

ADEL ABDESSEMED

His role as an artist is to fight, not as the victim or executioner, but as a witness of his own time

BY **FABIEN FRYNS** | PHOTOGRAPH BY **BAUDOUIN**

DISRUPTION HAS BEEN a dominant force in Adel Abdessemed's life from a young age, and has had a profound impact on his work. Born in Algeria in 1971, his youth was marked by civil war. "It occurred to me that to be the witness of such a brutal war was the start of everything in a way. I think there has always been a deep link between chance and its witnesses. My art is that of the witness. I can identify with the concept of the artist as the witness of their own times, whatever their practice."

Fleeing his home country, Adel settled in Lyon in 1994 to study at the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts. In 1999, he moved to Paris' Cité Internationale des Arts and, that same year, he obtained French nationality. "It was one of the most beautiful moments of my life, as it enabled me to live and travel freely. I am a man of the universe: I love my roots, but I prefer my crops. Algeria is my roots, France my crops."

In 2000, P.S.1 invited him to New York as a resident artist. In the wake of 9/11, Adel's neighbour and fellow artist, Maurizio Cattelan, questioned what inspiration could come from such trauma, whereupon Adel responded: "I will dive into the abyss and bounce back towards the light."

Bounce back he did, for instance with *Telle mère, tel fils* (like mother, like son). This monumental installation conjures ideas of flight and freedom—incidentally, this was the first of his works that I saw in the flesh, at Shanghai's Yuz Museum. Adel loves China, and China loves him, resulting in his return next March with a large exhibition at the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai.

Combining elements of violence and hope in a poetic yet poignant way is what Adel has come to perfect. For him, the artist's role is to fight without playing victim or executioner. "I had a choice: to inhabit the memory or the world. I chose to inhabit the world and question it with my art. I think my work is actually positive. The world is violent, not me."

Adel spent lockdown in his home and studio in Paris. "I am used to solitude; it is nothing new for me. I am accustomed to the silent immensity of intimacy and the universal."

Isolation has not stopped this workaholic, even if his project schedule has shifted. *St. François d'Assise* at the Grand Théâtre de Genève, for which he is stage and artistic director, has been postponed until 2024. Group exhibition *Crossing Views* at The Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris will run until January 3, 2021. His controversial *Coup de Tête* (2012) was installed at the Geneva Biennale: Sculpture Garden, while works from his Cocorico series are on display at the city's Wilde Gallery until October 23. On this occasion, a volume will be published by Koenig Books, with a beautiful essay by Daniel Birnbaum. ■

