

Sleeping from Memory

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One motivating question informs all of Kader Attia's art: how to find in his own experience a chain of ideas that will lead him to the poetic, transformative work of art. How can an artist take ordinary, mundane experience and infuse it with the resonance of shared memory? How to move from the particularity of one individual's time and place to the inclusiveness of social significance? More specifically, how can a child of Algerian parents, born in 1970 and raised on the outskirts of Paris, make works of art that challenge and exceed simplistic notions of cultural identity. Attia's new work made for *Momentum 9*, his first solo exhibition in the United States, exemplifies the artist's resourceful imagination. Using his childhood memories as a starting point, the artist has fashioned an installation that operates in the registers of both private and public space, leading us to a complex experience that weaves together the sensual, the emotional, and the political.

Childhood is often a reference in Attia's work. His memorable 2005 installation for the Lyon Biennale, *Flying Rats*, recreates a busy, life-sized children's playground. In Attia's version, the children are sculpted using an amalgam made with bird seed. The playground and its kids are enclosed in a wire cage, along with a flock of live pigeons. These "harmless" birds take on a vulture-like role, slowly pecking their way through their cellmates' bodies, reducing once playfully posed kids to lifeless carrion. This richly metaphorical work may be read on many levels as it compellingly plays out a disturbing fantasy of childhood's disappearance.

Disappearance, for the artist, is both a formal technique and a pathway to meaning. *Flying Rats* is a sculpture that literally destroys itself. Attia has stated, "I am interested in the evocation of something by its contrary. The articulation between form and meaning often happens through emptiness. Because I care a lot about form, I care a lot about emptiness." Absence is at the heart of another recent series of works titled *Ghost*. Attia used women at prayer as models from which to make body casts in aluminum foil. He

recently showed a large group of these casts in his exhibition at the Haifa Museum of Art in Israel. The artist's dense congregation makes a visually arresting display, yet his supplicants endure only as vacant, silvered ghosts.

Images of loss, absence, and mortality haunt Attia's work, and his new *Momentum* installation is no exception. He first explained his idea for this exhibition to me with a recollection:

When I was a child, we were living in a small apartment in a Parisian suburb. As we were a family of 7 children in a small space, we used to sleep like 5 kids in the same room, and also in the living room on the sofa. This was quite common for the families of this area, most of them huge families of immigrants in small apartments. The beds we had were also typical of those these families were using: very simple, one board of wood as a box spring and 4 simple wooden feet. The mattress was made of a big piece of cheap foam.

In this installation, the crowded apartment of the artist's childhood has become a cramped dormitory of serried ranks, replete with cheap foam mattresses on wooden platform beds. Ironically enough, in recent years foam mattresses have become *de rigueur* for the back-pained bourgeoisie. But theirs is an altogether different, luxury version of the material developed by NASA known as "memory foam." Attia offers us a decidedly less comfortable take on the slumber party; his foam not only remembers the impression of the body it has held, that shape has been gouged out of the material itself. Each body "memory" is different, suggesting an array of individual sleepers, now absent save their cadaverous impressions.

If we can see linking thematic threads among Attia's works, we can also see that he has no "signature style." From bird seed to aluminum foil to the foam mattress, the artist finds the resonant material for each new work he conceives. (His practice to date has also incorporated photography, video, painting, and drawing.) As he developed this installation following a site visit, the artist considered several ideas before settling on his final concept, which he then sketched: "The drawing is a very important step in my creative process because it allows me to test how I can deal with the meaning and the

formal aspect of my work.” When Attia first showed me his working sketch I began to see how potent his metaphor would be. The collection of hollowed body contours could suggest not only a cramped dormitory but also a “lying in state,” victims of Pompeian-style catastrophe or perhaps the disasters of war. Notably, his drawing also includes visitors to the exhibition; as with many of his projects, Attia wants to immerse the audience in an environment that commands attention.

Attia also decided that rather than ship his work from Paris he would make the installation in Boston with the help of local art students. The participating students, from Massachusetts College of Art and Design, have not only provided their labor, but quite literally their bodies. Each student has created a trace of his or her own figure lying on the foam, which has then been dug out by hand. Attia: “They draw their own absence. The emptiness of the shape of their body becomes more important than their real body.”

This installation, and the earlier works I have mentioned all relate to a notion of emptiness that is, for Attia, of fundamental importance. He cites the profound influence of Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu’s phrase, “Man creates things, but emptiness gives them meaning.” At the same time, it is clear that Attia’s points of reference are often very concrete. In different ways, each of his works invites reflection on the most pressing questions of contemporary life and society: childhood and mortality, violence and religion, poverty and consumerism. In a sly 2004 installation, Attia turned a Paris art gallery into a fashion boutique dubbed *Hallal*, the equivalent Arabic word to the Hebrew “kosher.” “Hallal” was presented as a chic new brand of fashion apparel. Aside from revealing his sense of humor, the artist’s ruse betrayed an acute awareness of the nexus of religious and economic systems. Most remarkable, perhaps, is that Attia’s work avoids the one-dimensionality of some art that might be considered “political.” His approach is consistently experimental, finding unexpected forms and materials to explore potent ideas. In this way, Attia has absorbed the strategies of conceptual art while at the same time speaking to a broad audience. As he put it, “I would like to make works that can be shown and understood anywhere. I want to address the audience without the limit of cultural or religious borders.” True to this mission, Kader Attia’s work succeeds in being

both psychologically charged and socially engaged, blending personal insight with poetic metaphor. Still a young artist, he has already found a powerful creative voice that once heard is not easily forgotten.