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Adel Abdessemed

By Olivia Sand

Writing about Adel Abdessemed (b 1971 in Algeria, presently based in France) is a challenging undertaking as his practice is so broad. As writers rely on words as a means of expression, similarly, Adel Abdessemed, as an artist, covers the entire spectrum offered by the word 'art'. Outspoken and direct, he completes pieces that combine aesthetic qualities with his own vision of the world. Determined not to evade awkward topics, he is more than ready to take a position and to take risks. It goes without saying that such a multi-disciplinary artist with a very strong personality may polarise people; loved and adored by some – considered irritating by others.

Adel Abdessemed reminds you of a distant time when artists were discussing the world and determined to bring new engagement. In the following interview, he shares his ideas about his practice, the art world, and the world in general.

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER:

You have two museum exhibitions taking place simultaneously, one at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Lyon and one at the Grand Hornu in Belgium. How did you make sure they were distinct?



Adel Abdessemed, Paris ADAGP 2018.
Photo: Gilles Bensimon
© Adel Abdessemed

ADEL ABDESSEMED:

I was first invited by Denis Gielen, Director at the Grand Hornu in Belgium and three weeks later I received an invitation from Thierry Raspail at the MAC in Lyon. Mr Raspail was attracted to a drawing he had seen in my apartment in London in which I explored the architecture of Donald Judd. The drawing, entitled *Judd*, is now part of the Lyon exhibition.

The meeting with Denis Gielen took place through my former dealer Yvon Lambert. We visited the museum in Belgium and very quickly I was taken by the space, which I saw as a palace. To me, a presidential palace is a place of power and large rooms, as they are often seen on

television – with paintings of gods, heroes, or hunting decorating their walls. When I saw this space as a palace, the tune of *Otchie Tchiornie* (Black Eyes), the famous song sung by the Red Army, came to me right then and there. In December 2016, we heard the news of the plane crash and the death of the members of the Alexandrov Ensemble (Red Army Choir), when they were travelling to sing for children in Syria at Christmas. It was a tragic event. I also remember very clearly the death of Ceaușescu, a tumultuous event which – for the first time – could be followed on television. To me, it somewhat resembled Goya's painting *The Third of May 1808* (1814) and I felt seeing Ceaușescu's assassination through the media was extremely shocking.

AAN: Do you think it was similar to what happened with the bombing in Iraq, where some people were following it live on television like an entertainment?

AA: I remember the live broadcast in 2003 as Baghdad was about to be bombed. At the time, I was living in Berlin and I knew from the news at what time the bombing was going to take place. I still have a very strong recollection of that moment. As I did not own a television, I was wondering where I could go to follow what was happening. With the internet less accessible back then, I thought of a pub where they had giant screens for American football

broadcasts would be best. I was convinced that on this day, they would show the news live, and indeed, that was the case. The pub was highlighting the 'fireworks', but what struck me most is that among the people at the pub, some were clapping and cheering. I was stunned and, in my mind, I associated these people with Pieter Bruegel the Elder's (1525-1569) *The Triumph of Death* (circa 1562). The live broadcast deeply shocked me and this episode is still a part of the obscure images that keep haunting me.

AAN: When you say 'obscure', can you be more specific?

AA: For example, there is more to Nick Ut's *Napalm Girl* (1972) photograph taken during the Vietnam war than we originally thought we knew. Forty years later, this young girl revealed that within this tragedy, the United States did not send the bomb, but someone from the Vietcong, which was even worse. A propaganda image was needed and it is undeniable that this precise picture accelerated Vietnam's liberation. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the bomb was thrown by the Vietcong as opposed to the American pilot who was against it and would not throw bombs on temples.

Similarly, I am puzzled by certain events that took place when I was younger, like the assassination of the ex-Algerian President Mohamed

Continued on page 4

NEWS IN BRIEF

role as a source of spiritual enlightenment, of moral inspiration, and of social cohesion. At a time when strengthening tolerance and pluralism seems to have become an acute worldwide priority, music offers an exciting medium for reaching and involving global audiences. More information on akdn.org.

NEW CURATOR, MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

The museum has announced that Christina Yu Yu has been appointed as the Matsutaro Shoriki Chair, Art of Asia. A noted scholar of both historic and contemporary Chinese art, she will lead a team of curators in overseeing the museum's collection of more than 100,000 works from Japan, China, Korea, South and Southeast Asia, and the Islamic world. Yu Yu currently serves as the director of the USC Pacific Asia Museum, one of the few museums in the US dedicated exclusively to the arts of Asia and the Pacific Islands. An alumna of Wellesley College and Boston University, she will return to Boston this summer and assume her new role at the MF, where she began her curatorial career as a graduate intern. She takes up her new post on 2 July.

ASIA SOCIETY, TOKYO

Asia Society today announced it will open its first-ever centre in Japan, in partnership with the International House of Japan in Tokyo. The International House of Japan is a

private, non-profit organisation established with support from the Rockefeller Foundation and other private institutions and individuals, in 1952 for the purpose of promoting cultural exchange and intellectual cooperation between the peoples of Japan and those of other countries.

ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

The institute has announced the appointment of Colin C Mackenzie as the new curator of Chinese Art. Mackenzie most recently served as Senior Curator of East Asian Art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (2009-18), where he oversaw the reinstallation of three Chinese galleries in addition to regular small exhibitions in the Chinese painting gallery, Chinese furniture gallery, and Japanese gallery.

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

In April, the Chinese galleries closed for approximately 10 months to begin the first comprehensive renovation and reinstallation of its galleries of Chinese art in many decades. The new galleries will present a comprehensive display of Chinese art in all media, including paintings, sculpture, porcelains, ceramics, carvings, metalwork, costume and textiles, furniture, and contemporary works. The new installation will also make direct interpretive connections to the Museum's three celebrated Chinese architectural interiors in adjacent

galleries, all from Beijing. These include a 17th-century Chinese Reception Hall from an official residence, an 18th-century Scholar's Study, and the Ceiling from the Hall of Wisdom Transformed at the Zhuhai Temple, an early Ming-dynasty Buddhist monastery. More information on philamuseum.org.

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

The museum has announced the appointment of Dr Fahmida Suleman, ROM Curator of Islamic Art & Culture. Dr Suleman will be responsible for developing and implementing strategy to build, manage and interpret the ROM's world-class collection of Islamic art and material culture, which represents the largest collection of its kind in Canada. Dr Suleman takes up her new position in January 2019.

ASIA WEEK HONG KONG

Formed to promote Asian art and culture in Hong Kong, the sixth edition takes place from 23 May to 2 June in venues around Hong Kong and includes a series of events and including antiques and contemporary art that brings together dealers, galleries, auction houses, museums, cultural institutions and collectors' societies. More information on the 2018 programme to be announced on asiaweekhk.com.

OBITUARY

The death has been announced of Ram Kumar in India. The Vadhra

Art Gallery stated, 'We mourn the loss of a mentor and passionate supporter who has been a part of the birth and growth of our gallery. We have held over 22 solo exhibitions by Ram Kumar over the years'. Ram Kumar was a prolific painter and a passionate writer, with a creative career spanning over seven decades since he gave up his job at a bank to learn art under Sailoz Mukherjee at Sharda Ukil School of Art in 1948. Born into large family in Shimla, Ram Kumar initially pursued his MA in Economics from St Stephen's College in Delhi. However, soon after his introduction to art, in 1949 he borrowed money from his father and travelled to Paris to study art with the support of a French Embassy scholarship. In Paris he studied under Cubist painter Fernand Léger and sculptor and figurative painter André Lhote, producing figurative painting in these early years. While in Paris he met SH Raza and stayed with him for a short period during which time urban cityscapes begin to appear as backdrops to his figures. In 1960, he travelled to Varanasi with MF Husain, and this marked a turning point in his life and this magical city would remain his muse for the rest of his life. From here on abstract landscapes became his main subject, rendered time and again as an amalgamation of colours and textures. Ram Kumar was a vital part of the Indian modernist scene and was associated with the Progressive Artists Group as well as the Delhi Shilpa Chakra.



Studio View of Adel Abdessemed, Paris ADAGP 2018.
Photo: Marc Damage © Adel Abdessemed

Boudiaf in June 1992. The news came as a shock, even more so because I held a talk at the place where he was killed. There are things that remain obscure, for which we do not have any definitive answer or follow-up, for example, the assassination of the Russian ambassador to Turkey in an art gallery in Ankara in 2016. Another striking image I know and that I found on the internet is one from the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto in 1934 that depicted a little boy raising his hands. It was featured in the Stroop Report and today this image can be found on the internet as one of many about children who are dying of tumours, accidents, or other ailments. I find this dangerous for our children and for the future, because this image is not just any image. I adopted the boy, calling the sculpture that I subsequently completed *Mon Enfant*. I resuscitated this image, bringing it back to life. This image may not be mine, but I have an intimate relationship to it. In addition, there are also images I create that are linked to my own journey and, generally, they are allegories of certain situations. This is how Otchie Tchiornie became the title and the central work of my exhibition at Le Grand Hornu: a gigantic hall with soldiers. This inspired me to add an endless red carpet reminiscent of the idea of a palace, even though no celebrities will walk on it. In my opinion, we live in a time where there are soldiers everywhere: in airports, in neighbourhoods, in public spaces. Basically, there are as many of them as there are birds on the streets. Today we are living in a state of high alert and, therefore, I thought of this exhibition featuring the soldiers as a manifesto.

AAN: At MAC in Lyon you also included the installation *Shams* (sun in Arabic), which was previously shown in Qatar where very few people got to see it before

the installation was shut down.

AA: It was Thierry Raspail's choice to include this installation – he had originally seen it in Qatar. Indeed, it is a piece that nobody has seen there because it was censored. In Lyon, the installation is filling an entire 500-square-metre floor and uses roughly 35 tons of clay. The piece is all about fatigue, exploitation, the human condition, all of these topics which we know exist, some of them easily identifiable and others not. In Qatar, for example, you will see what I am describing in *Shams* right now behind construction areas that are hidden by oversized advertisements for luxury goods such as jewellery, watches, or perfume.

AAN: Is it true that the installation *Shams* is made of clay and is meant to disintegrate as the exhibition goes on?

AA: It is similar to what somebody else before me, Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975), wrote in his brilliant manifesto about the Nazis and the extreme right in his native Italy. He called it 'The disappearance of the fireflies', which explores the issue of disappearance. *Shams* bears some resemblance to the issues he is describing.

AAN: Today, animal rights associations have more impact. When exhibiting pieces involving animals, you will be facing some resistance. In Lyon, there have been some very harsh comments regarding your video *Printemps* that features roosters. It was ultimately withdrawn from the show. Unless people take the time to understand the piece, it seems you will be associated with the wrong cause. How are you handling this situation?

AA: For the first time, I have written an answer about one of my pieces – the video *Printemps* – in *Le Figaro*. The art world, society, and artists need



Exhibition view of *L'Antidote*, at MAC Lyon 9 March to 8 July, 2018, Paris ADAGP 2018. Photo: Blaise Adilon © Adel Abdessemed

to get further implicated because we are at the mercy of these illegal courts expressing their points of view through the social media. The only good news is that the person who started the controversy on social media about the video apologised, removing his comments from Twitter. However, why was this comment posted in the first place? Because that particular person was lacking information and did not have the necessary tools. Today, people criticise before asking questions or finding out what a piece is about. I am not an animal rights activist, but I hope I can say I am one of the biggest advocates for animal rights. I have completed many pieces dealing with the subject, not necessarily condemning, but redefining the conditions in animal farms, redefining the pharmaceutical industry, reconsidering whether it is ethical to send a monkey or a rat into space to obtain lab results. I am condemning all kinds of exploitation, including that dealing with animals used in combat. I am an artist creating images, a responsible one who cannot be accused of being a bloody murderer. I love life. Therefore, I find it paradoxical that I, the biggest advocate of animal rights, end up being considered an enemy. In my opinion, the people involved in animal rights associations are acting like fanatics. Instead, we should have a real discussion about what the problem is, and how we will fight what today makes us feel uncomfortable.

I am quite puzzled, because for *Printemps* I took all the precautions necessary as I filmed the roosters, relying on the expertise of professionals from the film industry. In the video, I did not want to show a mystical fire, but I wanted to show that currently the world is in a shambles. I am not the one who is violent: it is the world that is violent. On that note, Marcel Duchamp said 'death is always other people'. It is the same when it comes to violence – it is always other people. Therefore, these people have to stop acting in a way that is almost wicked. They need to look at the works and engage in a real discussion. Perhaps we should hold a big colloquium, inviting artists, thinkers, composers, people who have worked on these topics or even on ethical questions like Elisabeth de Fontenay, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva or Derrida before that. Let us discuss and try to identify a real political strategy to fight the ministry of agriculture, the ministry dealing with these pharmaceuticals and cosmetic laboratories where there is a lot of money at stake. Nobody is talking about it, however, they are attacking an artist like me. I am equally helpless and today, we are

infringing on artists and on their freedom. To continue like this is not acceptable and threatens the creative process. We all know where this is leading to: one day, a new Crystal Night will take place. We need to wake-up: these people who want war are very united and have a common goal. As for us artists, intellectuals, thinkers, creators, writers, composers, we are in the process of giving up our thinking. We are divided. We need to assess this dangerous situation carefully. I am crying out in despair, but there is no-one saying we need to stop. Let us all sit down and think about what needs to be done. If I am wrong, it is of no importance, but at least I am moving forward. Now, to come back to your initial question regarding the video *Printemps*, I am never writing any subtitles or comments in conjunction with the work: I believe a work of art should be presented as it is, without any judgement.

AAN: Getting people's attention to focus on important topics seems quite difficult in this day and age. How do you do it?

AA: Basically, it comes down to a war of images. My images are very simple and what is disturbing is precisely their simplicity. Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), one of the leading German theologians of Christianity was denounced by the Church who wanted to have him hanged because he was referring to the notion of detachment. I am detached from all narrative and this is what I have been trying to do for the past years. To best describe my approach, let me use the following parallel: in order to catch the fish, I am drying up the sea. In my work, this is how I am dealing with this war of images. We are bombarded on a daily basis. Consequently, I am emptying the sea, keeping the fish. These are my images and I am relying on metaphors to describe what I am doing.

AAN: Of course, there is the argument that art is not only about getting a message across, but also about beauty. Do you agree?

AA: Derrida (1930-2004) wrote a masterpiece where he was referring to *le bon dire*, however, with *le bon dire* there is also *le mal dire*. If he were to write about my work, he would write about *le bon voir*. My art is extremely positive, filled with life. Of course, I am not using the idea of hope in my work, because all dictatorships today are relying on it. My art is filled with life and similarly to Schopenhauer (1788-1860), I live my life intensely.

AAN: Earlier in our conversation, you mentioned censorship. What

happened after *Shams* was closed in Qatar?

AA: Historically speaking, I think I am the only artist who went there and told them my own truth. I showed *Shams* and they were shocked and tried to fight me. In my opinion, this is an Arabic dictatorship with Arabic tyrants. I actually never wanted to have an exhibition there. It was solely the desire of my former dealer who insisted on it. My work is like an onion: I peel off a layer and then another and another, until I reach the truth. The day of the opening in Qatar, I immediately noticed the changes: the government who initially welcomed me came straight away and started making calls to make sure I would not remain open. They wanted to get rid of me, but fortunately I am still here.

AAN: Your drawings highlight your qualities as a draftsman. What about painting?

AA: Throughout my childhood I was a painter. I focused exclusively on drawing and painting except for a small amount of sculpture. At the time, I was fascinated by Jackson Pollock and De Kooning. Their way of expression felt like jazz, where one does not know where it is going, it just carries on. I experienced this concept within painting, where my hand follows my eye and my eye follows my hand without knowing which one of the two would, or should, take the lead.

I left painting behind when I arrived in France, because in the course of my trajectory, I also discovered the work of Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, and Piero Manzoni. I subsequently came to the conclusion that the medium of painting, a medium that has always existed, that has never disappeared and is still alive was already for these reasons a masterpiece per se. Painting is a symbol of existence which has never died and is infinite. At the time, since I did not have a place of my own, people welcomed me to stay and I was almost living in their living room. With only few belongings and very little space, I started completing short videos. These works did not take up any room and are now part of an important collection. Little by little, I distanced myself from painting and I started thinking more in depth about images which, over the course of time, added up to a fair quantity of proposals. Without knowing it and wanting it, I realised that I was asking many different questions about what an image actually is by using different materials. I cannot really say that I distanced myself from painting, because my eye is still always painting.

AAN: It seems that Joseph Beuys is an influence. What does his work mean to you?

AA: An exhibition of Beuys' work was one of the first exhibitions I saw in my life and represented a major transformational experience. I was always interested by Josef Beuys (1921-1998), but I was never interested by his shamanistic approach. What I loved with Beuys was his energy and what he discovered. Let us not forget that he was one of the co-founders of the Green Party. Perhaps in certain parts of the West, the irrational that he so vigorously promoted was not accepted. That is why one speaks very little or rarely of him now, because he is no longer here. He remains seminal for what he called the 'broadened concept'. In hindsight, this is exactly what he did: he expanded the horizon. *Adel Abdessemed, L'Antidote is at the Musée d'Art Contemporain (MAC) de Lyon, France, until 8 July and Adel Abdessemed, Otchie Tchiornie is at the Musée d'Art Contemporain du Grand Hornu, Belgium, until 6 June*



Exhibition view of *L'Antidote*, including *Shams*, at MAC Lyon, 9 March to 8 July, 2018, Paris ADAGP 2018 © Adel Abdessemed