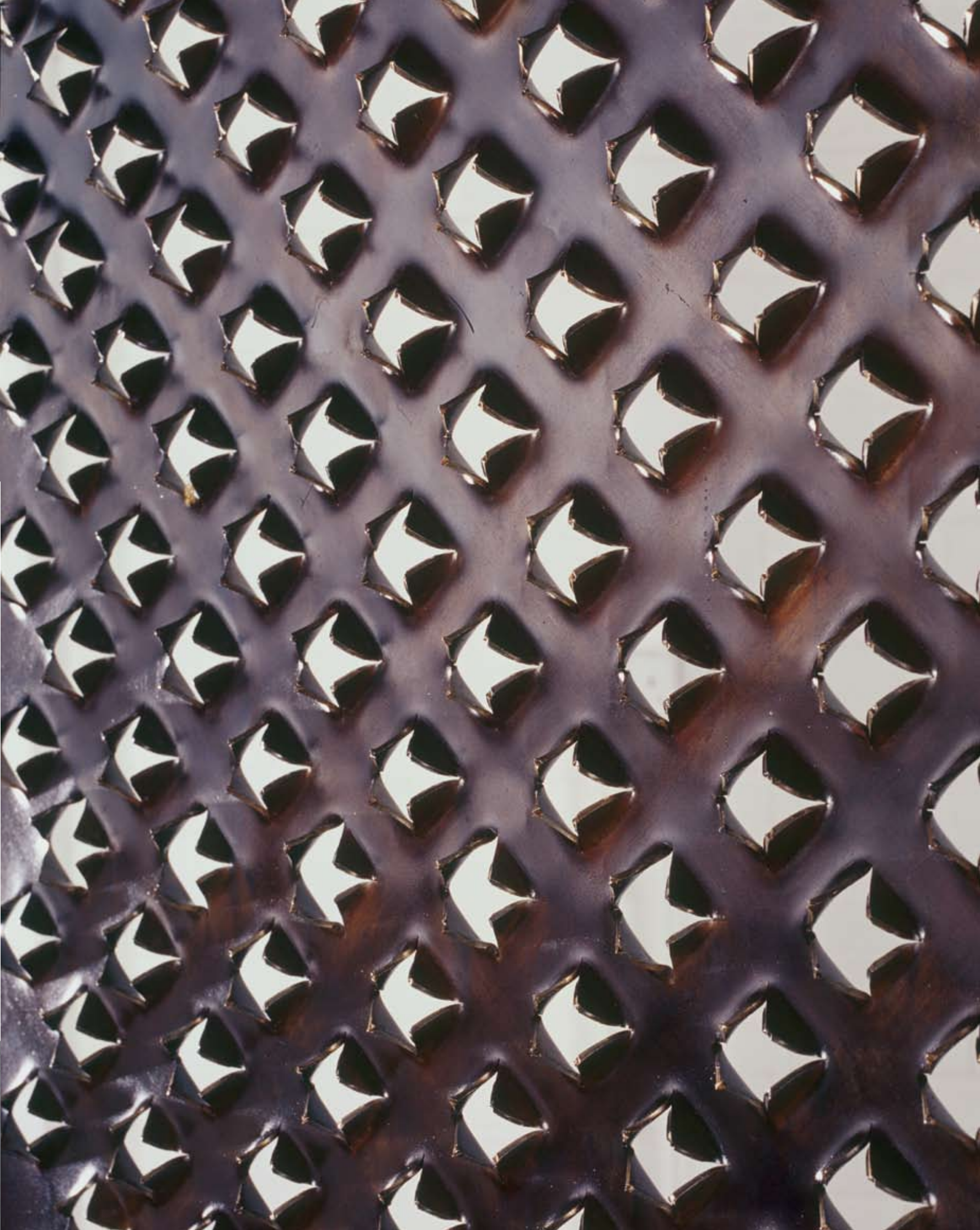


# finding the essence

mona hatoum







Continuing to astonish with her bold and profoundly revealing works, Mona Hatoum is remorseless in her quest for an inner truth. By stripping objects of their outer shell she seeks to expose their true nature and, with it, shed light on our own condition.

TEXT BY JAMES PARRY  
IMAGES COURTESY OF WHITE CUBE

Mona Hatoum famously dislikes interviews, and who can blame her? The history of such exchanges is littered with fraught confessions and skewed portrayals, and she is right to be cautious. In any case, the key nuts and bolts of Hatoum's life and work are already known to most art aficionados: the Palestinian heritage, growing up in Beirut, the visit to London and then the inability to return home as Lebanon imploded into civil war; the early years of political activism and performance art, and then the later work, including Turner Prize nomination and the more sensationalist of her works; everyone recalls *Corps Étranger*, for instance. Yet, judging Hatoum and her work by such a string of markers is a pointless exercise. Intriguingly complex, she is also frank and direct in her work, and honest and relaxed as she sits on a sofa next to me at London's White Cube, one of five galleries that represent her worldwide.

"I come from a family of academics, and art was of no interest to anyone at home," she recalls of her childhood. "It wasn't even on the curriculum at school, so I very much had to forge my own way." She particularly remembers finding opportunities to draw in her poetry books, sketches facing the text, and in biology class, creating images of amoebas and other organisms. But early hopes of an artistic career were seemingly stifled. "I sat down with my father, when I was 16 or so, to discuss what I wanted to do. I said that I really wanted to

study art, and he exclaimed, 'No way!' It wasn't that he didn't appreciate art, he was just worried about how I could support myself through it."

#### State of Limbo

Hatoum later found her school notebooks, touchingly kept by her father in an old filing cabinet and only discovered after he had passed away. Her family was unusual in the sense that there was not the conventional pressure from her parents for her and her two sisters to get married – "Which was good, because for me at that time, marriage was definitely not on the agenda!" Hatoum recalls, with some irony (she has now been married to husband Gerry Collins for 14 years). After taking a graphic design course and then working in an advertising agency to get some money together, she left for London on a short visit, fully intending to return to Beirut afterwards to start her undergraduate studies. But whilst she was in the British capital, the political situation in Lebanon suddenly deteriorated; fighting broke out, and so Hatoum took the decision to stay in Britain until things calmed down at home.

They did not, of course. At least, not for 15 years. Stranded in London, Hatoum started to make sense of the situation and decided to take a foundation course at the Byam School of Art. At the end of that year, and with no sign that the situation in Lebanon was improving, she enrolled for another three-year course at the Byam and then moved to the Slade School of Fine Art for two years of postgraduate studies. Whilst at the Byam, Hatoum had her first exposure to painting; "For me, at that time, painting was what art was all about," she recalls. "I tried my hand at everything – one term I'd be trying

Opening spread:  
Left: *Grater Divide*. 2002. Mild steel. 204 x 3.5 cm, variable width. Photo: Iain Dickens. Courtesy White Cube.  
Right: (Detail) *Grater Divide*. 2002. Mild steel. 204 x 3.5 cm, variable width. Photo: Iain Dickens. Courtesy White Cube.

Facing page: *Hair Necklace*. 1995. Artist's hair, Cartier bust and leather. 31 x 22 x 17 cm. Photo: Edward Woodman. Courtesy White Cube.















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But two particular artistic movements soon struck a chord with the rapidly developing artist: Minimalism and Conceptual art, which have both remained with her ever since. “What I like about Minimalism in particular is the flushing out of all the unnecessary ‘noise’,” she explains, “the idea of stripping things down to their real essence.” Faced with the doctrinal and practical clarity of the Minimalist approach, painting and other forms of representational art soon lost their appeal to Hatoum; “I got frustrated with them. I was more interested in ideas of change and movement, and traditional art forms were simply not the right medium for these.” In particular, she found herself increasingly drawn to materials that enabled her to work three-dimensionally, using plastic and mirrors to make cuboid shapes, for example, and at the Slade was exposed

for the first time to video and performance art.

Although her artistic knowledge and experience were by now developing rapidly, life was not so easy for Hatoum socially; “It was hard then, I was worried constantly about my family in Lebanon. I didn’t really have a support system in London in those days. I met people at school but they were often unaware of my situation, or indeed of the Middle Eastern predicament generally.” It is little surprise, therefore, that at about this time she became involved in political activism and, increasingly, performance art. Having left art school, and

Previous spreads:  
Left: (Detail) *Impenetrable*. 2009. Black finished steel and fishing wire. 300 x 300 x 300 cm. Photo: Agostino Osio. Courtesy Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice.  
Right: *Impenetrable*. 2009. Black finished steel and fishing wire. 300 x 300 x 300 cm. Photo: Agostino Osio. Courtesy Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice.

*Nature Morte aux Grenades*. 2006–7. Crystal, steel and rubber. 95 x 208 x 70 cm.  
Photo: Jörg von Bruchhausen. Courtesy Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin.

*A Bigger Splash*. 2009. Murano glass. Dimensions variable. Photo: Agostino Osio.  
Courtesy Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice.

Above: Two stills from *Corps Étranger*. 1994. Video installation with cylindrical wooden structure, video projector, video player, amplifier and four speakers. 350 x 300 x 300 cm. Photo: Philippe Migéat. Courtesy Centre Pompidou, Paris.



*Corps Étranger*. 1994. Video installation with cylindrical wooden structure, video projector, video player, amplifier and four speakers. 350 x 300 x 300 cm. Photo: Philippe Migeat. Courtesy Centre Pompidou, Paris.



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# profile

with no studio and little money for materials, Hatoum saw distinct advantages in venue-based performance art – little or no overheads, for a start. Yet as an art form, it also had an ephemeral quality that she relished; “It was very much about the here and now, very impulsive and improvised. Nothing stayed behind – except perhaps a photo or two – and I really liked that, mainly because I was so critical of my own work that I couldn’t live with it.” She adds that she also thrived on the edginess of performance art, its critique of the art world and of commodification in general.

## Acting Up

Particularly notable in her oeuvre of that period is *Live Work for the Black Room* (1981). The performance takes place in darkness, in a room where all the surfaces are painted black. The first few minutes of action are unseen by the viewers, who can only hear Hatoum as she falls repeatedly on the floor and then draws an outline of her prostrate body in white chalk. After each outline is drawn, she places a nightlight in its centre; slowly, as more candles are lit, the nature of the work becomes apparent: a vast spaghetti of chalk lines, covering the floor and increasingly dwarfing – and ensnaring – the solitary human form that they represent.

Hatoum undertook over 35 performances between 1980 and 1988. At the same time she was also producing video work, decidedly in its infancy then as a genre; “Both performance and video art were very marginal at that time,” she explains, “we certainly didn’t view video as a commodity, but the great advantage it did have was that it was possible to send it out to various exhibitions and reach a wider audience than was ever possible with performance.” Hatoum brought her skill with both forms to bear in works such as *So Much I Want to Say* (1983). Her first video work, it comprises a series of canned images showing her being gagged by an unseen man and struggling to speak. These are transmitted live between Vancouver, where the action is taking place, and Vienna, where an audience watches on a screen and receives continuous sound via a telephone line.

During the late 1980s Hatoum became less politically driven – “I realised that activism was not really for me, I used

to sometimes feel physically sick after being at a demo” – and less interested in performance and video art. Instead, she found herself more preoccupied with working with materials and, after securing a fellowship at Cardiff Institute of Higher Education in 1989, enjoyed the facilities and time to experiment further. She recalls how “this was a very liberating time for me. I was away from my peers in London and not under the pressure to perform, as it were. I had the time and space to do my own thing.” The result was a move towards installation art and expressions within which the role of the viewer and spectator were increasingly important. Interactivity with the audience – but with the artist absent rather than ‘performing’ – became central. The decade culminated in a work in which the currents Hatoum sought to establish between viewer, work and unseen artist came alive, literally, with *The Light at the End* (1989), featuring exposed electric heating bars mounted on a gate-like structure resembling a grill.

The 1990s saw Hatoum produce some of her trademark installation pieces, works that have come to define her as one of the most innovative and insightful artists of her time. Her fascination with the human form – she has used the body, hair, nails and body fluids in her work for over two decades now – came to the fore most famously via her remarkable endoscopic journeys, *Corps Étranger* (1994) and *Deep Throat* (1996). These seminal works presented the internal human form as a sort of science fiction creation, transforming it into something unworldly and confrontationally abstract. Meanwhile, Hatoum took routine household objects, furniture and utensils and stripped them of their everyday meaning. The striking results challenged perceptions of what surrounds us in the domestic context and sought to reincarnate these seemingly mundane and innocent items as disconcerting and potentially hostile. *Incommunicado* (1993), for example, presented a baby’s cot as a prison-like cage with ‘cheese wire’ stretched across the base; *Divan Bed* (1996) saw traditional upholstery replaced by severe steel plates, resembling a slab in a morgue. These unnerving themes were drawn together

Previous spread:  
Left: *Interior Landscape*. 2008. Steel bed, pillow, human hair, table, cardboard tray, cut-up map and wire hanger. Dimensions variable. Photo: Fakhri N Al-Alami. Courtesy The Khalid Shoman Foundation/Darat Al-Funun, Amman.  
Right: *So Much I Want to Say*. 1983. Video tape. Duration: 5 minutes. Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London.

in *Homebound* (2000), an assemblage of post-Second World War furniture and domestic items that are brutally stripped of any soft furnishings and presented as stark and skeletal. The objects in this reduced tableau are connected via a melee of wired-up copper cables that electrify and crackle, creating a malevolent and oppressive atmosphere.

## Size Matters

It was during this period that Hatoum consolidated her place on the international stage, with nomination for the Turner Prize (1995) and participation at her first Venice Biennale (1995). Her work has since continued to engage and astound, its recurring themes and circularity a kinetic confirmation of her consistent outlook, but in themselves so constantly evolving that new forms and expressions abound. Morphed kitchen objects surface in works such as *Grater Divide* (2002), whilst *Cage-à-Deux* (2002) presented an oversized birdcage large enough for human occupation and fraught with danger and tension. *Unhomely*, a landmark show in the vast Osram light bulb factory space in Berlin in 2008 (and now the main space for Galerie Max Hetzler), confirmed

Hatoum's trademark coupling of the familiar and the strange, the conscious and the unconscious, but in a way that opened up new vistas: *Nature Morte aux Grenades* (2006–7) and *Undercurrent (red)* (2008) particularly stand out as works of great power and originality.

Earlier this year Hatoum returned to Venice for her third Biennale there, with a solo show entitled *Interior Landscape*. Exhibited in the stunning palazzo of the Fondazione Querini Stampalia, some of the smaller works were sensitively integrated with the outstanding historical artefacts on permanent display there. The show's undoubted highlights were *Impenetrable* (2009) and *Interior Landscape* (2009), surely two of Hatoum's most epic works to date. Other pieces were redolent with recurring themes – her fascination with human hair, for example. Hair is a challenging medium for any


artist, not least as it arouses often conflicting responses to do with sensuality and repulsion. Hatoum's approach is, as ever, highly individual; she has both woven her own hair on a diminutive loom and rolled it into tiny balls to be scattered like mini tumbleweeds, as was the case in Venice (where *Hair Necklace*, an earlier work, was also displayed). The deeply personal nature of hair serves as a potent investorial emblem of Hatoum's craft.

Hatoum regards *Interior Landscape* as her most successful show to date, or at least the one with which she is most satisfied. More tellingly, she feels that it was the result of a process of quiet consideration and contemplation, something only made possible by the tranquil and concentrated time she gets when she is in Berlin, where she has been spending half of her time since 2003; "I make homes wherever I am, but my life [in Berlin] is so much more balanced than it is in London these

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The results of this change are clear to see. Hatoum's works constituted the recent inaugural show at the Rennie Collection in Vancouver, Canada, and a new

project at the Musée de l'art contemporain du Val-de-Marne in France is imminent. This year's schedule includes a residency culminating in a solo exhibition at the Beirut Art Centre, marking a timely return to Lebanon. "I'm very excited about spending time and producing work there. The space is beautiful and it's a non-commercial venue," she explains. "Residencies are always so inspiring, the feeling of constant discovery is a real stimulus for me." This commitment to continuing the creative journey with a totally open eye, heart and mind clearly defines Hatoum, shaping the artistic twists and turns of this most enigmatic of Contemporary artists. 

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