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Kader Attia on why we need art to overcome 'the dark times we live in'

Ahead of a UK exhibition, the French artist talks about his Algerian heritage, colonialism and emotion



Guy Chazan JANUARY 25, 2019

Kader Attia's grandmother used to collect jewellery from elderly people in Algeria to help fund the country's war of independence against the French. It was hidden in caves and later taken to Tunisia, melted down into silver bars and swapped for Kalashnikov rifles. Among the items she picked up were recycled French coins that local craftsmen had mounted with red coral or glass and repurposed as brooches and necklaces.

"This jewellery was produced by an anonymous artist who cannibalised the symbol of his occupier and transformed it into something new," Attia says. It was an "early form of resistance" by a colonised people absorbing the tools of its oppressors and "vomiting them back".

Attia positively fizzles with stories like these, a heady mix of cultural anthropology, art history and personal anecdote. It is the conversational style of an artist who for nearly 20 years has been exploring the legacy of colonialism, both in France, the country of his birth, and Algeria, the land of his forefathers — an enterprise that has established him as one of the most sought-after artists of his generation.

Born in a Paris suburb in 1970 to a Berber mother and Arab father, Attia straddles two worlds — that of the old imperial overlord, and its former colonies in north Africa. This has given him a unique insight into the way those two societies interact and into the strange tensions of 21st-century life, strung between belonging and otherness, identity and difference.

"He is driven by this idea of creating a new form of cultural understanding, one that goes beyond what is purely European or purely African," says Ellen Blumenstein, a Berlin-based author and curator who has known Attia since 1999.

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"Rochers Carrés", 2009. Analogue C-print

Famous in his native France and his adopted home of Berlin, Attia has so far had relatively little exposure in Britain, a country with its own complex colonial heritage. That is about to change. The Hayward Gallery on London's South Bank is staging the first major UK survey of his work, pieced together from public and private collections across three continents and including some of the big multimedia installations that sealed his status as one of the art world's rising stars.

Ralph Rugoff, the Hayward's director, says the exhibition will showcase the central role of emotion in Attia's art. "He's really challenging cultural institutions to behave in a different way — to allow emotion," he says. While much of contemporary art is sterile, obsessed with aesthetics at the expense of social context, outside the galleries' walls, "rightwing demagoguery is playing on people's emotions and fears". To counter that, "Attia is trying to create a more emotional kind of installation", he says.

Attia puts it this way: the artists who "scream, scratch, paint with blood" have been excluded from the arts scene. "The left has given up the field of emotion," he says. Now art must "reappropriate what has been hijacked by politics". Describing himself as an activist, he aims to "open up the eyes" of his audience — "maybe not 95 per cent of them. But if you can open up the mind of 5 per cent, it's the beginning of a victory," he says.

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"The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures", 2012. Mixed-media installation at Documenta 2012

The Hayward show will feature one of Attia's most famous — and most emotional — works, "The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures", which made a huge splash when it was shown at Documenta in the German city of Kassel in 2012. It contains pictures of soldiers from the first world war who suffered severe facial injuries in battle and were patched back together by early cosmetic surgeons. These are juxtaposed with displays of striking wooden busts by African sculptors based on the same images.

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Attia says he was struck by the different approaches to the idea of repair in western and non-western cultures. In the west, it is seen as a way to fix or conceal imperfection, and restore the injured body or object to its original shape. In contrast, he says, “primitive societies repair things by leaving the injury visible”. There are parallels here with *kintsugi*, the Japanese art of fixing broken pottery using lacquer dusted with powdered gold or silver to highlight the lines of fracture.

He recalls a residency he did at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington, during which he discovered a huge quantity of repaired objects that the authorities kept in storage and never showed. One was a mask from Congo covered by a piece of tin, which he found “amazing”. The fact that they were locked away said a lot about western museums’ approach to “primitive” art.



"Continuum of Repair: The Light of Jacob's Ladder", 2013. Installation of books, scientific instruments, mirrors, metal, shelves, found objects and light at Whitechapel Gallery, London

Blumenstein says this interest in repair is typical of Attia, who often presents complex ideas in accessible ways. “He deals with principles, forms or themes that everyone can relate to, such as Jacob’s Ladder or the mirror as a motif, or the idea of repair,” she says. “That means that even people who find it hard to relate to contemporary art can engage with his work.”

Though it is accessible, Attia’s work is backed up by intense, often exhaustive research. His studio in Prenzlauer Berg, a rapidly gentrifying district of northern Berlin, is crammed with books on Jean Dubuffet, Gerhard Richter, the Arab historian Ibn Khaldoun, as well as volumes about “Mozart’s Brain” and “Magical Tattoos”. Among tomes on colonial history stand small African carved heads; a drawing of songbirds hangs from one shelf and a statue of a leopard stands in the corner.

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The books form the basis of his artistic practice. “I always start with a lot of reading but, at the same time, I’m always drawing,” he says. He flips through sketchpads full of notes scribbled down from books and quotes from conferences, accompanied by rough, doodly drawings — an angular metal stand topped with a motorcycle helmet, a squiggly contraption made from what looks like a car exhaust-pipe, an ironing board and a hinged wooden arm.



Kader Attia photographed in Berlin for the FT Weekend Magazine © Robbie Lawrence

Though he sometimes refers to himself as a researcher, Attia is no dusty academic. In conversation he is animated and intense, frequently running his hand through his hair and riffing freely on everything from Berlusconi and Brexit to phantom limb syndrome and the status of traditional healers in Senegal. Through it all runs a deep attachment to the physicality of art. “I like the texture, the matter,” he says. “It’s like this membrane that binds us to each other through touching, smelling, hearing, watching.”

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Attia grew up with his six brothers and sisters in Garges-lès-Gonesse, a suburb of Paris with a large immigrant population. His father was a bricklayer who worked on local construction sites, his mother a cleaning lady and nanny. Racism in banlieues such as Garges-lès-Gonesse is rife: locals routinely told him to “go back to your own country”.

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That formed the backdrop of his interest in “humiliation” — *hogra* in Arabic — a feeling he says generations of people from former French colonies such as Algeria have had to struggle with. This humiliation, he told Rugoff in an interview published in the Hayward catalogue, has occasionally produced “monsters” — terrorists, for example, “who feel they have nothing left to lose”.

One of his first projects, which he completed in 2002, was a series of photographs of transgender Algerians living as illegal immigrants in Paris — the beginning of a long interest in outsiders and social outcasts. Attia deliberately avoided portraying them as victims, focusing instead on joyful moments such as shared birthdays and fake weddings. When private galleries in Paris rejected the work, he arranged a slideshow in his flat in Belleville. It was his first art exhibition.



"La Piste d'Atterrissage (The Landing Strip)", 2000-2002. Series of C-print photographs

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"La Machine à Rêves" (Dream Machine), 2003. Mannequin and vending machine with ready-made and custom-made halal objects

In 2003 he created "Dream Machine", a vending machine containing consumer goods seen through an Islamic filter, such as halal gin and condoms, and a self-help book entitled *How to Lose Your Banlieue Accent in Three Days*. He also created his own halal clothing brand, setting up a fake shop in a Paris gallery.

Attia's home environment was a recurring motif in his work from the start. One series of photographs focused on the huge housing estates for migrants and workers that had been built around Paris after the second world war. Such "*grands ensembles*" had, he says, held out a promise of equality and comfort but ended up being little more than "open-air jails", forming a complex machinery of social control.

He also had a strong interest in African art, ever since a stint spent travelling as a young man in Congo. He recalls his anger at the exhibition *Picasso and the Masters* at Paris's Grand Palais in 2009, which showed how the painter was influenced by, among others, Caravaggio, El Greco and Paul Cézanne. There were no African masks — even though their influence on masterpieces such as the "Demoiselles d'Avignon" is well documented. The omission was, he tells Rugoff, an "insult to the traditional art of Africa".

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"Measure and Control", 2013. Vintage vitrine, stuffed cheetah, African mask (detail)

Attia's response was to take a mask he had found in a market in Senegal and cover it in pieces of mirror. Anyone viewing it then saw a highly fragmented "Cubist portrait of themselves". It was a way to harness the concept of repair and transformation in order to draw a direct link between Picasso and African art.

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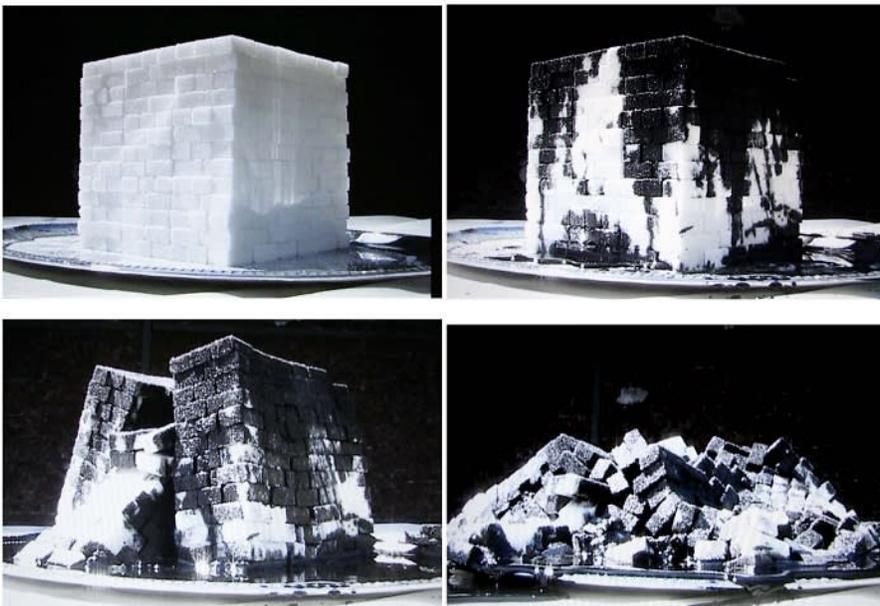
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From the mid-2000s, Attia's work began to garner increasing attention. In 2007, he created "Ghost", a huge installation showing an army of praying Muslim women made from tin foil. On closer inspection the women are found to be empty shells, their burka-like hoods framing a vacancy stripped of spirit or individuality. A video from the same year, "Oil and Sugar", shows a large white square built of smaller sugar cubes that evokes the holy Kaaba in Mecca: black crude oil is poured on to the structure and it gradually erodes and subsides.

Near the start of the current decade, he moved to Germany, a country where the critical response to his work had always been more positive than in France. When he began working as an artist, he says, any criticism of France's colonial past and its role in the Algerian war had been controversial. "I started speaking about it when it really wasn't allowed, and I had difficulties showing my work," he says.



"Ghost", 2007. Installation of aluminium-foil sculptures, Halle 14, Leipzig, 2008



"Oil and Sugar #2", 2007. Single-channel video projection

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However, he has never disconnected from Paris, a city that still inspires him and informs his art. As soon as you exit the Gare du Nord, France's colonial legacy is right there in your face — “the architecture, the Arabs, the mess”, he says. “You really know what it feels like to be in a colonialist empire.”

Following the terror attacks on the French capital in 2015, he went back there to set up La Colonie, a bar and meeting space for exhibitions and debates. His mission — to “repair the fragmentation of society”, no less. “In the dark times we're living in, we need to reinvent ways to share politically and publicly,” he says. One event last December focused on the work of psychoanalyst Karima Lazali, whose recent book *Le trauma colonial* explores the psychological legacy of colonial oppression in Algeria, and the persistent memory blanks it has caused, both in Algeria and France.



Réfléchir la Mémoire (Reflecting Memory), 2016 Single-channel HD digital video projection

Trauma and forgetting feature in one of Attia's most famous recent works, “Reflecting Memory” (2016), a video about phantom limb syndrome which won him the prestigious Marcel Duchamp Prize and has strong echoes of his earlier work on repair. The main focus is on amputees who continue to experience pain in their amputated limbs. But in interviews with psychoanalysts, surgeons and academics, he explores how communities, too, can suffer the same symptoms by denying trauma, or failing to engage with the collective crimes of their past. One interviewee cites the example of Turkey's refusal to fully acknowledge or atone for the Armenian genocide— a trauma that is left unhealed and continues to cause great pain.

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“Reflecting Memory” also refers to mirror therapy, where mirrors are used to help amputees visualise their phantom limb: some patients have seen their pain diminish as the mirror is gradually removed. Attia shows a series of subjects in different locations — praying in church, standing in forests, looking down from railway bridges. In a striking *coup de théâtre*, he then shifts the viewpoint, going behind the mirrors held up to their limbs and revealing them as amputees.

The film often elicits a powerful response. Attia tells of an American who emailed him after watching it: his brother, who had lost a limb fighting in Vietnam, had recently died. Seeing the video had helped him to mourn, Attia says.

For Blumenstein, it is Attia’s emotional appeal that singles him out. “Many artists like to accuse, to judge, but Kader never does that,” she says. “It’s like he’s striving for a kind of reconciliation — which is in itself a kind of repair.”

“Kader Attia: The Museum of Emotion”, Hayward Gallery, February 13-May 6;
southbankcentre.co.uk