



Julia Kristeva

Adel Abdessemed, *Telle mère tel fils*, 2008  
View of the exhibition *Adel Abdessemed: R/O*, David Zwirner Gallery, New York, 2009  
Airplanes, felt, aluminum, metal  
500 × 2,700 × 400 cm (196¾ × 1,062 × 157½ in)

Adel Abdessemed, *Exit*, 1996–2009  
8 yellow neons  
Each: 23.5 × 34.9 × 3 cm (9¼ × 13¾ × 1¼ in)

Adel Abdessemed, *Shams*, 2013, detail  
Clay, steel, wood, jute, plastic, mixed media  
600 × 5,500 × 150 cm (236¼ × 2,165¾ × 59 in)

Adel Abdessemed, *Taxidermy*, 2010, detail  
Taxidermic animals, steel, wire  
180 × 180 × 180 cm  
(70¾ × 70¾ × 70¾ in)

## Adel's Body (Conversation)





## 1. Looking

By lifting the imprints and receptacles of the sacred out of their traditional spaces to turn them into works of art, the Renaissance, the Reformation, Enlightenment humanism, and the current process of secularization returned images to social space. The newly visible bodies of men and women accompanied and accelerated the liberation of manners and minds. Bodies and souls exposed themselves to view, the representation of the psyche—recondite and private—affirmed itself through imagery, and this externalization of inner experience, gathering pace, honed the passions and inflamed thought, from narrative to poetry. Image and eroticism attracted or repelled each other; “works of art” became a “royal road,” opening the way for the sciences of the mind. “Your eye creates beauty in my soul,” wrote Ronsard, for whom the gaze was the fulcrum of the mind. Beauty now meant the soul in the fullness of its visibility, like a flower in summer light. Artists projected themselves into the imagery of portrait or landscape: for Impressionists, Surrealists, Cubists, Abstractionists, Conceptualists, Pop artists and the rest, the image was a neo-reality or rather reality itself, shadowing and superseding

the coarse and intractable “other” kind. Until technology got hold of it: photography, cinema, television, society of the spectacle, information technology, virtual reality, and ad hoc finance. The image no longer has a material body, but does it still have meaning? “We are enjoined to close our eyes,” Levinas remarked, adding that “the best way to encounter the other is to avoid encountering so much as the color of his eyes.”

Meanwhile, those singular bodies known as artists have not stopped using images to represent the unseen energies they live off. Extravagant manipulators of the visible, they bend it this way and that, in the most improbable and unpredictable directions, to make it convey our exhilarations and fears, the raptures of blood and flesh, the speed and turmoil of thought. In outlandish “works of art,” avant-garde or iconoclastic, Dadaist or video art or installations of every stripe: the mega-collectors and mega-markets love it, it doesn’t mean a thing, and so it costs the earth.

But make no mistake: the extreme commodification of contemporary imagery does not sever it altogether from the “sacred.” The quest for the invisible is still the motor of a commodity that lately has been sacralized by drug traffickers and/or petrodollars. Indeed, these seductive or baffling representations cannot but place the viewer, let alone the “specialist,” *into analysis*. Reconnected to their inner lives, the webnauts who spend most of their time in navigation suddenly dive into themselves, and discover they have depths: from day-dreams to personal hallucinations, the very depths of immemorial wisdom—splinters of divinity harking back to the source—come to the rescue to “make meaning.” The meaning that is so pitifully lacking in the scandals of our time, in the social reality and political imagery of today.

I don’t object to this interpretive cacophony. It reminds me of the late writings of Hannah Arendt, dreaming of a political space that might be like an audience leaving a concert—its sole criterion being that of taste, the oldest of all meanings, the most unique and incommensurable. And yet, an *effervescence of thought*—not to be confused with some homogenizing “communion”—links these suddenly liberated singularities: each one has incorporated the work in their own way.

I sample the work’s body with my eyes, as I might test it with my ears or with my tongue. This carnal interpenetration, this “primal scene,” is by no means within the reach of every interpreter, expert or

otherwise. But it is the horizon to which all aspire, before which the work presents itself. For it constitutes the reciprocal reverse, in terms of reception, of the artistic act in terms of creation.

I want to go through the image so as to partake of its generative energies. I want to share in that life-and-death excitation that buoys the body. To reinvent this body, the creator’s, in my own way. To encounter it. What body?

## 2. “I don’t have a style”—Movement

You said those words the first time I visited your studio. The media echoes had reached me; I was prepared for “Cri, Razor Wire, Coup de boule de Zidane, Taxidermy,” expecting to meet the “enfant terrible” of contemporary art.

My first surprise was the variety of the works you led me through. Dark sketches of female heads. Sharp-edged metal sculptures. Skeletons, white or of watery glass. Kamikaze tortoises with explosives strapped to their shells. And you, smiling, swift, articulate, citing Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, Kristeva, and more, but neither as “intellectual mentors” nor as “footnotes”; rather as installations in themselves. Later I would discover your “aesthetic credo,” and learn how consummately you handle the universal vocabulary of contemporary art: your work undertakes, and I quote you, “a perpetual reshaping of meaning,” “betraying a certain cruelty,” no doubt, but without “idealism or passion,” with a view to “establishing conceptual links.”

It was your energy that struck me most. I recognize in you the *uprootedness of the foreigner*. “That speaks me,” like the motto of one of my novels’ heroines, “I travel myself.” I thought of the



restless *mobility* of Francis Bacon, who claimed to be “unable to remain seated,” to “never understand this, where people relax their muscles and relax everything.” “I paint to excite myself,” he said, and to make images that “trap reality” in the excitement that “concentrates and gathers” a maximum of reality, but *does not illustrate it*. At the heart of your atelier I spotted *living traps* (the skeleton, the razor wire, Zidane innocently off balance.), in which your energy captures a “scene,” a “representation,” an “image,” and far from being appeased moves on to set new traps. What you call a “link” or a “perpetual reshaping” are striking for the *intensity of your involvement* in each of the stations of your whirlwind: they touch me, because they have touched you. Mobility, then, the *perpetuum mobile* of the outsider, who turns his departure from the birthplace, his *EXIT*, into an enduring structural EXILE: the *traversal of everything*. This has nothing to do with Bacon’s body, whose taut excitement was an affliction: “I’ve suffered all my life from high blood pressure.” On the contrary, in range and restlessness, your imaginary is a will-o’-the-wisp: vibrancy and fragmentation. It concentrates and conducts plural, not to say contradictory, energies and narratives, the better to strip them of passion and by the same token to jettison the ballast of idealism and make room for thought.

The *body* in which you trap reality in order to deposit your own reality there and awaken it in us is an unbalanced body, floating, flying; its discomfort mingles with gracefulness. You are not a tragedian, you *knock tragedy off balance* and set it to swaying with a disenchanting smile.

Take the *Cheval de Turin*. Historians associate it with the horse mercilessly whipped by a drunken coachman: the scene upset Nietzsche so violently that it triggered the madness of his last ten years. You invite your commentators to interrogate your energetic upsurges when you modestly identify with that “universal mongrel” whose art draws from the “deepest wellsprings of the West.” Allow me to invoke, in the same vein, the phobia of horses afflicting Little Hans, the famous “case” that so intrigued Sigmund Freud. The child sees (like Nietzsche) a horse flogged by a coachman, but in his phobia he associates the horse with the coachman, and the latter with his own father! As a result, the creature devolves into a monster who threatens to punish him, and with good reason: the little boy had watched his parents, seen them



Adel Abdessemed, *Cheval de Turin*, 2012  
White painted aluminium, leather; 230 x 160 x 50 cm (90 ¼ x 63 x 19 ¾ in)



*Prancing Horse*, Tang dynasty  
Painted pottery; 37.5 x 40.7 cm (14 ¾ x 16 in), private collection

“making a row with their legs,” and “fallen into the habit of giving himself pleasure through masturbation.” Less noble than Nietzsche’s horse, Little Hans’s horse has much to do with the phantasmagoria of little Adel, and indeed with our own.

And I’ve not forgotten the Trojan Horse, likewise part of what you call the “deepest wellspring of the West.” Leaving his connection to that horse in the penumbra of memory, you only retain from the story of Laocoön (he who “understands the people”—the father of the people?) the serpents that tear the two sons to pieces before attacking the father.

What captivates me in Adel’s *Cheval* is its libidinal charge, exciting and destructive in equal measure (condensing orgasm with phobia and death), metamorphosed into a beast precariously balanced on its front legs, tail and rump aloft, bridle dangling, poised to take flight. Quite different from the mighty steed painted by Velázquez that closes the exhibition at the Grand Palais, symbolizing the power of the brush and its phallic drive. Is yours, with its tossing hocks, a mare? A pony at prayer, a mule, a disabled animal, suffering from some genetic anomaly? Unusually, it is blinded by sticks of dynamite attached to its forehead, and ready to enter the heaven that houses the “great parade” of other creatures condemned to be blown up—tortoises, hedgehogs, mice, rabbits, and a multitude of birds (cf. *La Grande Parade*, 2011–2012).

I sense the momentum behind Zidane’s tangle with Materazzi. The muscular metal bodies are faithful to the clips that went viral; my son David, a Zidane fan, often played them back and we both, from the start, exculpated our hero. You do not sculpt the innocence of the men but the teetering of their bodies, buffeted by opposing and mutual passion: that’s the aspect that interests you. With them you leave the ground—whether of the pitch or of reason. On their site in Dubai, the weightlessness of these hefty men is more telling than the footage itself, and this “head butt” is like an upward launch.

Feet—sensitive organs in so many ways, sites of balance—are a recurrent element in the works you send me. Crushing the serpent (*Zéro tolérance*, 2006), trampling a fruit (*Pressoir, fais-le*, 2002), treading on flagstones and petals (*Ayai*), bursting a can of Coke (*Foot on*, 2005). Foot of pleasure and pain, foot of stability and menace. Down to walking speed, life will walk or not walk. Which life?



Adel Abdessemed, *Coup de tête*, 2012, view of the exhibition *Adel Abdessemed Je suis innocent*, plaza of the Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2012–2013  
Bronze; 540 x 348 x 218 cm (212 ½ x 137 x 85 ¾ in)



Adel Abdessemed, *Ayai*, 2013  
HD video projection, 2 sec. (loop), color, sound; dimensions vary (aspect ratio 16:9)



Adel's, of course. And now your body itself embarks on what no amount of "energy traps," "scenes," "protagonists," or "works" can supply: it soars into airy, solitary exile. I like your *Helikoptère* video and the drawings that go with it. No surprise there, because I know that if "your" body lacks the ability to hover, your hands send it whirling through the air in sculptures, drawings, and installations. Not a stunt man, nor Tom Cruise in *Mission Impossible*, Adel revolving in the sky at the end of a turning rope is not a metaphor either. The experience and the work that fixes it *realize* the baroque body, exposing the perils of the diversity and mobility that condition your journey. It is certainly no good trying to pin down a "style" here, in the sense championed by art history and market mechanisms. You rehabilitate the baroque body, but in a different acceptance: the one engendered by globalization.

We are familiar with the delights of ecstasy in Tiepolo. The more acrobatic artists exile themselves with him in the direction of the Highest. Closer to the affrays and frights of modern times, and drier in its verbal expression, I prefer Artaud's auto-perception of motility in his own interior body in his *Letter to the Balinese*:

Everything lies in motility  
of which humanity has grasped, as ever, only  
the phantom....  
There is no tissue,  
consciousness comes not from the fabric  
but from the cavern cannon-shots...  
where the value of all things  
springs from clash and counter-clash alone  
and no overt logical or dialectical virtue can  
be ascribed to  
anything at all,  
because the motif  
repels the mind's eye and the mind's grip,  
whence it draws form, volume, hue,  
brilliance...

The vertical  
rotation  
Of a timelessly constituted body  
In a state beyond consciousness,  
Made steadily harder and heavier  
By the opacity of its thickness and mass.

Or, more spectacularly, Mervyn's rotation in *The Songs of Maldoror* by Lautréamont. This anti-hero evades the "center" and defies heaven in centrifugal gyrations:

They have reached the circular precinct of the place Vendôme... The catapult whistles through space; Mervyn's body follows it constantly, always blown from the center by centrifugal force, always keeping its mobile, equidistant position along an airborne circumference, independent of matter. The civilized savage lets go little by little, loses the other end... and his body smashes into the dome of the Panthéon.

Adel's body, what a body: ecstatic, schizophrenic, savage, civilized. Propelled by the ex-centric force of the refugee, you lash the globalized herd glued to their Web.



Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *Olympus or The Triumph of Venus*, 1761-1764, detail  
Oil on canvas; 34 1/4 x 24 1/4 in (87 x 61.5 cm); Museo del Prado, Madrid



Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo, *The Swing of Pulcinella*, 1791-1793, detail  
Fresco; 200 x 170 cm (78 3/4 x 66 5/8 in); Museo del Settecento Veneziano, Ca' Rezzonico, Venice



Bertrand David, *The Flight of Mervyn*, 1996  
Illustration for *The Songs of Maldoror*, Comte de Lautréamont appearing on the cover of *Isidore Ducasse à Paris* (Paris: Du Lérot, 1997)



Adel Abdessemed, *Helikoptère (I)*, 2007  
Video on monitor, 3 min. (loop), color, sound  
Black oil pastel on 10 wood panels  
Each: 245 x 143.2 x 1.3 cm (96 1/2 x 56 3/8 x 1/2 in); overall: 491 x 716 x 1.3 cm (193 1/8 x 281 1/8 x 1/2 in)



*signification* of language, modifies it, breaks it down and recomposes it, so that it comes to life afresh and I, too, am reborn. I have called *semiotic* this eruptive, instinctual intensity of the speaking-body, an intensity repressed by the *symbolic scene* in which, fastened to the signifying chain of language, my “Ego” and yours exchange *significations*.

The body-soul dichotomy inherited from metaphysics has been countered, in psychoanalysis, by the *heterogeneity* of speaking mammals—our heterogeneity. Neither pure energy nor pure meaning. The intensities of the *semiotic drive* are infused with a meaning that escapes the Ego and its language, yet echoes their logic. Meanwhile the *symbolic* strategies of *signification*, producing arguments and evaluations, find themselves infiltrated and modulated by semiotic flows.

Plato was the first formulator of this energetic *meaning*, a mode preceding *signification*, describing it as a “space” anterior to space: prior to the One, to the Father and to any firm “identity”; fluctuating-spawning-amorphous-inflamed, all mutation and becoming. But nurturing, too, maternal rather than divine “in the absence of God,” and thus unqualifiable, apprehended by a “spurious reason.” And yet (*Timaeus*, § 50–53) Plato takes the risk of naming it “khōra,” or *khōra*, a receptacle:

a third nature, which is space, and is eternal, and admits not of destruction and provides a home for all created things, and is apprehended without the help of sense, by a kind of spurious reason, and is hardly real; which we behold as in a dream, say of all existence that it must of necessity be in some place and occupy a space.

And we may liken the receiving principle to a mother, and the source or spring to a father, and the intermediate nature to a child... the nurse of generation, moistened by water and inflamed by fire, and receiving the forms of earth and air, and experiencing all the affections which accompany these, presented a strange variety of appearances... it was full of powers which were neither similar nor equally balanced, was never in any part in a state of equipoise... as when grain is shaken and winnowed by fans... The receiving vessel... scattered far away from one another the elements most unlike, and forced the most similar elements into close contact. Wherefore also the various elements had different places before they were arranged so as to form the universe. At first, they were

all without reason and measure... and were altogether such as everything might be expected to be in the absence of God.

We all have a body—a *semiotic chora*—which we more or less faithfully repress or express. The schizophrenic, on the other hand, is invaded by it. He does not *symbolize* the flows of this “agitated chora” though sign-words, divorced from the *thing* felt. His semiotic body afire with intensities remains mute, vociferates in horror or jubilation, raves deliriously (confusing words with things, losing the sense of reality, deforming speech), collapses into crime. *Crisis-crime*.

By contrast, there are those who are hypersensitive or ultra-traumatized, bearers of a specific biological heritage or one forged by the randomness of filiation and history, over-endowed with intensities, or unwitting predators: some such beings—artists—succeed in lending meaning and form to their semiotic body. The unnameable energetic thrust that sways hither and thither fastens on an element, an object, a person, an ambient situation, that calls to it and on which its vibrations chime, or overflow. The swayer recognizes himself; the abduction becomes a “chaste and hideous coupling” with this other that provisionally becomes a kind of self; “I” form and deform it; condensation, brazier of significations. A provisional “language” crystallizes, neither cry nor crime, but an ephemeral adoption of the codes of the surrounding community.

This experience has nothing in common with the transmission of information or data. It explores the violent appropriation of the mirage of a *desired other*, which I become, and in which “I” is consumed. *Transubstantiation and joy*, confesses Marcel Proust, a connoisseur in the matter. “Imagination, the only organ I possess for the enjoyment of beauty.” This *jouissance* in the infinite creation-creation of new language-bodies, might it not be to play with madness?

“For reality to be bearable, we are each of us compelled to entertain some small internal lunacies,” writes Proust in *Within a Budding Grove*. *Remembrance of Things Past* opens with the image of a man attempting to go to sleep. As the writing progresses, the author manages to put into words a profound, paradoxical dream, which he calls the dream of the “second apartment”: a world apart, a descent into the self that blurs the limits of the self. A hallucination without objects or people, at

whose core the sleeper lies in a state of psychic near-death. This Proustian slumber evokes Plato’s sensorial cavern, the place where man, imprisoned, is deprived of all human presence and all interaction with the outside. The narrator often uses metaphors of harness, of sun, of light, that suggest non-being and its unreality. Without an alter ego, without dialogue, without communication, only fleeting shadows appear, that unmoor us from “reality.” There is no “reality.” “Reality, the dross of experience,” the dreamer calls it.

People with autism undergo an excess of sensations that annihilates them to the point of being unable either to reclaim or to speak of them. In such a psychic calamity, there is no self: neither understanding nor memory, neither space nor time. Proust, however, explores those liminal states and endows them with words. By enabling us to share the unnameable, he manages to communicate what the British psychotherapist Frances Tustin called “endogenous autism”—something that affects us all and makes us fragile, but that exceptional works of art can somehow contact and cut through.

### 3. Body without Organs, or Semiotic Body

The fascination exerted by schizophrenia upon philosophers and psychoanalysts has given rise to the cult of the “body without organs.” Like a “factory” incessantly producing “agencies,” this body is not an organism so much as a territory criss-crossed by flows, vectors, and intensities that plough it, make it live and die, “deterritorialize” or “reterritorialize” it. All this regardless of the limits of the Ego and the strictures of codes, “signifiers,” and other “values.” A telling construct from the pen of Deleuze, the “body without organs” has the merit of disrupting the frequent over-reliance of psychoanalysis on the idea of the structuring priority of language over psyche; Deleuze restored singularity to the schizophrenic. Once it became a theoretical cult, the *body without organs* established the schizophrenic as a poet, and vice versa; moreover, imagined as being extraneous to culture, an affinity to Spinoza was imputed to it (*Deus sive natura*), to posit some co-extension with Nature.

I have lived with Artaud’s “cavern cannon-shots,” with Mallarmé’s “music in letters,” with Lautréamont’s gyrations. I have experienced the *meaning* of that rowdy, jubilant motility which, refractory to the

your semiotic *chora*-body, spawning unendurable energies?

The Nobel Prize Committee invited me, along with the poet Joseph Brodsky, to talk to them about how the “moderns” made and received poetry. Brodsky deployed metaphors to speak of *metaphor*, the tool and sinew of his experience. The audience was disappointed to find its curiosity answered in nothing but metaphors. My address was no more rewarding for them: it embroiled the issue further by alluding to the sensible experience of, again, Proust, who likened the subjective *metamorphosis* that generates the “work of art” to the *transubstantiation* occurring in the Catholic mass, whereby the bread and wine are not “like” the body and blood of Christ, they *are* that body, here present. In a letter, Proust described his way of writing as one in which “the supreme miracle is accomplished, the transubstantiation of the irrational qualities of matter and life into human words. The work of art (text or image) is thus ultimately a transubstantiation of the writer’s body and life into his “work.” By means of analogy-comparison and metaphor-metamorphosis, the artist “brings out of the shadows what [he] had felt, [so as] to convert it into a spiritual equivalent.”

The *fire* that consumes Adel (see *Adel Abdessemed Je suis innocent*) recalls the self-immolation of the young Tunisian vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, the act that triggered the “Arab Spring.” It reminds me of the Afghan women who set themselves on fire to escape forced marriage, to whom I dedicated my Hannah Arendt Prize in 2006. And of other countless victims of oppression and injustice. I also perceive, because it is *you* who have made this image-experience, how the fire of *Adel Abdessemed Je suis innocent* reveals the transubstantiation of your corporeal identity: it is *you* in your instinctual flow-body, with its spiritual equivalents and ethical revolts. A permanent combustion makes your metamorphoses scorch us, because, as Proust said, “If that is lacking, there’s nothing.”

Your *Exit* from *Exile* spawns another metaphor-metamorphosis: that of water. In *The Sea* (2008) you are floating on a board tossed by waves—an aquatic version of the aerial rotation of the helicopter—until the image of the body dissolves, leaving behind a mass of rubbish in black bags, piled into a boat foundered on dry land. Movement is no more; goodbye, hypnosis and dreams. Farewell, baroque soaring. All that is left for the artist’s body is to go

round in circles in the minimalism of a rolled ring of barbed wire: *Salam Europe*.

Your sensual tornado toys with death. Adel’s body is both mortal and lethal, with a snake around the neck (*Dead or Alive*). A cactus-spurt, a fan of sharpened blades (*Axe on, Nymphéas*, 2015).

#### 4. Metamorphosis of Metaphors

When you write, Adel, that “a work that matters is a shout of solitude,” the “shout” is not a comparison here, it’s not even a metaphor to evoke solitude, distress, or some unutterable limit. You are naming, I think, what was for Baudelaire a true *metamorphosis*, described as follows by the famous “assassin” (*haschichin*) of *Artificial Paradises*: “You stare at a tree . . . and in a few seconds what would for a poet be a natural comparison becomes a reality to you. First you endow the tree with your own passions, desires or sorrows; its sighs and swayings become your own, so that soon you yourself *are* the tree. . . . Cause and effect, subject and object, mesmerizer and sleepwalker.”

You yourself *are* the “shout,” *it shouts* in you; but what shout do we mean? That of the victim, or that of the executioner? Is it of joy or delectation? Your polymorphic works invite us to *hear you shout*, and to *shout* with you.

In what signifying framework do you emit that resonance, and incarnate it? Into *whom* are you metamorphosed? How do you compose the repercussions of that paradigmatic “shout,” those cries you make with your hands, with your body, to sustain



Adel Abdessemed, *Salam Europe*, 2006, view of the exhibition *Testigos/Witnesses*, Fundación Montenmedio Arte Contemporáneo, Vejer de la Frontera, 2006  
Barbed wire; H 60, ø 500 cm (H 23 3/4, ø 196 3/4 in)



Adel Abdessemed, *Dead or alive*, 2007  
Video projection, 2 sec. (loop), color, sound; dimensions vary (aspect ratio 16:9)



Adel Abdessemed, *Axe on*, 2007, detail  
Groupings of knives; dimensions vary with installation





Adel Abdessemed, *Mon Enfant*, 2014  
Ivory, 133 x 70 x 40 cm (52 1/4 x 27 1/2 x 15 3/4 in)

## 5. Mon Enfant: A Political Scream

“This replica is made of ivory,” you told me, as I gazed at *Mon Enfant*. You care about that ivory. So do I. The white, polished smoothness of crystallized milk, like solid light, brings this child from the Warsaw Ghetto—who became a symbol of the Shoah—strangely close to me. That photo snapped by an SS officer, a document of Nazi brutality, was a key piece of evidence at the Nuremberg Trials. It prompts outrage, love, and compassion; it condemns utterly. Your version does not resurrect the boy. Its whiteness asserts the immortality of the body. The too-big cap, the terrified yet absent gaze, are in the SS photo; but the body remade by Adel is no longer that photo. The living pallor of that life-size child (your sculpture measures 133 cm) does not snatch him away from tragedy, but inscribes it outside time, white on white, feet touching the red floor. That glossiness, as blinding as it is matt and deep, is neither marble nor mastic, what is it? Ivory. Is that what arrests me, the teeth and tusks of elephants, hippos, walruses, and other great creatures, the persistence of life in the bone, is that what sweeps me away?

The spinal column and every skeleton you’ve made since have reabsorbed the perishable flesh, bone transmuted into body; an undecayable, reassuring fullness. From your sculpture I’ve understood why in Arabic the skeleton is called “*habibi*,” “my dear,” “my sweet.” “My” child, for evermore.

But the possessive pronoun snags on me. You adopt this child, you clasp his raised, scared hands in yours. You are both him and his savior. But possession is my stumbling block: I am wary of ownership, however well-intentioned. The clearly vital ivory of teeth and tusk inverts vulnerability into animal power, ready to defend itself, to attack. Good: “your” child will stand up for himself. But how many elephants had to be slaughtered or mutilated to recreate “your” child? Though I am hardly an animal sentimentalist, let us at least conserve endangered species.

As I continue to contemplate the child, I note that your orphan drives have tamed him: an emblem of all the gassed bodies, your vagabond, “mongrel,” exiled insurgency attacks the very stuff of art. Perhaps. What does it cost to engage in the *transubstantiations* that make us feel and think, that “humanize” us? Are “we” the pacifists we think we are when we destroy animal life, albeit for “spiritual” or “aesthetic” ends?

And that’s not the last of the questions you do not pose, because, as Picasso said, “If you know exactly what you’re going to do, what’s the point of doing it?” But I don’t ask more, and retain the milky glimmer of this being made of concentrated light, like the white of the eyes looking at me and with which I look back. Beyond species and time, *Mon Enfant* invites us spectators, concretions of the earliest light of the world, to a mutual interior caress.

*Cri* (made from mammoth ivory) compounds this dazzlement. The Jewish boy from 1943 has changed into a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl, Kim Phuc, fleeing from a napalm strike. Once more you have picked up an iconic news shot, taken by Nick Ut this time. Is the press supposedly neutral? A war crime is not the Holocaust, no doubt, but human brutality never spares children from abuse, assault, trauma, and death. The trembling lip of the young European has given way to the howling mouth of the little Asian, the hands are no longer held up but out to the sides, crucified without nails, as though to shake off the napalm after tearing off her clothes. The ivory whiteness



Adel Abdessemed, *Cri*, 2012  
Ivory; 140 x 114 x 62 cm (55 1/4 x 45 x 24 1/2 in)



Adel Abdessemed, *L'Âge d'or*, 2013  
Copper plated in gold; 113 x 188 x 4.5 cm (44 1/2 x 74 x 1 3/4 in)

is almost iridescent, glossier still on the skin of this doll: Is that because the material comes from mammoth tusks, older and more expensive than elephant tusks? More violent than your “shout of solitude,” the sine qua non, you said, of “a work that matters,” Kim Phuc’s scream is one of pain and horror at the threshold of death. Placed in front of your black chalk drawings of soldiers cradling machine guns, the face and mouth project at us less the *abjection* of murder than the *resistance* of life confronted by death. A scream of revolt.

These distressed, abused children deserve the most precious materials: you mold these once-angelic bodies out of priceless substances. Not pulling your punches, humanity cannot be allowed to forget that it has been treated as less than dirt (*Shams*, 2013). But elsewhere you grant to the small victims of our alleged golden ages a bas-relief in gold-plated copper (*L'Âge d'or*).

The expressionism of Edvard Munch makes of desperation an abyss, and solitude under empty skies conveys, in his work, a modernity devoid of transcendence or History. Breaking with this tradition, the polysemy of the anguish you depict—from *Mon Enfant* to *Cri*, by way of *The Sea*, Adel Abdessemed *Je suis innocent* and *Salam Europe*—is founded on *political bodies*. You mobilize the Shoah, the Vietnam War, post-9/11 globalization, the unstoppable stream of migrants. The semiotic *instinctual meaning* of your . . . baroque body blends with the *symbolic* register of *political and ethical* signification. The “Adel’s body” that inserts itself in this polysemy does not take sides or propose a moral, let alone a political, “roadmap.” It is content to capture as many senses and significations as possible. There are no solutions, you are free to feel and think: such is the consistency of the world that emerges from your experience.

That “innocence” you cite (as though to shake your sense of guilt?) is therefore not a claim to neutrality, nor an admission of naïveté. An erotic and political polyphony confers on your work the plural consistency that exonerates, makes *innocent* in the etymological sense, like innocuousness: “does no harm.” All in all, the metamorphoses of Adel’s body remind me of the “voluptuous kleptomaniac” in Louis Aragon’s *Paris Peasant*, who revels without pathos in “vagabondage through uncertainty.”





Adel Abdessemed, *Nafissa*, 2006  
C-print; 74 x 100 cm (29 1/4 x 39 3/8 in)



Giovanni Bellini, *Pietà*, 1505  
Oil on wooden board; 65 x 90 cm (25 5/8 x 35 3/8 in); Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice

## 6. Like Mother Like Son

Adel's body in the arms of his mother (*Nafissa*) is obviously an ironic nod at the Pietà genre, among whose many exemplars I would single out Bellini's version painted in 1505.

Here you pay carnivalesque homage to Christianity and its painting. But it's the persistence of the baroque body that I detect, more than your tribute to the "source." The linking axis is the gaze: mother and son welded together by their eyes. Aside from that, the arrangement is precarious, unbalanced yet again, in jeopardy. The body is held up as much by the nervous muscular tension of the son as by the mother's arm and shoulder—unless this momentary stability is owed to the wall brushed by his feet and the car mirror behind his head? Plainly, this Adel is not a dead Christ, he must be already risen. The picture had to be taken quickly, the equilibrist is defying the laws of gravity and if he doesn't fall down in the next quarter-second, he's going to straighten up and get into his car. This barely sketched acknowledgment of the mortality of the body and its debt to the "standing mother" (*Stabat Mater*) is eclipsed in a smile,

equally lacking in glory. Just an ingenuous affection, polyphonic and amused.

Stranger, because more erotic, is the mother-son embrace in flight. That is how I read the two airplane bodies—before or after take-off—entangled under the title *Telle mère tel fils*. The elaborate slew-around culminates with two snakes in a knot. A pair of massive pipes, exuberant phalluses? Or the intertwined legs of the lesbian couple in Courbet's *The Sleepers*? Erotic allusion is seldom so explicit in the metamorphoses of Adel's body. The version shown at the Pompidou Centre in 2012–2013, in which the legs are even more entwined, bears the ironic title "*Innocent*."

The mother-son Eros hints at its opposite: How to wriggle free? Here is the fuselage of an Aero Commander, star of the piston engine, which seems to have undergone a bad landing. The piece is appetizingly titled *Bourek*. Like the morsels *Nafissa* prepared for little Adel? Ever the superstar, but damaged by her son, does a mother exist to be got rid of? I like to think that *Nafissa* is a fine cook, and I don't know if Adel can rustle up a better bourek than she can, but I can vouch for the incomparable excellence of his spit-roast lamb.

Set opposite the *Nafissa* Pietà is *Lincoln*. Looking rather more relaxed, in the same casual clothes, the son's body drapes nonchalantly across the arms of Father Lincoln. Why Lincoln? The sixteenth president of the United States ensured the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, and abolished slavery. A sort of god for modern democracy, he is inevitably a god to our "universal mongrel." One doesn't trifle with such a father, and playing at Oedipus is out of the question. Nonetheless, the baroque acrobat dares to look absent-minded, perhaps skeptical. Innocent, but always faithful to his political vagabondage.

With no personal links and no name, but closer to human wretchedness: the *Joueur de flûte*. Forget the Holy Mother and the stony-stiff president. A naked, paunchy elder, with an almost invisible penis, nibbles morosely on a flute that is conspicuously longer than his member. What happened to the baroque body? Unexpected, taken aback? Adel's metamorphic gaze in this piece becomes oddly compassionate, resigned, and forgiving.

But then his rotations catch up with him, and he is back among the madonnas. Mona Lisa, Lise. Nothing on, with a piglet suckling her breast: the



Adel Abdessemed, *Telle mère tel fils*, 2008, view of the exhibition *Adel Abdessemed: RIO*, David Zwirner Gallery, New York, 2009  
Airplanes, felt, aluminum, metal; 500 x 2,700 x 400 cm (196 3/4 x 1,062 x 157 1/2 in)



Gustave Courbet, *Sleep*, 1866  
Oil on canvas; 135 x 200 cm (53 1/8 x 78 3/4 in); Le Petit Palais, Paris



Adel Abdessemed, *Bourek*, 2005, view of the exhibition *Adel Abdessemed: Dead or Alive, P.S.1* Contemporary Art Center, New York, 2007–2008  
Aerojet Commander airplane fuselage; H 274, ø 244 cm (H 107 1/2, ø 96 in)



video causes an outcry and will be censored. A gross blasphemy, a rejection of porcine, pig-eating men, or the revenge of an erstwhile colonial?

I'd sooner dwell on the tenderness that comes through in these images. At this thousandth spin of his merry-go-round, a "tornado of hilarity and horror," Adel's polysemic body has noticed that the piglet is him, and even the breast is him. And so his camera approached the light and this absurd nativity scene: all the censors and all the religions melt away in shame under the shadow of that smile. And I share in the mystery of Lise. What a back-handed homage to the pig-eaters!



Adel Abdessemed, *Lincoln*, 2009  
C-print; 127 x 174 cm (50 x 68 1/2 in)



Adel Abdessemed, *Joueur de flûte*, 1995–1996  
Video projection, 30 min. 10 sec. (loop), color, sound; dimensions vary (aspect ratio 4:3)



Adel Abdessemed, *Lise*, 2011  
Video projection, 31 sec. (loop), colour, sound; dimensions vary (aspect ratio 16:9)

## 7. Drawing and *Habibi*: The Speed of Thought

No distance between thought and hand: their instantaneous oneness grasps and retraces, in visible bodies, the most concentrated interiority. No tentative groping: the artist's mind, at one with his gesture, carves the expanse, parses dark and light, and on the flat exteriority of a support, such as paper, brings forth the volume of an intention, a judgment, a taste. Through the rightness of marks alone, their location and motion, their black build-up, their luminous gaps. I have always regarded drawing as evidence of the utmost concentration, in which the most subjective intelligence and most acute abstraction reveal an outside suddenly sensible to the artist, and yet so intimately linked to the viewer that it emerges with an obviousness both absolute and singular. Drawing, or the speed of thought.

It may be that I got this notion from my mother. A face, a view, an animal, a flower, an object, everything sprang to life under her pencil: my mother drew as others embroider, or breathe.

One drawing of hers has remained engraved on my memory. It was one of those cold, white winters that grip the Balkans and I was warming my frozen

cheeks and fingers near the charcoal stove, half listening to a radio programme for children. "What's the fastest form of transport in the world? Send us your answers, along with a drawing..." "A plane," my little sister piped at once. "No, a rocket," I said. My mother joined in: "For me, it's thought," she said. "Well, but you can't draw a thought, it's invisible," I retorted with my usual insolence. I can still picture with utter clarity the scene she drew on my behalf and that won me first prize in the radio contest. To the left a big snowman was melting, head tumbling as though severed by the invisible guillotine of the sun; to the right, the terrestrial globe in interstellar orbit was offering its imaginary expanses to stationary travelers.

There was nothing outstanding about that drawing. But to my child's eyes it was revelatory, thanks both to the concision of the concept (a perishable body is transcended and transformed by the power of the mind) and to its liveliness of line (without falling into caricature, the spirited, witty strokes conveyed the melancholy of our mortal condition at the same time as the triumphant irony of thoughtful intimacy).

Unlike those contemporary artists who *install* mainly because they can't *draw*, you, Adel, are a past master of that art. The chalk marks render the fierce rigidity of the *Soldaten*, aiming their rifles at Kim Phuc with the same gimlet ferocity as those in the Warsaw ghetto and elsewhere. Your wrist flexes to depict the diligent boredom of the family man slumped over the prospect of his day (*Park*, 2014). Other marks brush the paper so lightly that they make the burned Vietnamese child almost levitate.

You apply chewing gum to soften and sweeten women's faces, and your pencil turns psychologist in some portraits from 2014. *Elektra*: rounded sadness, patience; *Rio*: mischief and sensual teasing; *Elle*: a turbid femme fatale; *Ksu*: haughty elegance, chilly pleasure. Like the hungry beak of thought, the drawing seizes their intimacy then spits it out, but actually possesses it, flattens it gently, without pins, fixed with chewing gum.

Could that be why *Julie* (2013), your wife and the mother of your daughters, escapes the drawing treatment? There may be a sketch of her I haven't seen. Instead I see her erect, august, alone, like an Athena, a salt-stone statue upon a rock. Here Adel's body tastes love salted with life and passing time. Absolute, incontestable, and sovereign.



Next to the video of Julie, a white drawing presses (*Mes amis*, 2005): *Habibi*, a central character in Adel's metamorphoses, who crops up in many guises. Here, he is entwined with the young spouse's body. The scene reaffirms the impression given by all your serial skeletons: that such revenants are not in the least macabre or ghostly, and no more provoke a shudder than they reduce the frivolity of spectators to naught.

The other humans take care to keep their skeleton on its feet: they fulfill the duty to stand upright, for as long as possible. The Adel style of skeleton is a continuation of drawing by other means. Cruel, incisive, conspicuous, it reveals the most concentrated interiority.

What will be left after my death, the artist wonders? An unanswered question that quickens his thought. Nothing but bones, Adel thinks. No truth inside, beyond or beneath the images, only the skeleton-lair of time. The skeleton merges with the living body's rotation and the incorporated imagery. White lines of ribs, tibia, knuckles. Dry density of skull, hard clarity of death. The flesh has become bone, which outlines it and reveals it over the duration: that is the skeleton. Being is perhaps nothingness, but nothingness is not nothing, *it can be seen* in *Habibi*.

Perhaps Adel will only confess to his beloved his alliance with a tamed death? Quite possible. The wife-heir as mistress of the surviving oeuvre? In a way. The artist as always-already posthumous? Of course; as Mallarmé put it, death is but "a shallow stream." Dazzlingly manifest in this drawing that freights deace, Adel adds. Or if you will, a message in a bottle to the sea? The glass skeleton registers death with an aquatic smile.

Neither Reaper, nor Vanitas, nor pathetic Lover, death in Adel's work is like the skeleton: simply habibi, "my sweet," "my dearest," "my skeleton." The Arab language evinces a disconcerting simplicity. Do the fundamentalists exploit this to send their kamikazes to where their bones can have a blast in the virgins' paradise? On the contrary, the serene mortality traced by Adel's skeletons does not trivialize death, and does not idealize it either. They lift it, ruthlessly stripped, from the grave and make it actual to us. But still we don't know how to live with it.



Adel Abdessamed, *Habibi*, 2003, view of the exhibition *Le Citron et le lait*, Mamco, Geneva, 2004  
Resin, fiberglass, polystyrene, airplane engine turbine; overall length: 2,100 cm (826¾ in)



Adel Abdessamed, *Merci, la vie en miettes*, 2014  
Hand-blown Murano glass; 142 x 516 cm (56 x 203¼ in)



Adel Abdessamed, *Habibi*, 2006  
Hand-blown Murano glass, hair; 86.4 x 203.2 x 61 cm (34 x 80 x 24 in)



Adel Abdessamed, *Habibi*, 2006, detail





Adel Abdessemed, *Ksu*, 2014  
Black chalk on paper, bubble gums; 92.5 x 65 cm (36 1/4 x 25 1/2 in)

Adel Abdessemed, *Elle*, 2014  
Black chalk on paper, bubble gums; 92.5 x 65 cm (36 1/4 x 25 1/2 in)

Adel Abdessemed, *Rio*, 2014  
Black chalk on paper, bubble gums; 92.5 x 65 cm (36 1/4 x 25 1/2 in)

Adel Abdessemed, *Elektra*, 2014  
Black chalk on paper, bubble gums; 92.5 x 65 cm (36 1/4 x 25 1/2 in)

Adel Abdessemed, *Julie*, 2014  
Black chalk on paper; 184.5 x 130 cm (72 1/2 x 51 1/2 in)



Adel Abdessemed, *Décor*, 2011–2012  
Razor wire; 4 elements, each approx.: 210 x 174 x 41 cm (82 3/4 x 68 1/2 x 16 1/4 in)



## 8. The Crown of Thorns Expanded

Ever “mobile and equidistant” in posture, Adel’s body could not have dodged the Passion of Christ. It is around the pain of the cuts and gashes to the glorious Body that the artist’s embodied imagination effectively coils (*Décor*).

It would be tempting to approach this magisterial series by aligning it with Grünewald’s Christ, or by calling up Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* with their stimulus and appeasement of the senses. Or by comparing it to the visions of modern artists (Otto Dix, Arnulf Rainer, even Warhol) who clothed the man of suffering in iron, identified with his agony, or indeed turned away from it. One could also ignore them all, and simply cite the wounds of globalization. This would be to overlook Adel’s body, which exposes itself with maximum intensity in this core work; more seriously, it would mean obliviousness to the metaphysical incision that characterizes his trajectory and his modernity.

What has happened to Christ’s body? All we see is a cutting metallic substance, a barbed lanyard of razor wire in galvanized steel, wrapped around itself to mould a vacant volume based on Grünewald’s great Isenheim Altarpiece. The “mongrel” artist,



hungry for “sources,” is not *representing the body* of Jesus, he is grasping trans-human and divine suffering with both hands. He multiplies it to infinity: the five wounds and the scalp pierced by the thorny crown are no more than elemental particles in relation to this winding blade, whereby Adel transcends the body even in its divine dimension. The whetted strand folds and twists upon itself, weaves and embroiders, sparing not a single organ, muscle, vein, nerve, bone, or hormone. This is no common body being attacked and dispatched by an external weapon. With Christ, the “wound and the knife” are One, in the jouissance and anguish of the Passion. This Baudelairean insight into the perception-creation of Christ is heavy with consequences. It contrasts stingingly with the theological interpretations of yesterday and today. Its anthropological resonance is an interpellation.

Built of blades, the man of suffering is, was, and will be at once a victim minced fine and a formidable attacker braving his enemies. His submission to pain parallels his wrathful vengeance against decides: pogroms and Inquisitions are rife. The endless blazing corridors that make up this *un-body* (*dé-corps*, *Décor*) nonetheless possess the coldness of steel; inurement to suffering inoculates one against personal emotion, and feeds indifference toward others.

Mystical figure, Absolute Subject, this experience-installation is designed to rouse support, fervor, and disciples. The believer sprints toward it, cannot reach it, never stops trying. It is apt, then, to multiply the specimens—four Christs, 3+1—and open the numeric chain to infinity. The One swarms, covers the space: its congregation space. When the faithful become *fans*, the sacrificial scene becomes a stage, and henceforth everything is a *décor*, a set.

There remains what is *absolute*, the slash of the razor. The cut magnified in Christic experience fills the imagination as the most important station, essential to the metamorphoses the artist inexhaustibly invents for it. Sigmund Freud discerned male castration anxiety in this obsession. I would also point, following Melanie Klein, to the infant’s desire to cut off Medusa’s head, decapitating the “bad mother” so as no longer to fear her, instead appropriating her in dreams and giving her a name beyond passion-feeling: “Mummy.” I slipped this image into the Louvre in my exhibition about beheading, *Visions capitales* (1998, 2014).

These incorporations of a divinity both cut and cutting lie at the heart of political affairs today.



Adel Abdessemed, *Untitled*, 2014  
CNC-machined polyurethane, graphite on 3D printed nylon, scalpel blades  
140 × 90 × 125 cm (55 × 35½ × 49¼ in)



Adel Abdessemed, *Décor*, 2011–2012, detail  
Razor wire, 4 elements; each approx.: 210 × 174 × 41 cm (82¾ × 68½ × 16¼ in)

Their edge spares neither the current madmen of God, nor the new forms of totalitarianism: those gangster-fundamentalist rituals which some believers perform against infidels, including Christians.

The razor wire that coils around the agony of Adel’s Christ is the same as that found in Guantánamo, where it deters prisoners from trying to escape. Elsewhere we find it used to keep live-stock in their enclosures, or to top the perimeter walls of luxury homes.

On behalf of neither side does Adel’s body—nor his art as a whole—ever urge us to feel and think the *pleasures and abjections* of the Absolute and of fanaticism.

In the same line of hatefatuation (*hainamoraton*), two masculine bodies of nylon and graphite, made of bistoury blades this time: a killer and his victim. Title: *Untitled*. There is no word for it. Last but not least, the sober evocation of Allah lurks in the abstract figures, ornaments, and arabesques of *God Is Design* (2005), a geometric bid for the invisible. Am I an “evil eye”? I glimpse a foreshadowing of arabesques in the braiding of the razor wire in *Décor*. An invitation to open our eyes to the manifold configurations of the divine... until the next Big Bang?

The formula “God is dead” means anything at all, except that there is no God. Hegel said so, echoed by Heidegger, and Adel has no need to read them. *Décor* shows that even a dead God is still with us, and keeps starting again (four Crucifixes, and so on): just think! The “Absolute Good Friday” exists, and is hard at work. Not necessarily as a deliverance. The absolute cuts to the quick. Beware of sadomasochism, that slender, fanatic’s blade.



Adel Abdessemed, *Soldaten*, 2012  
Black chalk on paper; 184.4 × 130 cm (72¾ × 51½ in)





Adel Abdessemed, *Séparation*, 2006  
C-print; 90 × 103 cm (35½ × 40½ in)

The animal realm is the repository, for you, of that unruly vivacity with which your *solitude* keeps in touch. “Animals are presences, not symbols or icons or signs. They don’t stand for anything, they are truly there,” you insist.

I follow, and, indiscreetly prolonging the video, I watch you literally *transferred* into that instinctual animality Colette called “an ancient myself.” Not to take it over, domesticate it and make it into your likeness, but to rehabilitate that sensibility which falls outside social convention and is denigrated as “monstrous” or “savage”. “When I come on you alone with the animals,” complained de Jouvenel, Colette’s second husband, “I feel like an intruder. One of these days you’ll retire into a jungle.” It’s even worse with you, whose contact with the “jungle” is not made through the sobriety of words, but by way of brute materials and malleable visions. I reckon you’re capable of entering into the skin of animals rather as Colette entered a garden, according to her last husband, Goudekot:

Her contact with things took place through all the senses. She wasn’t satisfied with looking, she was compelled to sniff, to taste. Whenever she went into an unknown garden, I’d say “You’re going to eat it again!” and it was quite something to watch her get down to work. She moved hastily, avidly. . . . She would part flower petals and stare at them and smell them for a long time, she crumpled leaves between her fingers and chewed them, she licked at poison berries and deadly mushrooms, pondering intently on everything she had smelled and tasted. . . . At last she’d leave the garden . . . short of breath and staggering slightly, like a Bacchante after copious libations.

Tasting the beast, consuming it, incorporating it: you espouse this avidity not only as an accomplished chef, but also by plunging your camera and your hands into the cruel assimilation of animals that forms part of human culture, a kind of cannibalism of our brother creatures. This cannibalism persists under the varnish of recipes calmly accommodating the “raw” and the “cooked” to structure the elementary logics of kinship and myth. And you *separate* yourself from it by transporting animals—avidity and cruelty compacted together, inextricably and shockingly—into what we take to be “representations.” But these animal installations are real presences to you, shamanic acts.

## 9. Of Beasts and Men

*Séparation*: that’s my first impression from the dossier you gave me to illustrate the “metamorphic body.” You lean toward the lion from behind, the scene captures the movement, the beast lures you, you are about to reach it and hug it. I think this lion resembles you: the lines of the face and jaw; the absent amber gaze, your own lowered eyes intent. Your impulse to feel the energy under that mane and fur with your hands. Over and above the ancient branching of the species, a contained complicity is in evidence, to the alarmed surprise of the lion’s keeper. It occurs to me that you, like the writer Colette, might safely slip your hand through the bars of lion cages and confound the tamers. Like her, too, you might so pity a sick bird that you would put it out of its misery by wringing its neck. In total osmosis with the most archaic repressed, with the *pre-psychic* that haunts our drives and sensibilities under the thin film of words that covers them, you cannot bear to be *separated* from them. Irreparable solitude.

I am inclined to compare your symbiosis with animals to that which animates cave art.

In Chauvet (two ensembles, estimated as dating from 26,000–27,000 and 30,000–32,000 BP), the prehistoric artists represented, deep inside the cave rather than by the entrance, animals that were not being hunted and not being eaten. With fearless, majestic empathy these draftsmen detailed the dramaturgy of form and movement. And, by adding “positive” prints and “negative” stencils of their hands, the artists appear to indicate more than a simple ownership of the universe they inhabited. According to palaeontologists, such marks constitute a “transmutation between categories of living beings, between man and beast.” This zoomorphic representation, a “fusional perception of man and the animal kingdom,” seems to me underpinned by an *identification with the alien*—mammoths, rhinoceroses, bears or horses—as so many alter egos that “speak the same language and understand one another.” The artist projects himself into that world, taming the animal figures in order to create *his own figurability*. The Chauvet artists fully mastered the dramatic richness of that primal figuration, well before they were ready to depict the human figure properly speaking. Indeed the walls of this cave display only a vulva surmounted by a bison head—but this representation itself suggests a transmutation with the cavern penetrated and decorated by the artist.

This animal figurability of the self at the dawn of the self is not, then, a bald reproduction of the cosmos of creatures, nor even a secondary humanization of it. It is a genuine shamanic appropriation of the animal figure, in an effort to depict a human interiority apprehended as such: *that* animal figurability is none other than the primary figurability of human desire.



Adel Abdessemed, *Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?*, 2011–2012, detail  
Taxidermic animals, steel, wire; 363.2 × 779.8 × 40 cm (143 × 307 × 15¾ in)

## 10. Who’s Afraid . . . of the “Delicacy Principle”

Your complicity with animals—over and above the irreconcilable mistrust that separates the two orders, human and animal, because it lends meaning and corporeality to our unnameable foreignness—does not lead you to a mystical idealization of that other realm. Far from it: both the bestial savagery from which we humans strive for demarcation with limited success, and the hideous suffering we inflict on animals to satisfy our appetites or purify ourselves, appear as *privileged stations* in your recent works.

A video shot in Mexico uses pit bulls, pythons, scorpions, mice, boas, roosters, spiders, and a dead toad (*Usine*, 2008). You order the clubbing to death of six mammals, a goat, a pig, a sheep, an ox, a horse, and a fawn, and film the process (*Don’t Trust Me*, 2007). Monstrous culture of throat-slitting. You compress taxidermic animals into a cube, tied with charred wires: eroticism of touch, orgasm of the skin. Is this a frontier between unconscious drives and image, or the abjection of an art that “stuffs,” a conservatory of fetishized life? (*Taxidermy*, 2010).

And finally the most morbid of these compositions, with its singsong Disney title, *Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf* (2011–2012).



This insult to the wall tapestry is a mishmash in the worst possible taste. Didn't aesthetics teach us to find catharsis in art, purification, beauty, and truth? Your methods are certainly different! Perhaps you are a pervert, a delinquent, an "enfant terrible," an "intoxicated artist," "loathed and adulated"?

But no, you do not decorate abjection. You probe the abscess, and in so doing you taste it and reject it: pleasure and horror, never one without the other.

The probe is sharp, like a double-edged blade; it slices into unendurable meaning and yet cannot cut it out. You are not a moralist. You don't show us the way, you have no roadmap. You bring us into your laboratory—it's up to us to enjoy, to wince, to think! But without helping us find the way out?

I had an encounter with wolves myself, two months before the fall of the Berlin Wall. My father was murdered in a Bulgarian hospital, where they conducted experiments on old people. Only communists could be buried in graves, for fear of angry crowds. I wanted to buy a grave. "If you die, fine, your father can be buried with you," I was brusquely told. He was cremated, against his last wishes as a believer. An impossible bereavement. Until the need to write a "metaphysical detective story" imposed itself, with the title "The Old Man and the Wolves." I enlisted bits of the blackest Goya and the Ovid of the *Metamorphoses* into my unspeakable grief, my abject loneliness. My father appeared to me devoured by a pack of wolves, the wolves that were running riot in his country, and I called his country by the name of Santa Barbara, the global village. In times of transition, human beings change into animals and vice versa. One of Ovid's characters, Hecuba, who changes into a dog, offered me a way into the carnage befalling the Old Man:

But she ran after the rocks they threw at her, snapping at them with a harsh growling, and readying her jaws for words, barked when she tried to speak. A she-dog. The place is still there, on the Hellespont, where all may see, nearby to Abydos, the Monument to the Bitch.

Ovid is not the kind of fabulist who makes animals mouth the moral codes of humans. This epic poet injects his perception of animal sensibility under the skin of his fellow humans, in order to test their savagery and explode their hypocrisy.



Adel Abdessemed, *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?*, 2011–2012, detail  
Taxidermic animals, steel, wire; 363.2 × 779.8 × 40 cm (143 × 307 × 15 7/8 in)

There is jouissance in donning the identity of a pit bull, a python, a wolf, or other aggressive carnivore. A sadistic jouissance, revealed and penetrated, that allows dismantling of the logics of abominable acts. Unless we are to be content with denial, forgiveness, or moralizing, there is no avoiding this plunge into carnage.

Despite their undoubted capacity to evolve, the "classical" arts whose "aesthetic" values we have inherited possessed neither the technical means nor the materials thanks to which today's centrifugal forces and fusional perceptions, such as yours, can engage abjection in hand-to-hand combat, without falling into either pathology or crime.

The edge-to-edge of this hand-to-hand is as dodgy and perilous as your helicopter rotation, Mervyn's spinning around the column in place Vendôme, or the dance of the whirling dervishes. It is necessary to withstand dizziness and nausea, and, without preaching *goodness*—for there is no *univocal solution* to these abyssal instances of foreignness—to suggest that they are simultaneously constructible and deconstructible, by fragmenting them, by multiplying them in the detachment afforded by the texture of the representation. Such a manipulation of horror does not diminish it. It does, however, shake horror's absolute dominion, and opens the path of non-submission. It is the degree zero of dispassion and freedom. That is as far as we've got.

Your *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?* evokes the childhood fear of wolves, maternal foolishness in denying it, and the reasons for her denial. A monumental tapestry of wild fauna scorched and stuffed, stinking pelts, charred bestiary, stench of musk. Between nauseating anality and elaborate bow to Picasso's *Guernica* (whose dimensions are similar), which denounced the bombing of civilians ordered by Spanish nationalists during the Civil War (1937), this piece confronts the queasy visitor with six hundred taxidermic creatures that were burned with a blowtorch, pulled apart, piled up, and jammed together. These animals—from which we are separate, of course, but whose tortured and torturing power has nothing metaphorical about it—are "truly there," body and hide, if not body and soul. They speak to our mortality and the tremendous might of the death drive. At the center of the tableau, the neighing of the mare raped by a mythic bull reveals how the life instinct interlocks with death. Silent and mute, in perpetual struggle with Eros, Thanatos urges delinking,

destruction, return of the living to decomposition. More enigmatic, exempt from the aggressiveness that is seduction's twin, the dark jouissance of the death instinct comes back to mind in this violent spasm of resistance to the unthinkable.

Religions use this dark pleasure in their sacrificial rites, and *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?* represents the wars and crimes perpetrated by men no less than the animal sacrifices practiced in Islam, the Hindu Gadhimai festival, and other faith contexts. The artist who so meticulously invests in slaughters, death drives, and crimes, to set them at a remove in the imagination and incite thought, neither condemns nor condones them. He revels as much in his fear of wolves, boar, foxes, and deer as in his empathy with their wildness. He doesn't celebrate them, either. He exposes the incandescent state of his instinctual, metamorphic body, at the intersection of its centrifugal intensities.

A witness, a martyr? Hardly. You recompose and replace the materials and figures that you use, in such a way as to put any *identity* into jeopardy, explosively. Like that tortoise (*Tortue*) which is tempted to retreat into its shell, "its cave," but instead blows up the world with the dynamite strapped to its back. Like that dove (*Pigeon*)—another kamikaze—alighting on a concentrate of horror regardless of the risks. Like an elegant pot that would be abominable if it didn't know it was set atop a flammable plinth.

The marquis de Sade, in his controlled delirium, diagnosed that permanence of destructive impulses as far down as the death drive, which was increasingly being left to its own devices, as the religion that strove to restrain it was in retreat. Two centuries later, religions are no longer in retreat, and some of them are explosively in the ascendant. In detailing the thousand and one nights of the death drive, Sade's writing was not sadistic: rather it testified to sadism. The subtle reader that was Roland Barthes claimed that Sade can very well be read by the light of violence, but "he may also be read *by the light of a delicacy principle.*" What might this consist of?

It is not a class attitude, nor an attribute of civilization, nor a cultural mode. "It is a *potency of analysis* and a *power of jouissance*" that converge in *exaltation*, a kind of utopia for our societies. It does not *invert* violence, because "to invert violence is still to speak in the same code." The delicacy principle consists in inventing a "tongue," an unprecedented "aesthetic," designed to subvert "the





Adel Abdessemed, *Tortue*, 2015  
Tortoise shell, camel bones, buffalo horn, mixed media; 15.5 x 21 x 14 cm (6 1/4 x 8 1/4 x 5 1/2 in)



Adel Abdessemed, *Pigeon*, 2015  
Taxidermic pigeon, camel bones, buffalo horn; 26 x 31 x 19 cm (10 1/4 x 12 1/4 x 7 1/2 in)

very meaning of jouissance." How? By attempting "to fragment, to pluralize, to pulverize the meaning of jouissance" itself.

You have fragmented your sense of sadistic jouissance, dear Adel, into six hundred slaughtered corpses, a plethora of heads, legs, haunches, and manes, and by pluralizing it you pulverize it. The same gesture tackles the Golden Age, *L'Âge d'or* (2013), of slavery: tormented, exploited bodies, bowed beneath their loads and their shame in *Shams* (2013). The meticulous patience muffled in these harrowed slabs of clay-dust pulverizes the sun-dered, scattered atrocity. The Golden Age was nothing but a simulacrum, a fraud, a sham... You're not yet done analyzing, diversifying, and taunting exaltation so as to turn it into delicacy.

There's still a whole history of cults, of values, of certainties to be subverted, dear friend! That *delicacy principle* is a long-haul undertaking, with nothing gentle about it. It is monstrous. Cocteau used to say of Colette, whom he adored, that "if she weren't a monster, she would be nothing." The delicacy principle makes your fellow men distrust you. Don't even try to make it acceptable to the devotees of aesthetic and other religions. If you lack the sensuality of Colette and the intransigence of Sade, no matter, your intensities suffice to conduct your innocent revolt against those who are immune to the "delicacy principle": at the junction of man and beast, body and word, meaning and image. Fiery seeker after the invisible (*State*, 2013), your art confronts us with the extreme states that constitute our innermost secrets. You compel us to delicately reconsider the unendurable, before the speed of light is extinguished (*Schnell*).

Translated from the French by Lorna Scott



Adel Abdessemed, *Le Vase abominable*, 2013  
Copper on mixed media base; 550 x 200 x 200 cm (216 1/2 x 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 in)



Adel Abdessemed, *Schnell*, 2005  
Video projection, 11 sec. (loop), color, sound; dimensions vary (aspect ratio 4:3)