

Shadows on the Moon: Mounir Fatmi's 'Fragmented Memory'

Mounir Fatmi

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Upon entering the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, one is confronted with one of Fatmi's recognizable steel blade works with calligraphic Arabic letters cut into it. Suspended from the ceiling, the cut-out letters lie jumbled on the floor directly below. The work casts a noticeable shadow, an abstracted ghost of the images portrayed. The calligraphic work, titled *Mother Language* (2017), is a visual link to his previous body of work, a continuity in his thinking and execution, evolving his visual language. The title of the work is pertinent, especially juxtaposed with the other sculpture at the entrance, *Monument to our Fathers* (2017), a tall totem composed of brooms, shoes, white material and industrial black packing belts. His play on words alludes to not only every human's search for their sense of belonging, but also his own personal heritage and history.

There is a video work, *Across the Moon* (2017) in the same room. It is a screen with an image of a revolving surface of the moon in the centre, round, framed by its borders. Layered transparently on this surface are film images from the French occupation of Morocco, leading up to the exile of King Mohammed V in the 50s. There are also two print works in this series, both titled *The Visible Side of the King* (2017). This work recounts the revolt against the French regime in Morocco during which photos of the exiled sultan were handed to the people who were told to look first at the image, and then at the moon, creating the optical illusion that his face was on the moon. This work is about collective memory and its power – Fatmi states that 'the Moroccan people were under the influence of a collective hallucination.' As a result, there were demonstrations in his support in 1955, just before his return to Morocco where he became known as the 'moon king.'

Fatmi states that he remembers only three cultural objects from his childhood home: a copy of the Koran, a photograph of the Moroccan King and a calligraphic painting. He draws his themes and aesthetics from these objects continually in his practice. This collection of work exhibits an exploration that is consistent in his work of his cultural history, and critical analysis of it. It crosses over several thematic axes, but most prominently he deals with themes of identity, memory, history and belonging.



Mounir Fatmi, *Across the Moon*, 2017.

HD film

His work has elements of object biography, an exploration of things taking into account multiple interactions with other things and people over its time, constantly gathering new layers of meaning, value, and history depending on when it is being looked at, and who is looking at it. His work is a visual depiction of the depth of meaning, of the convoluted histories and memories attached to any one object, or person. Humans often try to categorize, and simplify in order to understand, but in so doing they only diminish their potential for understanding.

In the work *History is not mine* (2013) Fatmi questions all of the above, and photographs blank sheets of paper, the back of a person, their hands, books, hammers and a typewriter in a series of 8 photographs. In these photographs the writer is composing a document by hitting the hammers on the keys of the typewriter. There is something random about the writing of histories, often written by those in power, the dominant and the privileged.

There is a political undertone that runs through all his works. Previous exhibitions have explicitly explored the relationship between religion and politics, these art pieces trace a similar vein of thought, alluding to the working classes and questioning existing power structures. Words used to describe his work, and in titles, like 'manifesto' or 'workers' are part of language we often associate with the radical left. Fatmi states that he is 'a migrant worker' as a result of his feeling that he is always making work from a foreign place,' a statement that seems to refer not only to a physical place, but a metaphorical 'place' that he comes from, or travels to. These versions of history and versions are selves are not unlike the shadow ghosts on the walls and floors projected from the artist's works.



Mounir Fatmi, *Roots 01 – Triptych*, 2016.

Coaxial antenna cable and staples