

VENUS

MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

Nayeri, Farah, "Adel Abdessemed: Tackling Themes of Everyday Cruelty and Extremism"
The New York Times, October 20, 2015.

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL ARTS

Adel Abdessemed: Tackling Themes of Everyday Cruelty and Extremism

By FARAH NAYERI OCT. 20, 2015

VENICE, FRANCE — At first glance, the two-part bas-relief in black marble hanging here at the former Musée de Vence seems to be a throwback to the Renaissance. But on closer inspection, "Diptyque," a 2014 work by the artist Adel Abdessemed, turns out to depict two very contemporary scenes: the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the Twin Towers, and modern-day Mecca.

"Diptyque" is characteristic of the work of Mr. Abdessemed, a French-Algerian artist whose art often blends beauty and brutality, and who recently opened an exhibition inside the 17th-century chateau in southern France that once housed the museum. The show was designed by Jean Nouvel, the Pritzker prize-winning architect.



Adel Abdessemed's ivory carving of the famous 1943 image of a Jewish boy raising his arms in surrender outside the Warsaw Ghetto.

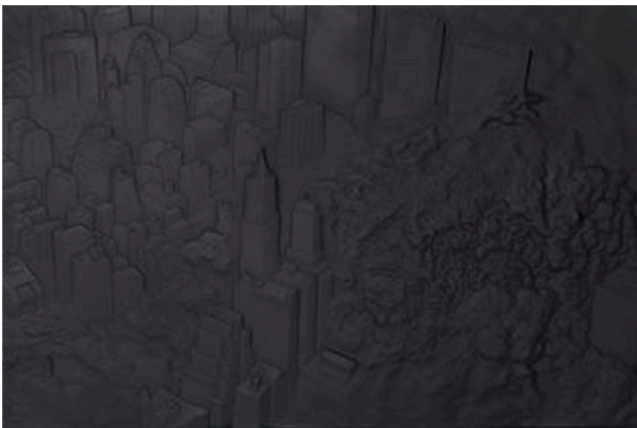
Mr. Abdessemed — who had a solo show at the Pompidou Center in Paris in 2012-13 — was prominently displayed in the main exhibition at the Venice Biennale this year. His installation "Nymphéas" (or waterlilies, after the series painted by Claude Monet) featured long knives darting out of the floor in circular clusters, their handles pointing upward.

The Vence exhibition, an intimate overview of Mr. Abdessemed's work, is spread across two floors of the chateau. It includes more than 30 drawings, sculptures, videos and neon inscriptions in room after room, as if visitors are being led on a treasure hunt. It continues in a former chapel nearby with three projections, including one of a naked man playing the flute.

Mr. Abdessemed — who lived through Algeria’s civil war when he was an art student and now lives in London — tackles themes of displacement, human sacrifice, everyday cruelty and extremism in works that incorporate materials like dead animals or barbed wire. His creations sometimes draw angry reactions.

His 2008 show at the San Francisco Art Institute closed in less than two weeks when videos of animals being bludgeoned (filmed on a Mexican farm) drew death threats. A five-meter-high outdoor sculpture of the soccer champion Zinedine Zidane head-butting an opponent was removed by the Qatar Museums Authority during a 2013-14 Abdessemed exhibition in Doha after triggering criticism on social media for promoting violence.

Mr. Abdessemed, 44, considers it his mission to unsettle. “As artists, we must generate tensions for something very positive and extraordinary to come out,” he said in an interview in London. “If we don’t put our finger on a problem, how will it get proper attention?”



A detail from "Diptyque" by Adel Abdessemed.
Courtesy of Adel Abdessemed, ADAGP 2015

The artist said the notions of resistance and struggle were essential to his creativity. “Without struggle, there would be very little art, very little invention,” he said.

Okwui Enwezor, the artistic director of the Venice Biennale this year, described Mr. Abdessemed as “an irascible spirit, fearless, reflective” and “an artist who likes to probe at the scar tissues of pain.”

The solo show here is the second in a series that Yvon Lambert, a retired gallerist, is organizing on the premises of the now-inactive Musée de Vence. Though Mr. Lambert never represented Mr. Abdessemed, the dealer invited him to stage his Paris gallery’s closing show last November. One shock display was “Untitled” (2014), a scalpel-blade sculpture of Mr. Abdessemed about to be beheaded by his father.

“Nobody likes the violence that exists in the Middle East,” Mr. Lambert said at the preview of the Vence show. Yet very few contemporary artists are prepared to talk about it in their work, he noted. “That’s what makes Adel Abdessemed a true witness of his time.”

The son of a policeman, Mr. Abdessemed grew up in Algeria just as it was emerging from 130 years of French rule and morphing into a military dictatorship. As a youngster, Mr. Adel was sickened by what he saw as a rigid, misogynistic school system there. Realizing that visual matters were his vocabulary, he spent his spare time making toys out of empty cans and sketching whatever he saw: a goat, a dog, a pigeon.

His university years coincided with a period of horrendous violence. The army annulled the 1992 elections won by an Islamist party, triggering a civil war that left 150,000 people dead. Mr. Abdessemed said he frequently woke up to the news that hundreds of people had been massacred the night before. The director of his art school was murdered along with his son on the school premises while Mr. Abdessemed was a student there.

“This violence that I talk about, I experienced it very directly,” Mr. Abdessemed said in the interview. “To this day, the wounds stay open and the questions remain unanswered: the arson attacks, the mass rapes, the unpunished murders.”

By his early 20s, Mr. Abdessemed started receiving death threats from extremists for demonstrating in favor of secular causes. He moved to Lyon, France, with the help of a group of French priests and nuns. It was the start of “the most extraordinary exile that anyone could ever experience,” he said.



Another detail from Mr. Abdessemed's 2014 work "Diptyque." Courtesy of Adel Abdessemed, ADAGP 2015

Enrolled at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, he was spotted by the Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist (now the co-director of the Serpentine Gallery in London), and in 2000 he was invited by the curator Francesco Bonami to take part in Slovenia's Ljubljana Biennial.

That same year, he got his first residency, at the PS1

contemporary art center in New York. Back in France soon afterward, he took to producing videos, but he also did sculptures made of airplane carcasses or stuffed animals, and he made terra cotta representations of burned cars. He soon became one of France's hottest contemporary artists, selling multiple works to the billionaire collector François Pinault.

By Mr. Abdessemed's standards, the works in the Venice show are not violent. Yet they are disturbing. Two famous images of children in war are recreated as ivory sculptures: the little girl running naked after a Vietnam War napalm attack, and the Jewish boy with arms raised in surrender outside the Warsaw Ghetto. The artist said he chose ivory, which he described as an immortal material, to lift those images from the banality they had fallen into on the Internet.

Each sculpture is displayed alone in an empty, tiled room. Mr. Nouvel, the exhibition's designer, said he wanted the works "not to be put on show, but to look as if they were at home."

He said each of Mr. Abdessemed's works "has a questioning, metaphysical dimension. It's often very immediate and very direct: He's the most direct artist I know."

Some of the works reflect current events so explicitly that they give the exhibition a documentary feel. The marble bas-relief "Diptyque" is a good example. Mr. Abdessemed, who was living in New York at the time of the Sept. 11 attacks, said he witnessed the second tower collapse. He left the United States soon after, he said, because he became identified not as an artist but as a Muslim because of his name and origins.

Another work, the charcoal drawing "Hope" (2011-12), shows a boat filled with refugees: It's a preparatory sketch for a real-life migrant vessel that Mr. Abdessemed exhibited as a sculpture at the Pompidou Center and at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York in 2012. Eric Mézil, who curated the Venice show, noted that Mr. Abdessemed had represented the refugee crisis long before it dominated the headlines.

The strongest works in the show are ageless ones with art-historical themes, though they are still confrontational. "Histoire de l'art" (2015) is a wall-length charcoal drawing of the crucified Christ, whose head is a three-dimensional, barbed-wire sculpture. "Histoire de la Folie" (2013) is a looping video of Mr. Abdessemed's bare foot crushing a human skull.

"The pieces are always more complex than they seem," said Philippe-Alain Michaud, the curator of the Pompidou show. "They spark a whole series of reactions, which are part of the art, and a whole series of reminiscences, which are also part of the art."

Mr. Abdessemed is preparing an exhibition with more benign contents, including drawings of men and women kissing in famous movie scenes — a vision that the artist said he was deprived of in Algeria, where kisses were systematically censored. The show opens in mid-November at the gallery Venus Over Los Angeles (run by the investor and collector Adam Lindemann). Beyond that, curators wonder what he will tackle next.

"We are looking at a very young artist: He's only just hitting his stride," Mr. Enwezor, the Venice Biennale artistic director, said. "There's a lot more from Adel we have yet to see."

A version of this article appears in print on October 21, 2015, in The International New York Times. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)