





THE ARTIST PROVOCATEUR

ADEL ABDESSEMED



F

Mara Hoberman meets Adel Abdessemed, an artist who has been sending shockwaves across the international art scene for over two decades with politically charged works that confront the viewer with difficult, and often troubling, images of violence, sex and oppression.

From four barbed-wire bodies of Christ inspired by the crucifixion scene in the 16th century Isenheim Altarpiece (*Décor*) to four life-size terracotta cars based on burned-out shells recovered after riots that swept across France in 2005 (*Practice ZERO TOLERANCE*), Adel Abdessemed's artworks are born of – and give birth to – controversy. Given his reputation as a provocateur, it is somewhat surprising to discover that his Paris studio – a sunny triplex near the fashionable quays of the Canal Saint-Martin, which he shares with his wife and four young daughters – is not only convivial, but also downright family friendly. Amidst preparations for his exhibition at Doha's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, the atelier is abuzz with activity. Charcoal sketches, prototypes for monumental sculptures, a tabletop model of the Mathaf galleries (complete with miniaturised-to-scale artworks) and empty coffee-cups testify to Abdessemed's voluminous, varied and vigorous creative output. In the adjoining office, surrounded by bookshelves filled with tomes of poetry, philosophy and art history, his wife, Julie, fields a constant flurry of phone calls and emails. Meanwhile, their children play in the loft-like living area just upstairs, providing a lively overhead soundtrack of squeals and scampers.



Given this rather idyllic life/work situation and the status that he enjoys as one of the most important and successful Contemporary artists based in France, it initially comes as a shock when Abdessemed mentions that he is in the process of relocating his family and studio to Marrakesh. However, considering the artist's peripatetic past – he was born in Constantine, Algeria, in 1971 and has hopped between France, the USA and Germany since leaving his native country in 1994 – relocation is not out of character. Abdessemed speaks openly about growing up in Batna at a time when Berber traditions were being replaced by Arabic and French, but eschews allegiance to any one particular cultural identity. In a conversation with the curator of the Mathaf exhibition, Pier Luigi Tazzi, in *Adel Abdessemed: Entretien* (published by Actes Sud in 2012), the artist describes a seemingly innate complexity surrounding his

own identity: "I was born in Constantine to a Muslim mother in a Jewish house with Christian nuns as midwives. In that day, I think I brought the gods of monotheism together." With this quote, Abdessemed uses a touch of his characteristic humour to locate himself in a uniquely privileged position. Affiliating himself by birth to multiple (historically conflicting) religions, Abdessemed simultaneously warrants himself access to all of them without being beholden by any of them. Similarly, Abdessemed's art cleaves (in both antonymic senses of the word) a peculiar path – attaching itself to and separating itself from the mainstream. Having settled comfortably in Paris for a number of years where he was recently honoured with a solo exhibition at the Centre Pompidou (*Adel Abdessemed: Je suis innocent*, 2012), it seems only natural that the self-proclaimed 'citizen of the world' is ready to move on.

Opening spread:
(Detail) *Décor*. 2011–12. Razor wire. Variable dimensions.

This page:
Le Vase Abominable, 2013. Copper vase on steel and mixed media base. 550 x 200 x 200 cm.

Facing page:
Installation view of *Telle Mère Tel Fils* at the Centre Pompidou, Paris. 2008. Airplanes, felt, aluminium and metal. 2700 x 400 x 500 cm.





**“Violence exists in
this world and I show
it. Aggressiveness
disgusts me.”**

“Finding the right substance – whether bones, salt or gold – for each piece is part of my research and becomes integral to the aesthetic of the final product.”

NO SMALL TALK

Over the past dozen or so years, Abdessemed’s career has charted a fast and furious path across Europe and the USA. After studying art at the École des Beaux-Arts in Batna followed by the École des Beaux Arts in Algiers (1987–94), he moved to France where he graduated from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Lyon in 1998. He had his first solo show at the Kunsthalle Bern in Germany in 2001, and made a splash four years later with the exhibition *Adel Abdessemed: Le citron et le lait* at the Musée d’Art Moderne et Contemporain in Geneva. It was here that Abdessemed’s work first caught the eye of French billionaire businessman and mega-collector François Pinault, who would soon become one of the artist’s most important and enthusiastic patrons. Abdessemed has since exhibited at high profile art institutions such as New York’s PS1 (2007), Grenoble’s Le Magasin (2008) and the San Francisco Art Institute (2008). Having worked with Parisian gallerist Kamel Mennour, Abdessemed is currently represented by international powerhouse David Zwirner in New York and London and Dvir Gallery in Tel Aviv.

The Pompidou exhibition in 2012 – Abdessemed’s most important show to date – spanned 22 years of work and highlighted themes and practices that have remained crucial since the beginning of his career. Known for creating work in the public realm (Abdessemed has often said that he considers the street an extension of his studio), the artist startlingly – if unsurprisingly – expanded beyond the Pompidou’s traditional exhibition galleries. In the museum’s main lobby, he installed the nearly 27-metre-long *Telle mère tel fils* directly on the floor. Here, two intertwined ‘bodies’ made from felt and parts of passenger planes greeted museum-goers before they even purchased tickets.

Garnering even more public attention, Abdessemed’s *Coup de tête* – a larger-than-life sculpture depicting French soccer star Zinedine Zidane’s infamous head-butt of Italian opponent Marco Materazzi during the 2006 FIFA World Cup





final – temporarily graced the outdoor public plaza in front of the Pompidou. The sculpture caused a mild sensation with tourists crowding around (and even onto) the monumental bronze statue for a photo op. French daily *Le Figaro* pondered whether *Coup de tête* represented a “*Monstre sacré ou sacré monstre?*”, a wordplay that roughly translates as “legend or monster?” Choosing his own words carefully, whether discussing this or other similarly prickly works, Abdessemed avoids talking politics. Instead, he offers the matter-of-fact, if deliberately nuanced summation: “Violence exists in this world and I show it. Aggressiveness disgusts me.”

PUSHING THE LIMITS

Though he pointedly leaves political interpretation to others, Abdessemed does not shy away from controversial subject matter or taboo materials. Given his feelings on the subject of violence, for many it is then surprising that, over the years, he has created artworks featuring animals (live and taxidermies), barbed wire, cannabis and ivory. In 2008, during an exhibition at the San Francisco Art Institute, his video installation *Don't Trust Me* (2007), which depicts various farm animals being killed by a swift blow to the head, was criticised by the public and in the press. Soon after the opening, protests by animal rights activists led the museum to shut down the exhibition. Undeterred by backlash, Abdessemed continues to use controversial materials. Showing off maquettes for sculptures that will make their debut at the Mathaf exhibition, Abdessemed explains, “Materials are a very important part of my work. Finding the right substance – whether bones, salt or gold – for each piece is part of my research and becomes integral to the aesthetic of the final product.” Indeed, visitors to Doha’s *L’âge d’or* exhibition will encounter a bicycle made of camel bones (*La Chine est proche*, 2013), a ‘prayer rug’ of sharp knives (*East of Eden*, 2013) and an imposing 5.5-metre brass vase atop a plinth of explosives (*Le vase abominable*).

In addition to challenging the comfort level of his audience with difficult imagery and angst-provoking materials, Abdessemed consistently pushes himself to the utmost limits, creating situations that test his own physical endurance or put him in harm’s way. A recent example is the disturbing self-portrait that was plastered all over Paris last fall to promote his Pompidou exhibition. To capture

Previous spread:
Practice ZERO TOLERANCE. 2008.
Terracotta. 180.3 x 116.8 x 430.5 cm.

This page:
Stills from *Ayāi*. 2013. Video
projection, colour and sound. Two
second loop (aspect ratio 16:9).

Facing page:
Coup de tête. 2011–12. Bronze.
534 x 218 x 348 cm.

PROFILE



This page:
Left: Stills from *Histoire de la Folie*, 2013. Video projection, black and white and sound. Two second loop (aspect ratio 16:9).
Right: *Soldaten*, 2013. Charcoal on paper. 184.5 x 129.9 cm.

Facing page:
L'âge d'or, 2013. Gold-plated brass. 113 x 188 cm. Photography by Marc Domage.

All images courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York/London. © Adel Abdessemed, ADAGP Paris 2012–13.

the photograph of himself ensconced in flames, Abdessemed actually performed self-immolation on the sidewalk in front of his home/studio. Other high-adrenaline feats include making drawings while hanging upside-down from a helicopter (*Helikoptère*, 2007), dangling over a vertiginous precipice in order to scratch the word 'death' onto the side of a rock (*Grand Canyon*, 2008) and introducing African wildlife, including wild boars (*Sept Frères*, 2006) and a lion (*Séparation*, 2006) to the streets of central Paris.

A current challenge Abdessemed faces is a demanding schedule of back-to-back exhibitions. In the last year alone, he has had solo shows in New York, Colmar (France), Paris and London. Hot on the heels of these major exhibitions, Abdessemed's Doha exhibition is comprised almost entirely of new pieces, including videos, works on paper and monumental sculptures. Describing this undertaking as "More than a manifesto: it is *l'âge d'or* (the golden age)," Abdessemed's intention with the Mathaf show is to present "everything all at once – past, present and future." References to the past range from the biblical *East of Eden*, whose title alludes to the tragedy of Cain and Abel, to art historical *Histoire de la folie*, whose black-and-white footage, Abdessemed says, was inspired by early photography – specifically the contributions of French inventor/photographer Niépce. The future, meanwhile, is brighter – evoked by a gleaming gold-plated bas-relief portrait of Abdessemed's four daughters (*L'âge d'or*) and a terracotta bas-relief depicting NASA's Mars rover (*Curiosity*, 2013).

THE TIME IS NOW

Though his vision of the future is optimistic, most of the Mathaf exhibition is dedicated to



“The fantasy is that a universal military presence will make us safer, or at least feel secure, but the reality is that ‘soldier of peace’ is an oxymoron.”

the present, which appears plagued by an overwhelming military presence and unfair labour conditions. Particularly unsettling is *Soldaten*, a series of charcoal drawings of uniformed men armed with machine guns. Referencing the French anti-terrorist forces that patrol the streets of Paris, Abdessemed remarks, “The *vigipirates* are everywhere. The fantasy is that a universal military presence will make us safer, or at least feel secure, but the reality is that ‘soldier of peace’ is an oxymoron.” Certainly, the impact of Abdessemed’s large-scale, dark and smudgy portraits of anonymous soldiers is a chilling reminder that the positive associations of a so-called ‘golden age’ – from technological innovations and great art, to economic prosperity and peace time – often come at an objectionable (indeed oxymoronic) price. Another powerful image of the present is the large-scale terracotta bas-relief *Shams* (2013), which recognises undocumented workers. Without referencing Qatar’s dependence of migrant labour specifically, Abdessemed acknowledges, “society is constructed like a pyramid. I want to show that the large base of rocks at the bottom is as important as the lone stone at the very top.”

Using a variety of stock images of contemporary life – from torched cars and mutilated airplanes to sports stars and armed soldiers – Abdessemed presents a shrewdly focused mirror image of our world. Works like *Taxidermy* (2010), a nearly two-metre cube made up of burnt stuffed animals and *Printemps* (2013), a video of live roosters that have been strung upside down and lit on fire, inevitably beg the question whether his artistic practice should raise more eyebrows than wearing a fur coat or eating a chicken sandwich. But no matter if Abdessemed’s representations are interpreted as poetic or grotesque, it is hard to argue that they do not strike a nerve. Whether visitors to Mathaf come away inspired or offended, *L’âge d’or* has inevitably sparked a conversation extending far beyond the temporal and geographic setting of this particular exhibition. And for this artist-provocateur, that is precisely the point. 

L’âge d’or runs until 5 January 2014. For more information visit www.mathaf.org.qa and www.davidzwirner.com