

## MOUNIR FATMI – BETWEEN THE LINES

8 January – 24 February 2011, Galerie Hussenot, Paris  
Exhibition Review

*By Kelly Carmichael*



**Mixology # 13**, 2010, video, France, 11min 04sec, HD, color, stereo - Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Hussenot, Paris, France.

Looking back at Mounir Fatmi's Paris exhibition in light of the social and political context leading up to what became known as the Arab Spring and the revolutionary action that unfolded across the region in the months following, the timing of this exhibition and the message of Fatmi's work seem to almost take the temperature of that transitional moment. Even the title of the exhibition – *Between the Lines* – seems to allude or hint to a deeper resonance, to encourage a more thorough examination beyond that which lies on the surface, to provide a metaphor for thinking and for both our understanding and acceptance of convention and ideology. Although a recurrent theme throughout his practice, by titling the exhibition in this way Fatmi overtly set the stage for a questioning of the status quo, one which would be repeated many times in the days and months to follow.

Mounir Fatmi's practice offers a timely exploration of the role that contemporary artists play as commentators on the world around us. Frequently we see an artist take something unfamiliar and make it recognisable, acting as a broker into the mainstream of unfamiliar ideas, concepts and approaches. Yet, what we see in Fatmi's work is the inverse – the artist taking something known and making it unfamiliar, even slightly alien. Mounir Fatmi employs a strategy of defamiliarisation that challenges fixed points of view, drawing the viewer into a deeper understanding of the work and its subversive nature. In a previous photographic series titled *Evolution or Death* the artist presented images of men and women with books strapped to their bodies, wires connecting and protruding to mimic bombs. Looking deeper, however, we might understand that

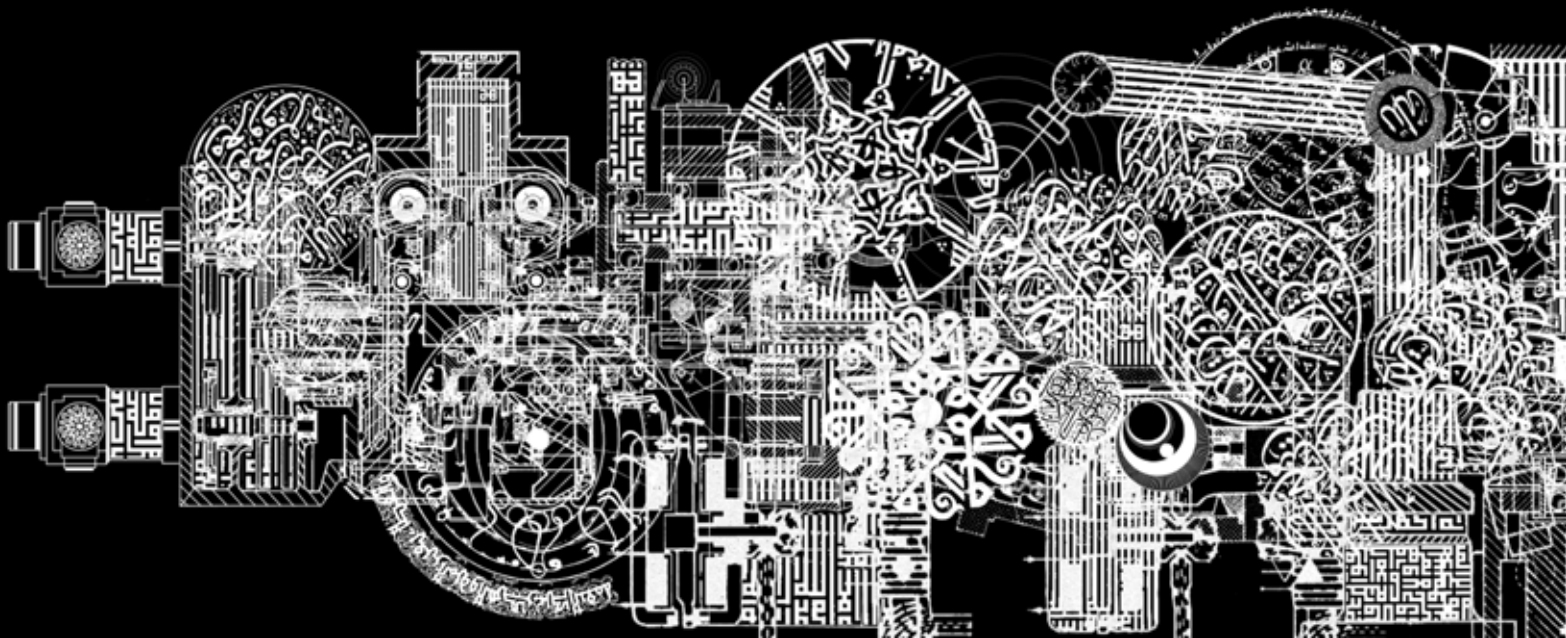


**Mixology # 1**, 2010, video, France, 11min 04sec, HD, color, stereo - Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Hussenot, Paris, France.

these are not suicide bombers but people protecting themselves from ignorance and destructive dogma with learning, culture and ideas. Forcing the viewer to oscillate between certitude, meaning, commonly accepted assumptions and what they perceive to be true, Fatmi's practice requires us to look again and question our learnt behaviour or cultural reflex. Extending this metaphor, *Between the Lines* sets out to be a way of thinking, playfully denying definition or categorisation. Presented in striking monochrome, the exhibition has a graphic and strongly aesthetic impact, but in characteristic style it is the spaces between, or shades of grey, that define the subtext and layers of interpretation in Fatmi's practice.

Building upon the artist's previous spatial constructions and linguistic games designed to destabilise and liberate the viewer in equal parts, *Between the Lines* presents a series of works where the fundamentals of meaning, function and tradition are simultaneously exposed and inverted. As an artist, Mounir Fatmi trades in the

poetics of tension, but always seems in command of its direction and sequence. This tension is in full effect in *Between the Lines* where the layering of multiple and often contradictory cultural, historical and intellectual references rub uneasily together. Entering the gallery, a large-scale video installation dominating the back wall titled *Modern Times*, a history of the machine, confronts the viewer. Inspired by Charlie Chaplin's celebrated film, in Fatmi's version circular verses of the Qur'an now form the cogs driving the mechanism forward. Though visually a beautiful and delicate painting in light featuring the recurring Fatmi motif of elegant Arabic calligraphy, the projection has a poignant and ominous nature. The stencil cut circular saw blades of the machine and its relentless rotation form a metaphor for the modern world and technology – as the device moves the calligraphy is alternatively revealed and overshadowed by other blades, its meaning and context dissolving into ambiguity and merging into the machine. As an artist particularly interested



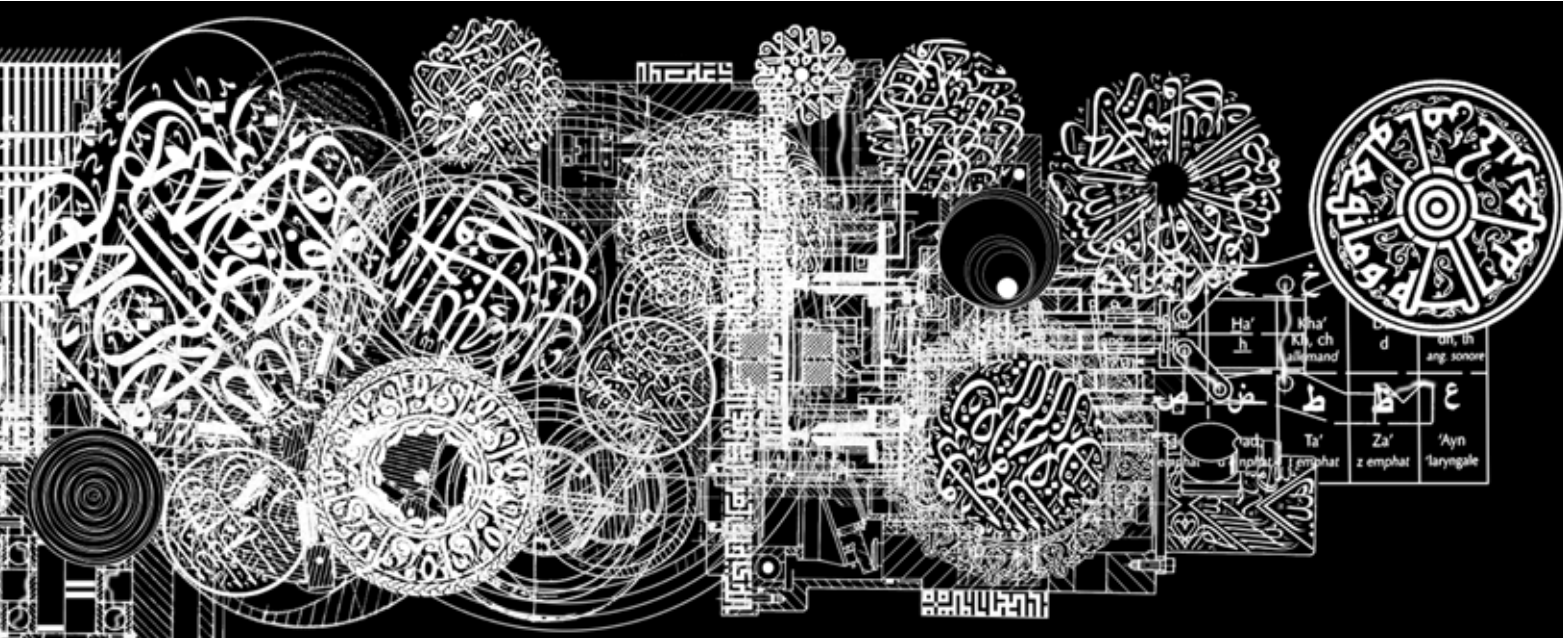
**Modern Times # 1**, A History of the Machine, 2009-2010, videos, sound, saw blades in steel. Exhibition view from Told, Untold, Retold, Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha -Courtesy of the artist and Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar.

in the idea of consumption and also demise, a warning of the dangers of rapid industrialisation and the role of technology in society starts to appear. We are not in control of the machine, instead, Fatmi seems to suggest that we have become the machine. Accompanied by an adjacent projection of frenetic spinning and oscillating disks, Fatmi's work echoes and replicates the friction of tradition and progress and of globalisation and cultural differences. Mounir Fatmi's interest in the systems of control that vie to mould us and govern our lives – those major offenders of religion, society, media and globalisation – shape much of his work and ask the viewer to question what we see and how it is disseminated. His practice has often dealt with the fall of grand narratives, outdated technology and the difficulties of achieving global integration. In Fatmi's work strong cultural signifiers of both Western and Arabic culture are deconstructed and recombined into Dada or Burroughs-esque cut-ups, often quite literally. A collage of prayer rug pieces forms a triptych on one wall and *Les Chutes/ The Falls*, a sculpture of Arabic calligraphy forms, tumbles out of a cardboard box resting on the floor. Recombined, these characters form a passage from the Qur'an – exactly which one remains a secret, the artist tells me – but isolated there is no message, just

words or remnants. Recontextualising cultural signifiers to destabilise accepted practice and provoke discussion culminates in *Mixology*, a split screen video presenting a close up of a DJ spinning records. Here the relentless motion and movement of *Modern Times* is updated and brought into the contemporary, two turntables and a mixing desk providing the rotation and kinetic energy that characterises much of the work in *Between the Lines*. In this work the black surface of the records are decorated with circular hadith painted in white on the grooved vinyl. As the records spin and the DJ scratches into the paint, both the meaning of the text and the music become distorted. An intentional and brutal clash between image and sound occurs, representing cultural meeting and the age-old sparring partners of pleasure and religion. In Fatmi's hands symbols of ideology and dogma become both less concrete and more complex, globalisation continues to encroach and consume cultural specificity yet offers it new identity. While important cultural signifiers may have been divorced from their original context and the intension tradition has imposed on them, through Fatmi's act of deconstruction they become another sort of sacred, that of art object in a gallery.

Postscript:





Mounir Fatmi's desire to engage the viewer 'between the lines' and require them to question ideology and dogma along with its symbols of power and authority culminated in another work, *The Lost Springs* (2011), being censored at Art Dubai where officials requested the removal of the installation's broom heads from which flags of the 22 Arab league countries were hung.

#### ***About the Writer***

*Kelly Carmichael is a contemporary curator and critic. Alongside researching and developing exhibitions she currently guest edits and writes for the website of Visiting Arts, a cultural diplomacy organisation and contributes regularly to contemporary art publications. As Creative Consultant to Islington Council, London, she was the editor of a publication on landscape architecture and contemporary art in urban parks and contributed to a project on social cohesion and the arts for the cultural department of the Commonwealth Foundation.*