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Usine (still)
 2008
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Foreground: Adel Abdessemed's
Prostitute (2008), at David Zwirner
 Gallery



Adel Abdessemed
Lincoln
 2009
 David Zwirner Gallery

ANIMAL SPIRITS

by Ben Davis

Adel Abdessemed, "Rio," Apr. 3-May 9, 2009, at David Zwirner Gallery, 519, 525 and 533 West 19th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

Adel Abdessemed (b. 1971) is probably best known as the contemporary artist that animal rights activists love to hate. Last year, his show at the San Francisco Art Institute was closed amid death threats when his videos depicting farm animals being clubbed to death in a Mexican slaughterhouse became the target of controversy. A similar brouhaha ensued earlier this year when the same suite of videos, "Don't Trust Me," was displayed in Turin along with another disturbing animal video, *Usine* -- though that time the show went on.

The Algerian-born, French-trained and New York-based Abdessemed does not want for admirers though. Robert Storr included him in his "Think With the Senses, Feel With the Mind" show at the 2007 Venice Biennale. New Museum curator Massimiliano Gioni has said that Abdessemed is a practitioner of "asymmetrical realism," and a key representative of a general turn towards the "unfiltered, brutal and sincere" in contemporary art. Now, Chelsea supergallerist David Zwirner has devoted all three of his West 19th Street gallery spaces to "Rio," Abdessemed's rambling solo show.

As you wander the exhibition, the first thing that strikes you is Abdessemed's eclecticism. His practice ranges from video art and performance documentary, to installation, sculpture, photography, even diagrams. What, if anything, holds it all together? (Roberta Smith suggests that "Rio" is little more than "a lexicon of the latest biennial fashions.")

Start with the already notorious *Usine*, a short 1:27-minute-long video loop which nevertheless includes an extraordinary variety of activity. A shaky camera passes over a courtyard landscape where various predators battle each other -- a snake strangles a frog, tarantulas stalk a mouse, roosters strike at each other, dogs sink their teeth into each others' throats.

The clip refracts Gioni's assertions about Abdessemed's practice in an intriguing way: Its jittery brutality certainly indicates that its intent is, in part, to confront you with a bit of "unfiltered" reality, and its brevity gives it a kind of stiletto-like intensity. At the same time, the scene is obviously not something the artist just stumbled upon. The hellish bestiary it captures is carefully orchestrated, probably intended to evoke an image of nature as unrelenting, "dog-eat-dog" (or "snake-eat-frog"?) cruelty (its title is French for "factory," indicating that it's probably also an allegory for the brutality of civilized society as well). *Usine* is raw and visceral, but it's also contrived and artificial. And I suspect that such blurring of the mediated and the unmediated is the artist's real interest.

Another piece, *Music Box* (2009) -- which happens to be sited at Zwirner right outside the darkened gallery where *Usine* plays -- hammers this concern home. A black steel oil drum rotates



Foreground: Adel Abdessemed's
Practice Zero Tolerance (retournée)
(2008), at David Zwirner Gallery



Installation view of Adel Abdessemed's
Telle mère tel fils (2008), at David
Zwirner Gallery



Installation view of Adel Abdessemed's
Telle mère tel fils (2008), at David
Zwirner Gallery



Adel Abdessemed
Telle mère tel fils (detail)
2008
David Zwirner Gallery

horizontally on a motorized axle, serving as the cylinder in a junkyard music box; as it turns, a pattern of bolts drilled through its surface strikes a series of metal combs, plucking them and sounding a tortured, but unmistakable, version of the famous opening from *The Ride of the Valkyries*. So, quite literally, *Music Box* is about the clash of "operatic" content with scrappy materials.

You can see a variation on the same theme in the nearby *Prostitute* (2008), three plain, black, wall-mounted boxes -- high-end shopping bags, in fact -- each containing a stack of three notebooks. An explanation tells you that the notebooks contain the labors of three different prostitutes, hired to fill their pages with transcriptions of the Koran, the New Testament and the Torah, respectively. Quite a flamboyant back-story -- and the fact that it is presented to the viewer in such a completely minimal way can only mean that *Prostitute* is precisely about the collision of such strong subject matter -- world religion, the sex trade -- with banality. At any rate, if this particular work doesn't offer an example of "filtered" content, I don't know what can.

And so it goes in "Rio." For every work in the show that courts the "unprocessed" look Gioni mentions -- photos like *Lincoln* (2009), a seemingly off-hand image of the artist throwing himself into the arms of a white Lincoln statue -- there is a work like *Practice Zero Tolerance (retournée)* (2008), a one-to-one clay replica of a charred car from the 2005 anti-police riots in the Paris slums, turned on its side. The most spectacular work at Zwirner is *Telle mère tel fils* (2008), which consists of -- I kid you not -- three airplane fuselages literally braided together like snakes, filling the space of one entire garage-like gallery. Both the latter two works confront you with actual wreckage (a marking on the tail of one of the planes let's you know that it was once the property of "Kalitta Flying Service"), suggesting the remains of violence or tragedy -- only to then turn around and emphasize their character as theatrical simulations, their superficiality. They are props for a punk opera.

Certainly this kind of indeterminacy is the key to appreciating Abdessemed's performance/installation *Grand Canyon* (2008) -- a large photo of the artist dangling from a rock wall, supposedly somewhere in the Grand Canyon, coupled with an actual slab of rock in the gallery, which has the word "DEATH" scratched into it, claimed to be the product of this labor. This act would seem to represent an adolescent kind of angst taken to cartoonish extremes. And then you read in the accompanying information packet that the installation is supposed to make you question "how the rock may have been extricated from one of America's last unpopulated natural landscapes," and realize that -- perhaps -- there is something satirical about the whole thing, a kind of deadpan lampoon of macho performance and earthworks.

So, a connecting thread exists, linking all these disparate projects. But is there a point, or is it just happy-go-lucky genre-jumping? What makes Abdessemed interesting is that in his case, formal promiscuousness actually seems motivated. In recounting his own biography, he puts great stress on his encounter with religious fundamentalism in Algeria, which led him to leave that country for France. This experience of invasive ideology is the biographical core of his practice. Hence his preoccupation, in works like *Prostitute*, with debasing the mythology of organized religion of all kinds. Nationalism is also the object of deep suspicion for Abdessemed, and the critique of it is the buried point of any number of works, from his use of Wagner's opera in *Music Box* -- a national origin myth, of course -- on down to *Soccer Ball* (2009), a replica of just what the title indicates, made from razor wire, a reminder, no doubt, of the nationalism and hooliganism catalyzed by that sport.



Installation view of Adel Abdessemed's *Grand Canyon* (2008), at David Zwirner Gallery



Visitors consulting gallery text in front of Adel Abdessemed's *Grand Canyon* (2008), at David Zwirner Gallery



Adel Abdessemed
Grand Canyon (detail)
2008
David Zwirner Gallery

Abdessemed seems to have generalized his distaste for oppressive ideology into an all-embracing liberal nihilism directed at literally everything that might have a claim on belief. If you want to get a sense of Abdessemed's politics, take a gander at *Untitled (I take care of History)* (2009), a diagram for an imagined history exhibition, scratched onto two lined pieces of writing paper. Arrows identify where different portraits would hang, labeled with the names of "all the political terrorists and war criminals the artist could spontaneously name." These range from familiar villains like "Ben Laden," "Pinochet," "Slobodan Milosevic" and "G.W. Bush," to both "John Paul II" and the current Pope (identified by his French name "Benoit XVI"), and figures who will likely be more obscure to the Western viewer, like "Denis Sassou Nguesso" and "Omar Bongo." "Toni Negri," '60s militant become post-national theorist, is listed. "Wittgenstein" appears but is crossed out.

The key to this personal rogue's gallery, I think, is that next to the diagram, Abdessemed adds a sketched homage to Courbet's famous crotch-shot, *The Origin of the World*. And scrawled across the open vagina is the name "Djamila Bonhired," the Algerian woman who became the symbol of the country's struggle against the French occupation in the '50s (she features in *The Battle of Algiers*). The artist's message seems clear. For Abdessemed, the "origin" of all the various menacing ideologies that stalk world -- their root, the original sin -- lays in having promised liberation in the first place, as such promises inevitably degenerate into horror.

In his article, Gioni quotes Abdessemed as saying that he rejects the label "postcolonial artist" because he is "not working on the scar and not mending anything." His work's explicit program is to offer no program and no answers. This may seem radical. In fact it is a version of a very common political fallacy -- that the problem is all the "extremists" who think they have the answers, and that the task is therefore not to analyze what is going on in society -- where the key levers of exploitation and oppression are -- but simply to stand back and treat all sides with equal scorn and irony.

It is possible to argue that the eclecticism of Abdessemed's personal taxonomy of terror in *Untitled (I take care of History)* explains the formal eclecticism of the work. Everywhere in the disparate works in "Rio," there are subliminal jokes which indicate that the artist is playing on different art-historical tropes. The photo of Abdessemed in the arms of the Lincoln statue gets its kick as a satirical echo of the *Pieta*. Another photo of the artist's children walking skeletons of dogs might be a joke on the lugubrious Marina Abramovic performance in which she consorts with a skeleton. It is not a coincidence that the boxes in *Prostitute* resemble a Donald Judd wall piece. *Enter the Circle* (2009), a film of a performance where the artist dangled from a helicopter to inscribe a circle on a panel, seems to tweak Matthew Barney -- and then Abdessemed one-ups Barney in taboo-breaking, restaging the helicopter-art project with two men, one who has no arms, the other with no legs, for *Les ailes de dieu* (2009) (a text assures us that the reference is to Yves Klein, however). We are told that *The Sea* (2009), another video work picturing the artist perched atop a board floating in the waves, trying to write something on it, is a parody of *The Raft of the Medusa*.

The breadth of such references defies any specific significance -- except as a sort of oblique statement that Abdessemed's only relationship to any sort of organized history is to blow a raspberry at it. The best metaphor for his practice is probably his own *The Best, the Most, the Only* (2009), a roomful of musical stands, each with a separate charcoal drawing of a hand giving the thumbs down on it -- an artistic score composed completely of different varieties of negation.



Which brings us full circle to those furious animal rights activists. In *The Sea* (2009), the text tells us that the phrase that the artist is pictured trying futilely to write on the board in the waves is "politically correct." This is more or less the same type of mocking, self-cancelling gesture he aimed at organized religion in *Prostitute*. But as a topic for critique, the irritations of political correctness are not really on the same level as the scourge of fundamentalism.

Of course, in the 2008 SFAI affair, Abdessemed has had an encounter with political correctness of the most fundamentalist variety. He describes his critics as "zealots." And yet, reviewing the concerns that animate "Rio," you have to guess that provoking animal lovers was at least part of the intended point of the disputed work. The whole furor started precisely because the text description at SFAI was provocatively vague about the artist's relation to the depicted killings -- and inflicting such uncertainty is indeed clearly part of how Abdessemed relates to his audience. The video was titled *Don't Trust Me*, for crying out loud. And now, as an encore, the artist is presenting *Usine*, which is if anything even more confrontational about being a staged theater of animal violence.



Perhaps all this has something to do with exposing the concealed fundamentalism of the animal rights movement. But it exposes as much about Abdessemed's own over-generalized critique of ideology -- his distaste for any sort of taboo is so all-sided that he assumes at the outset that no productive conversation is possible with anyone, only provocation. In the SFAI case, his stance *actually undermined* the attempt to start a "conversation" about the "issues" the work was supposed to be about (the forum at SFAI had to be cancelled amid the furor).

Adel Abdessemed
Untitled (I take care of History)
2009
David Zwirner Gallery



Abdessemed has a gifted eye for impactful images to deploy in his all-sided ideological critique. He is a talent. But it's worth noting that his current nihilism is probably its own kind of limiting ideology. It replicates what it finds distasteful, in the way that it programmatically refuses to reach out to the other, in its hermetic, disorienting, aggressive character. Given the critique of terrorism implied by the rogue's gallery in *Untitled (I take care of History)*, it is probably significant that when Massimiliano Gioni casts around for a metaphor for Abdessemed's mode of art, what he comes up with is "urban guerrilla."

Adel Abdessemed
Saturday
2008
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BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*. He can be reached at bdavis@artnet.com

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Enter the Circle (still)
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Les ailes de dieu (still)
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The Sea (still)
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Artist LaToya Ruby Frazier at the press
preview for "Younger than Jesus"