



Hot shot

A portrait of himself engulfed in flames will set the tone for firebrand artist Adel Abdessemed's upcoming solo exhibition at Paris' Centre Pompidou



PLAYING WITH FIRE

Adel Abdessemed in his studio in Paris' 10^e arrondissement. On the wall, *Je Suis Innocent* (left), a picture of the artist on fire by Gérard Rondeau, will be part of the upcoming Centre Pompidou show; and preparatory sketches for sculptures that will be displayed at the Pompidou (centre), and in 2013 at David Zwirner London (right)



Adel Abdessemed is on fire. The Algerian-born artist stands in the street in Paris with his arms crossed over his chest, unflinching as flames ignite the arc of petrol-soaked pavement at his feet, engulf his trouser legs, and climb his shirt. A man crossing the street glances over his shoulder and does a double-take. 'This is what I did yesterday,' the 41-year-old Abdessemed says excitedly back in his light-filled Parisian studio, holding up a colour print of the shocking scene. Was he scared? 'No. But in the end I was very upset, because the guy I hired to be in charge of safety decided he wanted to take some pictures of his own,' he says, punctuating the tale with the two-tone laugh that can give his intense statements an exclamation point of joy. 'He was a little late with the fire extinguisher.'

On the floor of the studio, beneath a wall papered with charcoal sketches, are some of Abdessemed's latest references: Nick Ur's shot of Vietnamese children fleeing the 1972 napalm strike of Trang Bang, and a news magazine open at the photo of a man setting himself on fire outside a bank in Thessaloniki. Unable

HOMETRUTHS

Above, the India Mahdavi-designed flat Abdessemed shares with his wife, Julie, and their four daughters. On the wall are the artist's *Nafissa* (2006) and *Mes Amis* (2005). This picture, *Coup de Tête* depicts Zidane headbutting Materazzi in the 2006 World Cup final. Photography: EPW Studio



to repay his debts, the Greek business owner invested in a megaphone and a canister of gasoline. 'I have always been playing with fire,' explains Abdessemed. 'I thought about this kind of image with fire as an act, which is what I do in my work.' He eschews the label of conceptual artist, in part to highlight the directness, immediacy and sense of motion that he strives for and also because such terms inevitably fall short of describing his shape-shifting artistic practice, which has ranged from brief yet brain-searing videos to monumental taxidermy installations.

'Act' also better captures the feats and ideas that are behind Abdessemed's images. There is no Photoshop magic, and he doesn't do dress rehearsals, even when his work involves drawing while suspended by his ankles from a helicopter or setting a herd of wild boar loose on the street. 'I like the challenge of discovery, of attacking something new,' he says. He compares his approach to the effect of crystal, able to reflect and refract light in many directions simultaneously.

The portrait of the artist ablaze will appear on posters that will set the tone >>



for his upcoming solo exhibition at the Centre Pompidou. Among the inspirations for the show's title, 'Adel Abdessemed: Je Suis Innocent', is the Cimetière des Innocents, an ancient burial ground that was located near present-day Beaubourg. It's also a nod to the themes of birth and death, violence and harmony, creation and destruction, omnipresent in his work.

Visitors to the Pompidou will get a taste of Abdessemed's risk-taking ways even before entering the museum. At the centre of the outdoor plaza will be *Coup de Tête*, a bronze sculpture that depicts Zinedine Zidane headbutting Marco Materazzi in the 2006 World Cup final. A rare monument to a defeat, the work is likely to reopen old wounds. Its slightly elongated figures, locked in an awkward embrace, are disturbing in a way that both demands and frustrates repeated viewing.

This effect is no accident, explains Tom McDonough, chair of art history at New York's Binghamton University, who contributed an essay to the exhibition catalogue. 'With this work, Adel takes us right back to this supercharged, highly ambivalent moment of recent history,' he says, 'where a Franco-Algerian football player who's been made into a French national hero, a symbol of assimilation, commits a foul in the most important game of his life. It brings out all these latent fears around a very charged set of issues, like racial and ethnic relationships.'

Abdessemed began by sculpting the figures himself and then had the work scaled up by a fabricator. His original plaster cast stands about a metre tall atop a wooden crate near the entrance of his studio. It is skilfully rendered, with a keen eye for proportions. 'This beautiful little

piece of sculpture could have made for a very dynamic thing, and that clearly was not what Adel wanted as an effect,' says McDonough. 'He has a real set of skills – the ability to draw, to sculpt, and more – that he chooses to activate or not activate.'

Just inside the Pompidou will be a 2008 sculpture consisting of three braided airplanes, an illusion made possible by swapping out their original fuselages with felt tubes. Entitled *Telle Mère Tel Fils*, ('Like mother, like son'), the work was inspired by his mother's *bourek* pastries. Her ability to stretch the tight family budget also made a lasting impact on Abdessemed. 'I can work with various scales and budgets, yet I never want to be excessive,' he says. 'I want to get the most of everything, my ideas, my materials.'

'Adel's images are terribly efficient, up to the point that they generate scandals,' says Philippe-Alain Michaud, curator of the Pompidou show. The two first met nearly two decades ago at the École des Beaux-Arts in Lyon, where Abdessemed arrived in 1994 to escape the civil war in Algeria. 'I had come to lecture and was struck by the piece he showed me, *Joueur de Flûte*: a naked imam in an empty room, playing the flute,' says Michaud. 'I was amazed by the scene's uncanniness and by Adel's persuasiveness. I thought, he can get anything from anybody.'

Michaud is eager to demonstrate how, in addition to dealing with contemporary

PLANE CRAZY

Shown here at New York gallery David Zwirner, *Telle Mère Tel Fils* refers to the artist's own mother, whose *bourek*, baked or fried filled pastries made of flaky dough, inspired him to roll aeroplanes into braided contortions.

Photography:
Cathy Carve

culture and conflict, Abdessemed's work is deeply rooted in art history, full of references to Masaccio or Goya. One wall of the exhibition space will be dominated by *Décor* (2011-12), four identical life-size sculptures of the crucified Jesus made entirely from razor wire. Acquired by French businessman François Pinault, the work spent the summer in Colmar's Musée d'Unterlinden, where it was displayed opposite the work that inspired it: German Renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece.

But the direct reference to the work of another artist is a rarity for Abdessemed, who tends to point to writers when asked about figures that inspire him. He is fond of describing his working process by quoting from Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*: 'I shall strike you without anger / And without hate, like a butcher'. It's probably no coincidence that the verse is an excerpt from the poem 'L'Héautontimoroumenos' ('The Man Who Tortures Himself').

Encountering Abdessemed's powerful images, it can be easy to forget that he has a lot of fun carving out a perilous niche 'between what it is taboo and permissible, what is said and left unsaid.' He is already thinking about the next work, the next show (an exhibition at David Zwirner's new London gallery is planned for 2013, and then it's on to Qatar). When asked about future projects, his eyes flash.

'I want to find a whale, bring it to my street and make a wonderful picture,' he says, mentioning a 19m specimen discovered in Morocco. 'So if you know someone who has a whale, let me know.' ★
 'Adel Abdessemed: Je Suis Innocent', 3 October 2012 – 7 January 2013, Centre Pompidou, www.centrepompidou.fr

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