

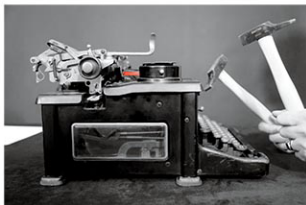
Art in America

REVIEWS May 26, 2017

Mounir Fatmi

DUBAI
at Lawrie Shabibi

by Rahel Aima



Tucked into a corner alcove of Mounir Fatmi's exhibition "Inside the Fire Circle" was a short video in which the artist sits down at a typewriter, picks up a pair of hammers, and begins to bang on the keyboard with them. The output is gibberish, of course, but the gesture is surprisingly gentle, even elegant. The artist resembles a well-dressed hotel pianist as he taps out a clattery patois that can be heard around the gallery. Titled *History Is Not Mine*, the 2013 video is mostly black-and-white; only the typewriter ribbon provides a drop of red. The work melds a certain nostalgia for the refinement of the past with an underlying sense of ambivalence about claiming ownership over historical experience.

Typewriters also featured in the show's title work: a large new installation positioned in the center of the gallery. In this piece, waterfalls of jumper cables spill from typewriters arranged on a high table. The end of each cable is clipped to a blank sheet of paper on the floor. The configuration, with black cables running down one side of the table and red ones down the other, suggests some sort of analogue setup for automated writing, mindless and mechanized.

With only the occasional flash of color, the palette of the exhibition was predominantly black-and-white. The polarized color scheme hinted at the artist's interest in binaries, and where they break down. This interest is not confined to formal experimentation; several pieces in the show offered specific content related to black racial identity in the United States. These photo works focus on John Howard Griffin, a white civil rights activist from Texas who, in 1959, took medication and underwent UV treatments to darken his skin, allowing him to pass as black. He spent six weeks traveling in the segregated South before writing the bestseller *Black Like Me*. For the photo work *As a Black Man* (2013–14), Fatmi manipulated archival images of Griffin to allude to his "transformation" from white to black. An image of Griffin prior to his skin treatment is printed eight different times, appearing to darken progressively with each iteration. The series, arranged horizontally on a wall, ends with two shots of Griffin as a black man. In *As a Black Man*, as in several other manipulated archival images depicting Griffin traversing the color line, Fatmi presents racial identity as malleable even as he invokes the historical role of photography in codifying racial distinctions.

Nothing in the exhibition suggested that Fatmi considered the limits of this malleability, or questioned the extent to which a nonblack person can access a black experience. The malaise evoked by *History Is Not Mine* seems to serve almost as cover for a deeper historical ignorance. In the video *Darkening Process* (2014), archival footage of Griffin, along with black dancers and jazz musicians is tinted red, green, blue, and yellow in turn. These scenes are edited together with shots of Fatmi methodically blackening his hands—palms too!—with shoe polish, in a nod to the only job Griffin was able to get while "black."

Perhaps Fatmi, who is Moroccan, has valid points to make about the fraught relationship between Arabness and blackness in North Africa—the history that is undeniably his. But his direct references to an Anglo, North American context make it impossible to separate his project from the ugly history of minstrelsy and blackface. Transposed again to Dubai, where slavery was abolished *de jure* only in 1963, the blithe obliviousness of this project is nothing short of chilling.