

Kader Attia - Alpha Beta
By Storm Jansen von Rensburg

Kader Attia conceived the sublimely dangerous installation, Alpha Beta at a time, perhaps surreptitiously, when knife crime in London hit headlines in tabloids and dailies in the United Kingdom and abroad. As is the case with institutional racism, most of the reporting, and profiling for 'stop and search' activities by police focuses on ethnic minorities. And here lies the edge.

Alpha Beta consists of 28 highly polished mild steel knives, shaped into the Arabic Alphabet, each attached to the wall by a magnet. The viewer is invited to pull knives off the wall using industrial gloves provided to protect one from the extreme sharpened edges. It is when a knife/letter is held in your hands that the power of the work reveals itself – providing a contradictory sense of omnipotence and fear, power and vulnerability. It provides the jolt of intense pleasure and horror that close contact with a weapon so readily offers.

For Attia the work is an extension of his ongoing interest and critique of the conflicting and contradicting world views, ideologies and philosophies of the Occident and the Orient – a schism that informs our understanding of our colonial past, as much as it determines current world politics. In Oriental culture the knife is a symbol of purity and peace. The sharpness of the instrument used in ritual practice in Islam determines halaal. In Sikh culture, adult men carry the kirpan by religious and cultural creed as symbol of non violence and defense.

In a European context however the symbolic power of the knife resides in vestiges of power, violence and aggression. In part informed by contemporary hyperbole, as illustrated with the case of knife crime in the parks and borrows of urban England, historic president resides, to name one example, in the rich tradition of heraldic symbology.

For an audience unfamiliar with Arabic, the work poses considerable difficulty – impenetrable, the assumption is that the Arabic script invokes an injunction, that it 'means' something. 'What does it say?' is the question most often asked. An assumption is made that it is the word of God, a quotation from the Koran. Attia walks a fine line by tricking the viewer into a simple reading of the work to equate Arabic as a weapon, as dangerous, and those that speak the language as violent and other.

For its production Attia chose a master craftsman located in Sheffield, the industrial city that gained its reputation for knife production already in the 14th century, and a major expansion centre during the Industrial Revolution as a steel producer. At once a symbolic and political gesture, Attia takes the making of the work into the heart of the place known for its weapon production. He takes the work to its conceptual home, its birthplace.

And thus Attia collides the two opposing forces magnificently and eloquently. The subversive power of Alpha Beta lies in its seductive beauty and its shiny surfaces, its play on danger and power, its

toying with viewers' insecurities and cultural stereotypes. And finally it seduces with its cold, clinically sharp edges that could draw blood.