


II



**SIMONE FATTAL
WHILE THE ANGELS
ARE NAMING US**





Sculpture started for me very gradually.

I was still a painter and was not thinking so much about change when I started making collages of objects, in three dimensions.

Then I had to leave my beautiful Beirut studio for Paris and California and during those years of travel and before we resettled I met a lot of artists. And quite a few looking at my work advised me to change gears. So when I finally settled in California and resumed an artistic practice, it was an unsaid project that I was going to do sculpture and that the medium was to be clay.

On my first day at school I was attracted to a block of alabaster. Its shape, its color were just irresistible.

The Professor tried to dissuade me, saying that this was a big stone, and that I should better start with a smaller thing. I was adamant. But when faced with the block and armed with unknown instruments. I was at a loss to know how to proceed.

After pondering a while I decided to treat the marble surface as a sheet of paper, and the instruments as pencils. Because that was what I knew, and it worked. I followed an imaginary line, the way I draw a real line on the paper.

It worked! I was overjoyed. The result was what I had expected; i.e. I had seen in the marble, one of these fragments of statues that are thrown away, or rather that are scattered on the grounds of all the archeological sites of the many ancient cities that are all around us in our countries: Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and so on.

My torso differed from all those I knew, in the fact that I named it: *Torso found today in downtown Beirut.*

Putting together the ancient and the contemporary, by chance, as it were, was to imprint the subsequent work I did.

Telescoping the ancient and the new, I had found what I wanted to say. And I kept that same vision.

The second piece I did was also not in clay. I experimented with lost wax, and I produced two figures, named swiftly *Adam and Eve.*

I saw Adam as a very tall figure, as it is described in the Islamic tradition, which states that he was a very tall guy. And hence the long legs. As for Eve, I saw in her a woman exhausted with the pregnancy of her posterity. That was my vision and is still my vision of Man and Woman.

I saw in them the contrary of the way they are represented in classical painting.

It is only after those beginnings that I finally turned to clay, and that I was able to enjoy the freedom of that medium. Malleable, supple, clay represented the ultimate direct medium for me, to pursue all kinds of forms, from the human figure to abstract compositions. It is the only one you work with directly, with bare hands.

I went on making figures, related to Adam. Tall men, standing men, who were his lineage. But to precisely describe the moment that really represents what that medium was to become for me, I had to wait to see a figure come out of the kiln, wearing a color, a color that I had made for it, and that first moment worked as a charm. I was hooked.

The glaze is the most mysterious and most elusive of charms. It is magical. Because when it is perfect it goes beyond your dreams, as you cannot precisely foresee it.

The great potters develop one or two or three colors at most.

So many accidents can happen in a kiln, this place of mystery, glowing in the fire. How to explain what one goes through while the door is shut and can in no way be opened before its time.

The great places of pottery were guarded like fortresses. It is said that in the Meissen workshops, they first hired only deaf people so the secrets of fabrication could not be divulged.

Fire. The challenge *par excellence*. In chivalry, challenges were put on the way of the pilgrim, or the knight gone to seek salvation or a fortune. It is about the same with clay and kilns.

The challenge comes in stages. You forego two or three very difficult stages. The first one consists in taking the piece to the kiln. When they go to the kiln, they have to be absolutely dry, and therefore are very brittle. Especially my standing men, standing on their two legs most of the time without any support.

(I have to say here that there are very few examples of this in sculpture. I have seen one example in pre-Columbian sculpture, of men standing, but they were quite small in height.)

I lost a great many pieces in that first translation. Then they undergo their first firing. And then if they emerge in one piece, and good-looking, you embark on the road and do not know where you are going, i.e. the glazing.

The glazing is what gives the piece its final character. Carefully chosen, the color will determine the charisma of the piece.

Color is always determined by the fire. Even when you fire with wood, and therefore use no external color, the clay will take on many different hues, from yellow to red, to black and all the nuances in between, in a manner unforeseen and unpredictable and impossible to direct. For these variations occur according to the place of the piece in the kiln. There you have the same clay, the same firing, but the place will determine the final color.

All these elements of chance, uncertainty, and the inherent anguish makes working with clay a highly charged endeavour.

So that the relative easiness and malleability one finds at the beginning is paid for by an extra stressful time towards the end of the process.

But what a process! I wouldn't give it up for any restful other means that would achieve the same result.

And I have to add, given the fact that the clay is alive and has a mind of its own, it is a process that one achieves, *à deux*.

Is it therefore because of the clay that my work in this medium is so radically different from anything I made in painting?

My painting was quite abstract, and did not contain any element of a person or resembling persons. But clay! Was immediately about creating people, characters, women, men and a myriad of other creatures, centaurs, camels, horses, cavaliers, helmets, and angels. Kings and queens and heroes, and goddesses.

It is true that it is as if I have been creating cities with their whole population and I would not say their habitats, but the remains of such places.

I leave the question unanswered for I have no answer for that.



La vie est plus forte que la mort. 2007. Collage, 124 × 89cm.

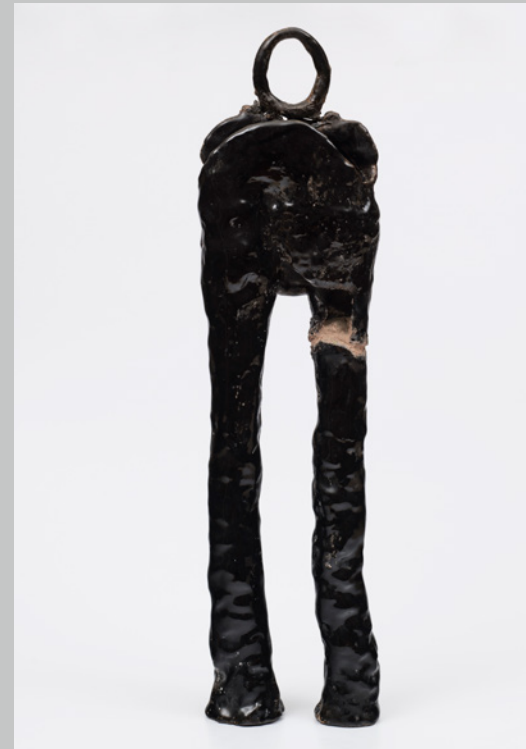


About a Revolution. 2012. Collage, 77.5 × 3.5 × 116.5cm.

La vie est plus forte que la mort. 2007. Collage, 124 × 89 cm.



Dueña sitting by a chariot. 1988.
Glazed stoneware, 11.5 × 20 × 21cm.



Wounded Warrior. 1999.
Glazed stoneware, 52 × 16.5 × 7cm.



Poet. 2001.
Glazed stoneware, 21 × 12.5 × 11cm.



Red Box (Container). 2002.
Glazed stoneware, 26 × 21.5 × 23.5cm.



By the Road. 2006. Stoneware fired in a wood kiln, 56.5 × 36.5 × 22cm.



War (Jenin). 2006. Stoneware fired in a wood kiln, 72 × 53 × 45cm.

Present Archaic

The English title of Lebanese architect and artist Nadim Karam's steel sculpture, erected in August 2021—in the shape of a man offering a flower spouting water onto the site of the exploded Beirut port—is *The Gesture*. This is remarkably different from the Arabic title, *Al-Marid*, meaning a rebellious ascendant djinn or devilish creature. The memorial, constructed pell-mell out of debris collected from the August 2020 explosion, was panned by critics due to its dismissal of the fact that deliverance of even the most nominal justice to the explosion's victims was by no means underway, and for its creator's brazen complicity with the CEOs of the Lebanese state whose mode of operation came to be called criminal negligence after the explosion, and which, on less eventful days, must be called organized abandonment. Was it merely bad timing, only a year after the atrocity, i.e. did Karam shoot too soon? Evidence points to the possibility that the problem is more perennial. In retrospect, it feels as though Karam's sculptures have become a jarring leitmotif of Lebanese post-civil war history of public art and public misfortune; writer and artist Walid Sadek, recalling Karam's "archaic" steel sculptures erected in 1994, 1995, and 1997—as well-oiled by the local banking sector as they were—is compelled to speak of a type of "cross-dressing, of postmodernity donning the threads of history and of history cloaked in postmodernity."¹ (No offense to cross-dressing!) Indeed, to a pedestrian observer or a survivor of war, in the mid-90s, Karam's frolicking sculptures may have come as the sardonic rolling credits after the end of history, after the conclusion of the Lebanese civil wars. Today, after the port explosion and the economic collapse, they are salt in open wounds.

I bring up Karam because he is another Lebanese artist whose sculptural work has been described as "archaic," and who has made sculptures in the wake of the port explosion. Of the two sculptures on stilts, *Angel 1* and *Angel 2*, shown at *While The Angels Are Naming Us*, Simone Fattal has said in an artist talk that one is an angel of compassion, the other of revenge, and that they were produced after the explosion. This is a presumably momentous detail, yet it is not disclosed in the exhibition catalog. Can we venture to say that this is for fear of the exhibition being read poorly, through the prism of catastrophe elsewhere? A refusal to make the Beirut explosion into a headline in Berlin could be of the same anti-essentialist valence as the exhibition's premise, a fabled encounter that took place in September 1219, during which the Christian friar and mystic Francis of Assisi crossed enemy lines to meet with Al-Kamil, Sultan of Egypt. Through various accounts and pictorial depictions of the rendezvous, we've received the following summaries:

Francis sought to convert the Sultan and succeeded at least in proving the truth of Christianity—according to various 13th century sources;

Francis sought to convert the Sultan and failed—according to various 13th century sources;

Francis, a fanatic, sought martyrdom through trial by fire and failed, when the Sultan refused to harm a man he perceived to be a fanatic—according to Voltaire, as well as various 13th century writers;

Francis, a mystic, sought a bonafide Muslim Sufi training through his visit—according to Idries Shah, eminent Sufi author and teacher;

Francis, a pacifist, sought reconciliation and an end to endless wars—according to contemporary (post-9/11) sources

Evidence points to the possibility that Fattal is oriented towards the latter two interpretations. In the collage, *The Geese of Konrad Lorenz*, the British-Zimbabwean novelist Doris Lessing, whose Sufi phase was ushered in by her reading of Idries Shah, makes a cameo. Lessing turned to Sufism in the 1960's, around a decade after her disillusionment with the Soviet project. Throughout, she insisted against simplistic oppositions between her "political" Communist and "spiritual" Sufi phases; all of her pursuits were decidedly "in the world, but not of it." It proves useful to keep this in mind when approaching Fattal's collage work. There, the present is always beholden to the *longue-durée*, as vast landscapes and swarming geese commingle with ancient artifacts and benevolent sheikhs. Abdelkader El Djazairi, the Algerian Sufi Emir who sits right across from Lessing in the collage, was exiled to Damascus after being forced to surrender to the colonizing French in 1847. In Damascus, he sheltered large numbers of the Christian population after the Druze-Christian conflict of Mount Lebanon extended to Syria in 1860. Beyond trite liberal narratives of religious co-existence and civilizational reconciliation, *While The Angels Are Naming Us* asks: may we find in the meeting of the friar and sultan a volatile moment of historical lucidity, where we may salvage "the idea of universal human history from the uses to which white domination has put it," in the words of philosopher Susan Buck-Morss?² This moment belongs neither to the friar nor to the sultan. It is firmly in the hands of she who has the foresight to turn back to history and revise the present. (May I point to Fattal's paper on the French political philosopher Tocqueville, titled *Alexis de Tocqueville, Democrat in America, Colonizer in Algeria*?³)

In July 2019, a few months before the start of the October 17th uprising, some friends and I attended a talk by Fattal

1 Sadek, Walid. "My Postmodernity and the First Attempted Assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri." Paper presented at Ashkal Alwan's Home Workspace Program, Beirut, February 2019.

2 In *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, Buck-Morss sets out to demonstrate the influence of the Haitian revolution (1791-1804) and the abolition of slavery in Haiti on Hegel's master-slave dialectic. In this instance of pollination from the colony, Buck-Morss sees a moment of clarity and "realization of absolute spirit." Other examples of such clarity include: "the French soldiers sent by Napoleon to the colony who, upon hearing these former slaves singing the 'Marseillaise,' wondered aloud if they were not fighting on the wrong side," and "the Polish regiment under Leclerc's command who disobeyed orders and refused to drown six hundred captured Saint-Dominguans."

3 Fattal, Simone. "Alexis de Tocqueville, Democrat in America, Colonizer in Africa." *Review of Middle East Studies*

on the Post-Apollo Press at the Beirut Art Center. The city was then already in a state of ominous, freewheeling decline. That same month, Palestinians in the twelve refugee camps across the country, there for more than seven decades, protested a recently-passed labor law that required all refugees to procure work permits, in an effort to drive Syrian refugees back to Assad's Syria. The episode is conveniently left out of most historicizations of the uprising, whose dominion remains delimited by nationalist imaginaries. In her talk, Fattal condensed decades' worth of storytelling material on publishing, kinship, and emigration, into around two hours, to great effect and warm appraisal. Most of the company I watched the talk with have since left Beirut. Like myself, many of them have landed in Berlin, which often feels like the terminus, or at least a transit point, for one of the trains shuttled about by the events of the so-called Arab Spring. I will spare the reader any talk of longing—we risk arresting and making fossils out of our griefs while they are still in motion. Post-Apollo was published out of Sausalito, California, yet as I listened in Beirut, I felt the city breaking past its geographical limits. What Fattal's talk did that night was provide a blueprint, tattered from frequent consultation yet held dearly, for how to exist and make work in communion, often outside of the nation someone was born into, in makeshift arrangements, as long as the rent is payable.

This can only happen alongside similarly invested comrades, whose lives come to be tightly interlaced with one's own. In the wake of Etel Adnan's recent passing, the public outpouring of love felt oceanic, demonstrating the extent to which Fattal and Adnan's partnership is for many a touchstone of near-utopian camaraderie.

Of Adnan's work, Fattal has said: "Hers is an Apollonian world, and a Dionysian world at the same time." Of Fattal's work, Adnan has said: "Hers is an archaic world. And it is the one that true creators like Paul Klee or Brancusi have looked for, sometimes desperately." In that world is a dashing flurry of ziggurats, sufis, farmers, lovers, riders, angels, handshakes. Dare I say that we may, if we wish, glean in Fattal's sculptures the arcana of a primitive communism? "Communism" not narrowly as in that of the Soviets, and "primitive" not as in of the past, not as in a prelapsarian unity which has been lost through tainted progression. But as in a primordial constant which lurks behind every epoch's subordinations and pleasures, a quantity which is present in a loving companion's embrace. This quantity we find only when we are able to call each other by God's 99 names, which is always, or never, and only temporarily.

Bassem Saad is an artist and writer born in Beirut on September 11th. His work explores historical rupture, infrastructure, and spontaneity, through film, performance, sculpture, and writing.



Angel. 2013. Stoneware fired in a wood kiln
29 × 10 × 10 cm. Signed.



Stele. 2008. Stoneware fired in a wood kiln, 70.5 × 37 × 31cm

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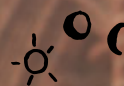
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