

Displacement, War, and Exile in Simone Fattal's *Works and Days*

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For fifty years the Sufi sculptor, writer, painter, and publisher Simone Fattal has honed her vision of the world and how it might be. Her social, political, and spiritual commitments shone through every one of the over two hundred objects on display at MoMA PS1 during the spring and summer of 2019.

Born in Syria in 1942, Fattal moved to Lebanon as a young woman. She studied philosophy and threw herself into the life of Beirut, where intellectuals from all over the Arab world had gathered before the outbreak of the civil war in 1975. After living the war for five years, she left in 1980 and moved with her partner, the celebrated artist and poet Etel Adnan, to Sausalito, in California's Marin County. She founded the Post-Apollo Press, which published socially committed and spiritually engaged literature. Although she still travels between California and Lebanon, she now lives in Paris.

In the MoMA PS1 seven-room exhibition, Fattal's first one-woman show in the United States, we follow her life and concerns. Bright abstract nature paintings in yellows, turquoises, and pinks from her earliest period, 1969–79, hang on some of the walls. They contrast with the somber charcoal *Illuminated Letters* (2008), which spells out Sufi aphorisms. Above all, the darkness of the times Fattal has experienced comes out in her warrior works, which curator Ruba Katrib calls her "humble forms of epic proportions."

The first object the visitor sees is *Torso*, a block of alabaster claimed to have come from wartime excavations in Beirut. In fact, Fattal carved the stone in such a way that it might evoke both an ancient statue and part of a body maimed by an explosion. Unadorned and heavy, it provides a powerful introduction to an

exhibition dominated by displacement, war, and exile from prehistory until today, from Akkadian, Greek, and Arabian epics to the Lebanese civil war. Fattal took the title for the exhibition from Hesiod's 700 BCE poem *Works and Days*, in which Prometheus fashions a man from clay. Her warrior statues, stoneware fired in wood kilns, mounted on metal bases, and surrounded by black-and-white abstract paintings, evoke the earliest stage in the formation of humans as revealed in the Qur'an (fig. 1). God formed the first human out of a piece of clay, it reads. This scriptural reference informs four large warriors lumbering on thick legs, each with a tiny torso and a hook for a head or no head at all. The warrior's job is not to think but to crush.

In contrast with the male sculptures, her small ceramic women figurines, many seated on chairs curved to fit the body, are serene and even whimsical. The 2010 *Poet* languidly reclines on an elongated chair, feet propped up on a footstool as she bends over her writing. The 2009 *Woman on a Rock* is a green abstraction of an elegant form perched on the edge of a bench with legs demurely crossed. Yet another figurine shows a woman, perhaps veiled, seated on the edge of a roof of a house in Damascus. She is looking out over the city that Fattal fled decades ago and that the Asad dynasty has destroyed.

Fattal has sculpted, painted, and, in a video spanning decades, danced her reactions to the savagery of events unfolding in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Middle East. In her review of the exhibition, Shirine Saad (2019), quoting the exhibition catalog (Fattal and Katrib 2019), writes that both Fattal and Adnan are "experiencing a renaissance as the world finally rediscovers and recognizes the importance of their work — a feminine expression of pure modernity from an ever-conflicted Beirut. 'We have seen absolute horrors, but we kept working,' said Fattal. 'And when you live in exile you worry even more. But life is stronger than war, and love is stronger than death.'"

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References

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