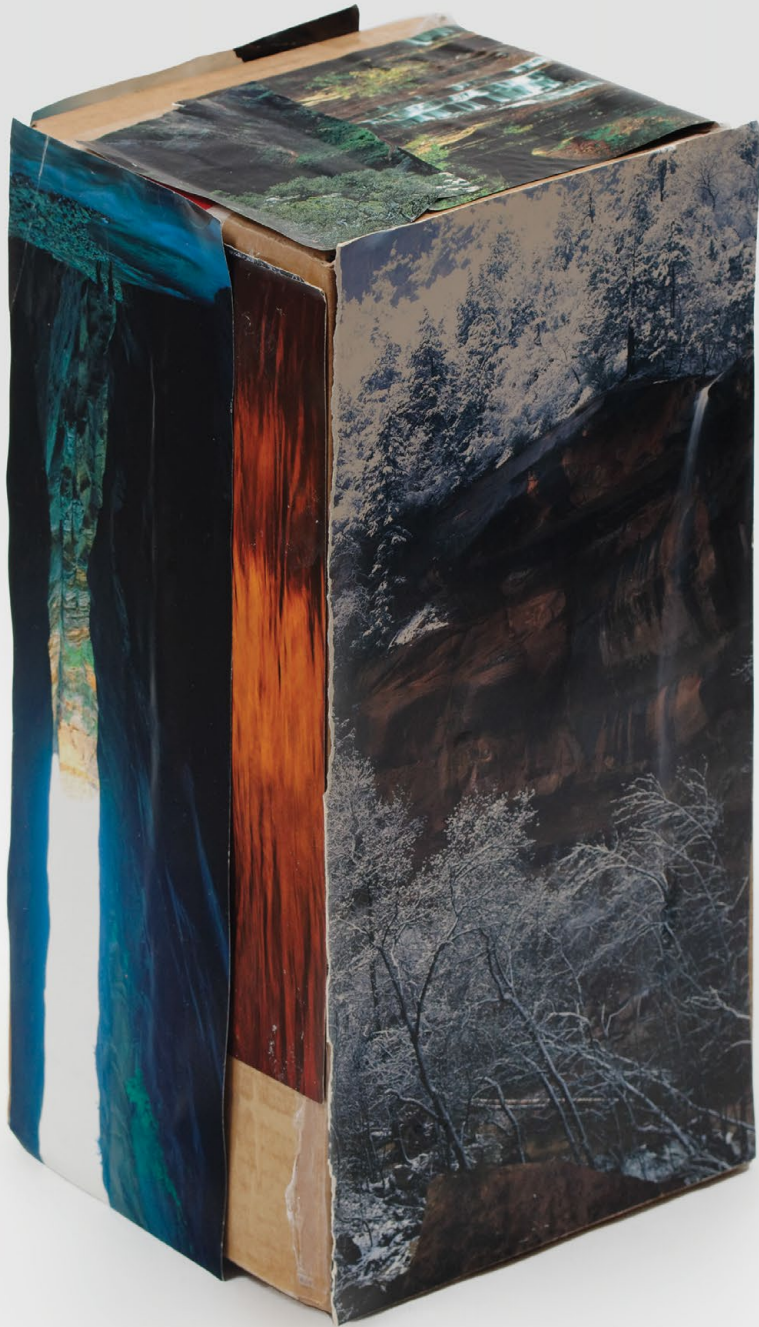


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Casts of Delays

SIMONE FATTAL, *Earth Day 9*, 26 x 10 x 10 cm. Photo by Aurelien Mole. All images courtesy Ashkal Alwan, Beirut, unless otherwise stated.



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

BY MARIE MURACCIOLE

FEATURES

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SIMONE FATTAL, *Tree*, 1977, oil on canvas, 100×81 cm. Photo by Tarek Haddad.

In the contradictions lies the hope.
—Bertolt Brecht

Simone Fattal's oeuvre is shaped by her travels from one country to another, and by dealing with interruptions. Born in Damascus in 1942 to a family that had to leave Syria during the 1960s, she settled in Beirut. Soon thereafter, she traveled to London and Paris alone, studying at the latter city's *École du Louvre* before attending philosophy courses at Beirut's *École des Lettres*. She has been a painter since 1969, beginning with a series of trees, followed by her *White paintings* (1972–80). In 1972, she commissioned the striking film *Autoportrait*, released only in 2012. Also in 1972, artist Etel Adnan, who became her partner, moved back to Beirut after years in the United States. The couple relocated briefly to Paris in 1975 to escape the Lebanese Civil War, before moving to California in 1980. Starting a new chapter, Fattal founded the publishing house Post-Apollo Press—inspired by her belief that the world had changed forever after the US moon landing—under which she published more than 200 titles to date. She also enrolled at the College of Marin, and in 1988, at the Art Institute of San Francisco, where she discovered her connection to sculpture. She went on to engage with the medium of ceramics, and initiated her long-standing collage practice. The couple moved back to Paris in 2012.

A nomad, Fattal adapts to change by constructing her way out of it. A lengthy process, it may have influenced her practice: the figures she builds carry a strong awareness of the various worlds she came across, which have disparate timings. As Adnan wrote: "Her world, archaic in appearance, is eminently contemporary. One can remember what Nietzsche has already said, that the one who belongs completely to his time, the real contemporary is the one who does not coincide perfectly with it, but defines himself as un-actual."¹

The fact that you cannot easily place Fattal's work in the trajectory of Western art or with a specific cultural scene adds to the plurality of her gestures. It is her time now, when the puzzle pieces are finally painting a landscape featuring a key journey in our real world of displacements and exiles.

The following conversation with Fattal took place in Paris in January 2021, at a moment when Lebanon and Syria carry deeper wounds than ever. When the world is sadly suspended and divided due to the pandemic, subjecting us to lock-downs and separations, lowering our haptic regime, Fattal builds glazed clouds and suspended three-dimensional collages.

1 Etel Adnan, "Simone Fattal, Ceramic Sculptor" in *Simone Fattal: Sculptures*, The post-Apollo Press, Sausalito, 2011.

Your practice is steeped in exploration, delays, and patience, running off the conventional path. Exile induces reassessment, which art history constantly needs. Your continuous moving took you to some unexpected angles, the kind that are needed to bring alternative narratives in the art.

Delays are part of my life, as well as deviation and loss. I was born in Damascus, and we left after my father's business in Syria was nationalized by Hafez al-Assad, in 1965. My father was sent to jail, and after he was released, we went to Beirut, where a partnership in another family business provided us with the means of living. I grew up in a wealthy family, as someone who wanted to be free to do as I wish, in what looked like a modern Arabic society—nevertheless, it was misogynist. I was the youngest of my family, and quite lonely, as I was sent to a boarding school in Beirut at 11 years old. I was always an outsider, although it made me feel free. Loneliness was a strength for a long time, then I started to see its limits. It was at that time that I made my movie, in '72. And when I met Etel.

In this movie, *Autoportrait*, you say that you never took care of yourself before you started painting. It's also interesting that the film pans from the eye of the camera, to the filmmaker, and later to the editor. Delegation is a good way to "get out" of yourself, to share a gaze, allowing you to expose yourself without filters. This gesture relates to the way that exile has shaped your life, as your practice is influenced by external, historical events. There were no set plans—you didn't follow the modern scene in Beirut, or the local schedule of exhibitions.

I was in New York where I saw an exhibition of self-portraits: it struck me that nobody has used films for this. I commissioned Pierre-Henri Magnin to film me, and a lot more happened in 2012, when Eugénie Paultre edited the footage. Delegation came with exploring a medium for its capacity to make things appear. Film exposed aspects of me that I didn't know—the accidental element of life was at stake. For me, life always came first, bringing the necessity of some gestures—especially my wanderings. But to make these gestures alive, I depend on a studio practice. I am

someone who needs a space to work in. I need to set aside time for everything, then I actually work quite fast. Each new move requires me to reconstruct. I can say that I activated the flow of accidental events with my conflictual desires. I needed to connect and accomplish things with other people, while, at the same time, I needed to do art by myself. All my life, I was busy connecting to people from new places instead of planning a professional life.

As a young girl I went to Paris. It was 1959, the Algerian War, and I remember the guy selling newspapers pushing the change towards me with disgust, as I was an Arab—that's where I began being "an Arab" actually. I was too shy to attend an art school. I felt quite lost and I had a lot of late nights. Very often I was on the dance floor, socializing in the dark.

I intentionally distort the opening quote from Brecht here: "In conflicts of desire lies life." And by the way, lots of great rebellions began on the dance floor, where minorities and outsiders use body language to counter normalization. You feeling lonely may also correspond to the situation in Beirut—your generation face the excess of Western influence; it opens a necessary void.

Yes, and as Beirut was packed with friends and family, I did settle in a studio by myself, something no one did at the time, even men. I needed to be apart. Of course, I studied philosophy at the École des Lettres. I attended every class. I was following the scene—it was mainly men, and the influence of Western art was significant. The local action centered around the art gallery Dar El Fan and Gallery One, owned by [poet] Yusuf al-Khal.

Yusuf al-Khal was Etel's motivation to return to Lebanon, as he founded the modernist journal *Shi'r* (*Poetry*, 1957–70). The main figures for me were his wife, the painter Helene Khal, and [painter] Huguette Caland. The two of them visited my studio before Huguette left for Paris, and I remember her there, drawing portraits of Mustafa, her lover, whom she was drawing all the time. I was clearly not their focus. [Painter] Paul Guiragossian made two portraits of me that I lost during one of my numerous moves. He was a friend, and came to my studio, where he noticed that [because the studio was on a high floor] I was in the middle of the sky, which could be an explanation for my *White painting* series.



SIMONE FATTAL, *Autoportrait*, 1972–2012, stills from video: 46 min.

The *White paintings* are quite incarnated, and rather pink. The ones I saw at Beirut's Sursock Museum in October 2020 at the exhibition co-curated by Carla Chammas, "At the still point of the turning world, there is the dance," like *The Last Moon* (1978), resemble details of a body.

Maybe. Then my generation didn't get together. Fadi Barrage, Georges Doche, Nadia Saikali: we never formed a group even if there was a project for this.

Heritage cannot be an organic operation, especially in a colonial context.

I had to experiment, to build my own puzzle. You don't build a practice from scratch. I didn't meet people whom I could follow, or who could drive me in their wakes, before I met Etel. With her, we were always sharing, and we collaborated soon enough, with the book *Five Senses For One Death* (1969). Youssef El Khal translated the poems from English to Arabic, and I made some drawings and paintings. We had a beautiful opening at Gallery One on October 4, 1973. I stress the fact that it was October 4, for had I chosen October 6, the date of my birthday, we would not have had that beautiful opening as that was the start of the October War with Israel.

Then again, we began to move from one country to another, and everything was precarious. I am not like Etel who is able to work on one table, I have to have a big space. I kept going back to my studio in Beirut after we moved to Paris. But when we moved to California, my work was interrupted, so I started publishing.

Sitt Marie Rose (1977), Etel Adnan's novel, needed a publisher.

I began with her *From A to Z* (1982), then *Sitt Marie Rose* in English in 1982, and the success came immediately, especially for the latter. I reproduced the map of Lebanon on its cover, a linear drawing of the road to Damascus and the frontiers—the book was published during the Israeli invasion—and it was a good decision: everybody wanted to know about the region. It attracted a nice crowd; Americans in universities taking Middle East Studies made a very progressive group of people.

The narrative sheds light on the Lebanese war, connecting the political to the personal via the female gaze.

The feminists loved it; there were many public readings in bookstores with a female audience, who identified with the main character. Through the books, we met a lot of intellectuals, and our lives took a different rhythm: I remember meetings with those in Middle East Studies at the end of November, and those in Modern Languages Association at the end of December.

When did you restart your studio practice?

In 1987, I started to sculpt, reconnecting with myself at a deeper level than I did with publishing. Publishing was mainly responsibilities for the outside world; it grounded me to a place. At the end, California was where I could really settle my practice. I took to sculpture right away, the first stone that I chose to work with was a large pink alabaster, and I was not afraid of its size.



SIMONE FATTAL, *The Last Moon*, 1978, oil on canvas, 100×145cm.



SIMONE FATTAL, *Chair*, 2012, stoneware fired in wood kiln and metal, 50 × 30 × 20 cm. Photo by François Fernandez.

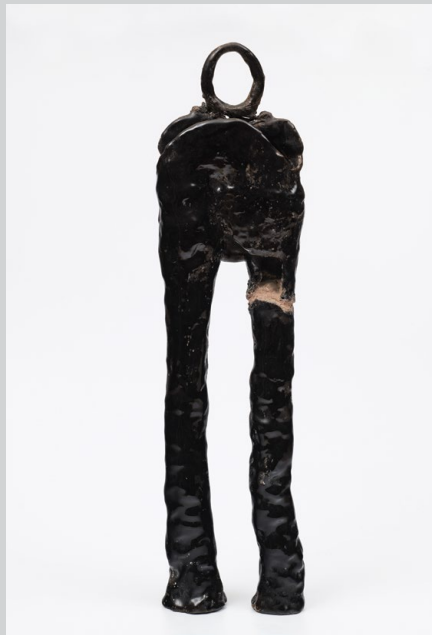
Etel mentions this in her text about your sculptures.² Soon afterwards you discovered ceramics, again a waiting process with delays.

I work very fast, but do need the ritual of waiting for materials to transform. Ceramics require multiple steps to change the flexible material into a solid object. You make them, then they need time to dry, to be fired, then glazed, turning into a completely different result, which becomes fixed. I must say the Art Institute of San Francisco was an amazing place to begin at. One of the classes allowed me to stay as long as I wanted, and provided the materials and the firing. They had huge gas kilns. That's why I had three one-meter-high figures at my first show in 2000 at Beirut's Janine Rubeiz. Then came *Ulysses Leaving the City of Troy* (2003). The whole installation was made at the Art Institute, and later shown at Paris's Cité des Arts in May 2003. At the same time, I started working with Hans Spinner in Grasse, so that by the time I was invited to show my work at the Sharjah Biennial in 2011, I had a good body of works ready.

Does scale make a difference for you?

My first pieces made with Hans Spinner were 150 cm high. I wanted to take advantage of the height of his kiln. In general, the larger size is important for me to convey my ideas. It is challenging, but it also ties the piece to my body—there is an invisible hug.

Many of your sculptures are standing figures, some of which appear beheaded. They contain minimal signs of human presence, whether standing or walking, and resemble some chairs that you made. Being beheaded relates to losing your mind, and one also thinks of the archaic standing figures, the kouros or the kolossos, which hold a presence, whether representing the dead or a god. You say you were not influenced by Alberto Giacometti, but by Henry Moore.



SIMONE FATTAL, *The Wounded Warrior*, 1999, glazed stoneware, 52 × 16.5 × 7 cm. Photo by François Doury.

The Wounded Warrior (1999) is connected to a sculpture Moore did during World War II, which interprets a Greek statue holding a shield—in turn I interpreted Moore's interpretation. Yes, I am influenced by Moore, as well as Barbara Hepworth and Kenneth Armitage. They bring a certain tension to abstract and human morphology that looks quite archaic, out of time, but also very 20th century. My figures extend from Syria and Greece, into a recent vocabulary of abstraction. They embody different times, because of the different worlds that I grew up in. As we know, modernity is not straightforward, or the only way. I have been reading up on Giorgio Colli's work about ancient Greece, the way he discusses Nietzsche and the notion of return. I have been reading so much—also the Quran, not religiously, but for the Arabic language.

Let's talk about your collages, especially the boxes that you began to produce during the first lock-down, *Earth Day* (2020). You once said that collage works are an immediate response to immediate history, whereas a sculpture is a more mediated response.

They are about what's happening. I find images from the media, and I relate them to the different places and times that they come from, like me. Perhaps because now, I can't travel or move. I have done collages for a long time, and they help me connect my memories. Our memory is very much linked to the haptic.

² Etel Adnan, "Simone Fattal, Ceramic Sculptor" in *Simone Fattal: Sculptures*, The post-Apollo Press, Sausalito, 2011



SIMONE FATTAL, *Clouds*, 2003–, stoneware and porcelain, dimensions variable. Photo by Arthur Boutin. Courtesy Lévy Gorvy, Paris/London/New York/Hong Kong/Palm Beach.

You also make these stoneware and porcelain *Clouds* (2003–), which are heavy and light at the same time, and they seem to derive from your first studio in Beirut, as a metamorphosis of the White paintings. This draws a temporal circle. But where do you wish to return to?

Damascus, but without the dictatorship. Syria is very important to me. In the '60s, I decided to visit Damascus, where my family still had an apartment. I remember my father was not happy that I did, he was afraid. I was going there from time to time. Etel and I visited everywhere in Syria—Palmyra three times, Aleppo, Abu Kamal, Bosra. Then in 2011, three months before the revolution, I decided out of the blue not to return. I am very involved with Lebanon, and extremely attached to Beirut: everything significant after my childhood happened to me there. My life is about being both Syrian and Lebanese, perhaps more of a composite of the times and the conflicting cultures.

Simone Fattal is currently based in Paris. She was born in Damascus, Syria, and raised in Lebanon, where she studied philosophy at the École des Lettres in Beirut. She continued her philosophical pursuits at Paris's Sorbonne. In 1969, she returned to Beirut, exhibiting her paintings there until the start of the Lebanese Civil War. In 1980, she settled in California, founding the publishing house Post-Apollo Press. In 1988, she returned to her artistic practice at the Art Institute of San Francisco. Her work is collected widely, including at the Centre Pompidou, Paris; the Yves Saint Laurent Foundation, Marrakech; the Surssock Museum, Beirut; the Sharjah Art Foundation; and the National Museum of Qatar, Doha. Recent solo exhibitions have been held at Bergen Kunsthall (2020); MoMA PS1, New York (2019); Pinault Collection, Punta della Dogana, Venice (2019); Musée Yves Saint Laurent, Marrakech (2018); the Rochechouart Departmental Museum of Contemporary Art (2017); and the Sharjah Art Foundation (2016).

Marie Muracciole is an art critic, writer, independent curator, and teacher based in Paris. She was the head of the Beirut Art Center (BAC) from 2014 to 2019, and the head of the cultural department at Paris's Jeu de Paume from 2005 to 2011. She was the editor of *Francis Alys Knots'n Dust* (2018); *Allan Sekula, Photography at Work* (2017); *Yto Barrada, RIFFS* (2011); *Climb at your own risk, Claude Closky* (2007); and the editor and translator of *Allan Sekula, Écrits sur la photographie* (2013). Some recent exhibitions that she has curated include "Yto Barrada - Holes In The Moon" at École nationale supérieure d'arts de Paris-Cergy (2020); "A Wonderfully Inadequate Medium: Allan Sekula and Photography" at Marian Goodman Gallery, London (2019); Joachim Koester's "things that SHINE and THINGS that are DARK" at BAC (2018); and Zineb Sedira's "Of Words and Stones" at BAC (2018).