BERGEN KUNSTHALL

Simone Fattal Fix Your Gaze On Saturn's Rings 31.1. - 22.3.2020

The exhibition features sculptures, drawings, paintings, collages and photographs by the Lebanese-American artist Simone Fattal, spanning from the early 1970s until today. The works are presented in a characteristic non-chronologic installation in which a myriad of narrative threads and layers appear through the juxtapositions of works in different media and on different scales.

Simone Fattal is mostly known for her work in clay and stoneware, glazed in luminous colours or shades of sand and brown. The works visibly exhibit the traces of their own making - barely formed, liminal, but highly suggestive. The many long-legged figures, assorted vessels or architectural ruins relate to her interest in mythology and archaeology, and chart themes such as the ravages of war and recovery. A whole world of memories, ideas and references to history, poetry and contemporary politics is precipitated in the works, which have come to life in close interaction with the sites and experiences that have surrounded the artist. Born in Syria and raised in Lebanon, Fattal studied philosophy in Paris and established herself as an artist at the end of the 1970s in Beirut. In 1982, she moved to California, where she started the publishing venture Post-Apollo Press.

Fattal's works possess a timelessness—at once archaic and modern. First and foremost, they exhibit a profound humanism and a reflection on humanity and its place in the world and in history.

History, memory, politics and the everyday - gallery 1

In this gallery, a large and diverse selection of sculptures is presented; ranging from vessels and steles – looking almost like archaeological finds - to rudimentary standing figures and torsos. A large number of the figures connect more directly to religion, history, literature and mythology. Within Fattal's cast of characters one finds angels, centaurs, heroes and gods. Her sculptures frequently draw on the epic historical texts such as the Sumerian tales, Arabic epics and Sufi mysticism. As symbols and figures, angels can for example be said to predate monotheistic religions and can be found in various religious faiths, as well as in mysticism and poetry, and thus seem to transcend both history itself and the divides

between cultures.

The warriors who also frequently appear are seen by Fattal as "witnesses", similar to the great Chinese warriors found in the royal tombs, bearing witness to their civilization. Architectural elements such as defence towers and walls, checkpoints, weapons and bunkers point to Fattal's own memories of Syria and Lebanon and adapt the tormented landscape of a region troubled by war and conflict through generations. At the same time, motifs such as garden buildings, animals and food and picnic baskets speak of ongoing everyday life and the rich cultural traditions of the region.

Simone Fattal speaks of history as a continuous movement, and her works seem to embody an overwhelming awareness of history. At first glance her sculptures are reminiscent of ancient artefacts, souvenirs or the idiosyncratic collectibles often found in domestic environments, in which very different objects come together to form a personal story. Indeed, the works contain both personal and historical references to her background in Syria and Lebanon. Deeply passionate about Syria's archaeological culture and the region's history, Fattal has stated that she sees history as having started with Sumer and "never ended".

Acknowledging our fragmentary thinking about history, and how much we cannot access, Fattal accepts that it is in many ways impossible to have real knowledge of the past. At the same time knowledge is crucial, and much is left out in our education. Fattal's works represent a protest against forgetting, and a reminder of how important historical awareness is in the present; perhaps especially so when we look at the Middle East region at a time of heightened levels of tension and conflict.

In Fattal's many collages, the links between history and the present are especially intensive. In one and the same work one can find elements such as a centaur, Ulysses, archaeological elements, Islamic, pre-Islamic and modern art as well as everyday life and contemporary politics. The collages are made up of source material gathered from postcards, newspapers and magazines, and often include portraits of the artist herself and her own works. The two large works La Syrie 1 and La Syrie 2 (both 2014), are a case in point. With a central motif of an historical map,

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these collages place Syria within a geopolitical context that has not changed significantly over the last hundred years, even though the map looks very different today. Since 1917 there has been ongoing attempts by other states to adapt the borders of Syria in their own interests. In one of the works, Fattal has added a more recent map to the collage, showing the Isis-controlled territories as they were around the time when she made the work. This map is only loosely attached to the collage by a single piece of tape, to convey the idea that the regime of Isis was not going to last.

Poetry, painting and Post-Apollo Press - gallery 3

The works in this gallery focus on writing and publishing, as well as on shifting geographical situations and artistic milieus, representing different chapters of Simone Fattal's career and her itinerant life. A group of paintings reflect her surroundings in Beirut, where she first settled as an artist. A selection of books documents her publishing activities with Post-Apollo Press in California since the early 1980s. While living in California, Fattal also started working in clay and making her first sculptures. Included in this room is a group of figures in white porcelain showing poets and writers at work or in contemplation. The sculptures hint at Fattal's deep interest in the role of the poet in society, and her investment in writing and publishing activities. A selection of photographs also represents different geographies and sites, from Mount Tamalpais in California to the Observatory Garden in Paris. Finally, two self-portraits turn the gaze towards the artist herself: one as a photographic 'selfie' from 1982, and the other in the form of the experimental film Autoportrait (1972 / 2012). Autoportrait is Fattal's only film work and is a filmic self-portrait of its author at the age of 30, shot in 1972 but not completed until 2012.

Movement, migration and cultural belonging are central themes in Fattal's work, as well as in her life and career. After studying philosophy in Paris, she took up painting in the 1970s in Beirut. Some of her earliest paintings are presented here, dating back to 1969. When starting to work from her own studio in East Beirut, Fattal had no formal training. She was living alone in her apartment and studio ("which nobody did at the time. Not men, not anyone"), working on paintings that reflected her immediate surroundings. Her second Beirut studio had a "perfect view" of Mount Sannine, a motif that frequently appears in this period of Fattal's work. Other paintings depict flowers, trees and the moon. Politics is always present in Beirut, and when Fattal settled in the city, the Six-Day War of 1967 had just ended, while civil strife between the Palestinians and the Lebanese forces was just beginning. At the same time the city had a vibrant scene with artists, writers and intellectuals. Beirut was also a publishing centre, and it was there that Fattal met her lifelong partner, the poet and painter Etel Adnan, who had come to Beirut to be the cultural editor of the Lebanese newspaper Al Safa.

In 1982 the couple was forced to leave Lebanon because of the civil war, and settled in Cali-for¬nia, where Fattal started the publishing venture Post-Apollo Press in 1982 and devoted the next few years to writing and editorial

work as a publisher of adventurous experimental literature and poetry. The name Post-Apollo takes the Apollo programme and the moon landing as a historical landmark and the potential beginning of a new age: "I thought at the time, and I still do, that for mankind to leave gravity behind and head out into the universe was the beginning of a new era. We could therefore count the years Pre- and Post-Apollo, the way we did with BC and AD" (Simone Fattal).

The books presented here make up an almost complete catalogue of the works published by Post-Apollo Press in the years from 1982 until today, including novels, poetry and prose. The first published book is the poem From A to Z, a work that expresses how everyday life was under the threat of extinction by nuclear war; a threat which was becoming increasingly real during the seventies. Written by Etel Adnan in New York, the poem deals with the experience of being in the city while looking at incoming clouds from the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in Philadelphia in 1979.

Simone Fattal worked as a writer and translator herself and has translated works from Arabic and French into English, for example *Rumi and Sufism* by Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch, a French scholar of Islamology. The books presented in the exhibition show how the press has been an important platform for connecting writers from the USA and the Middle East, as well as making European prose and poetry available to new audiences through translation. Many of the books are illustrated and designed by Etel Adnan and Fattal herself.

Go to Mount Quasioun and Fix Your Gaze on Saturn's Rings

- gallery 4

A central work in this room is the ceramic sculpture *The Garden* (2015). Elaborating on the wall as a motif which can be found in many of Fattal's sculptures, this work is like a maquette of a beautiful garden, or perhaps a pavilion within a garden where the trees have merged with the walls, and a blue moon (which resembles the logo of the Post-Apollo Press) illuminates the scene. With its architectural "arms" the sculpture embraces many of the ideas in the exhibition as a whole, as well as articulating a certain emotional longing.

The garden and the mountain are two recurring motifs in Fattal's works, often referring to Damascus as a Paradise lost. For many today, Syria exists as an idea; as the centre and heart of the Arab world, hugely important for its place in ancient as well as contemporary history. Fattal was born in Syria but was taken away to boarding school in Beirut at the age of 11. Many of her watercolours are inspired by childhood memories of Damascus - one of the oldest cities in the world, once surrounded by an oasis of rich vegetation. Today the Ghouta oasis is polluted and almost entirely dried up. This lost Paradise is represented in Fattal's drawings by luxuriant depictions of fruit, trees and gardens as symbols of a non-western cultural diversity. Gardens, trees and fruit are also common features of descriptions of Paradise in the Koran. Other recurring motifs in Fattal's drawings are settlements and houses; houses in Damascus very often contained the idea of

Paradise in themselves with their use of the garden and courtyard: "[...] the Arab house as seen in Damascus has an inner courtyard, where trees had to be present. My grandfather's house was a real Arab house with a big courtyard: the centre of the world with its little fountain in which you have fruit trees: oranges, bitter oranges, tangerines; flowers – jasmine was a must – and grapes on the terrace. You have to have all these elements to constitute the basis of life" (Simone Fattal in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist).

The exhibition title "Fix Your Gaze on Saturn's Rings" is taken from a drawing (not on view in the exhibition) where a depiction of Mount Quasioun is accompanied by a text in which one of the sentences reads: "Go to Mount Quasioun and Fix Your Gaze on Saturn's Rings". In interviews Fattal frequently tells the story of how one used to climb up the mountain and look down to see orchards, olive trees and fruit trees – a view filled with mystery and an immense sense of history. In a similar way, Fattal's exhibition can be thought of as a "mountain", giving us a view and making room for a rich perspective on the world we inhabit.

Simone Fattal (f. 1942, Damaskus, Syria) lives and works in Paris

Plattform: Simone Fattal & Barbara Casavecchia Sat 1 Feb 14:00 Free

Plattform talk with Simone Fattal and Barbara Casavecchia in connection with the exhibition "Fix Your Gaze On Saturn's Rings".

Barbara Casavecchia is a freelance writer and independent curator based in Milan, where she teaches at Brera art academy. Contributing editor for Frieze, her articles and essays – often focused on Italian contemporary art, visual cultures, and feminisms – have appeared in Art Agenda, Art Review, D/La Repubblica, Flash Art, Mousse, Nero, South/documenta 14, Spike, among others, as well as in artist books and catalogues. In 2018, she curated the exhibition "Susan Hiller. Social Facts", at OGR, Turin. In 2014, she co-curated with Lorenzo Giusti the retrospective "Maria Lai. Ricucire il mondo" at MAN, Nuoro.

Plattform is Bergen Kunsthall's series of lectures and debates. The series hosts talks and conversations with artists, writers and scholars in connection withour exhibitions and in relation to wider contemporary discussions.

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