**Adel Abdessemed**  
*Décor (detail)*  
2011-12  
Razor wire  
© Adel Abdessemed, ADAGP  
Paris 2012  
Courtesy the artist and David  
Zwirner New York/London

Opposite page, top, and this page:  
**Adel Abdessemed**  
*Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?*  
2011-12  
Taxidermy, steel, and wire  
143 x 307 inches  
© Adel Abdessemed, ADAGP Paris 2012  
Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner  
New York/London

WHITEWALL 101