



POETRY & POLITICS

MONA HATOUM'S "WITNESS"
Beirut Art Center
Until September 9th, 2010

The contemporary art scene is often accused of being too big on words and messages while lacking aesthetics. Yet if "Witness," the first solo exhibition in Lebanon by the internationally acclaimed Beirut-born artist Mona Hatoum, proves one thing, it is that the poetic and political can go hand in hand perfectly.

Mona Hatoum's show at the Beirut Art Center is named after "Witness" (2009), a miniature porcelain version of the bullet-ridden Statue of Liberty at Martyrs Square in the heart of Beirut. Presented as a kind of tourist souvenir, it is a subtle reminder of times gone by.

Next to it "Worry Beads" (2009) too plays with dimensions of scale, albeit in the opposite way. It is a giant bronze *masbaha*, the prayer beads of which look like canon balls. War and violence seem an ever present if beautified theme in Hatoum's work.

"Misbah" (2006/ 2007) is a bronze lantern much like the ones one could buy in the souqs of Damascus to adorn a child's room, were it not for the fact that the lamp's silhouettes projected around the room are those of soldiers on the march. "Impenetrable" (2010) is beautiful hanging cube made of barbed wire, while "3-D Cities" (2008) shows maps of Bagdad, Beirut and Kabul in which the cut-out parts signify periods of destruction and reconstruction.

Born in Beirut in 1952, the Palestinian-British artist is no stranger to war and violence. While studying in London in 1975, the Lebanese Civil War broke out, effectively forcing the then 23-year-old into exile. Having studied at the Byam Shaw School of Art and Slade School of Fine Art, Hatoum gradually made a name from the early 1980s onward, at first with performance art with a focus on the body, later with large-scale installations.

In 1995, she was nominated for Britain's prestigious Turner Prize, while she participated in such prestigious art events as the Venice Biennale, Documenta, and Sydney Biennale. Solo exhibitions include those at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Tate in London, the Hamburger Kunsthalle and the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing.

Not all of Hatoum's work possesses a political dimension. For instance, one work displayed at the BAC is entirely made up of every day objects. The table and chair reminded me of a bit of the first Hatoum work I ever saw, "Deep Throat" (1996), which is not on display.

While the work's title refers to both the famous early 1970s porn film and the main Watergate informer, "Deep Throat" consists of a chair, table and plate, on which a video is projected showing us the "reality" of eating, as Hatoum investigated her own body (from both sides) with a tiny camera. Her "Deep Throat" was recently sold by Christie's for some \$90,000.