

Visual Arts

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Simone Fattal: 'With clay, a piece is always animated'

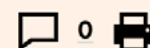
The Damascus-born ceramicist and painter has finally achieved recognition but shows no signs of slowing as she approaches 80



© Simone Fattal photographed for the FT by Richard Pak

Feedback

Caroline Roux AUGUST 28 2021



Simone Fattal's studio, on the fifth floor of an unimposing apartment building in Paris's sixth arrondissement, is tidy but enticing. There are shelves of her abstract ceramic artworks, glinting with glazes of yellows, blues and browns. There is a table of pots, tubes and brushes set out with laboratory efficiency. There are nearly finished paintings leaning against walls. There is even a ballet barre, slotted into a mirrored alcove. "I had one in my first studio in Beirut," she laughs, "so I had one put in here. I haven't used it."

The neglect of the barre is, one suspects, less to do with the fact that she turns 80 next year and more to do with her densely packed work schedule: Fattal has the dynamism of someone half her age.

"These are part of a new series of clouds," she says, unwrapping two horizontal ceramic forms that are pitted with the traces of her fingertips and glazed in mesmerising greens and pinks. They feel provisional but perfect. For Fattal, the alive quality of clay is everything. "With clay, a piece is always animated," she says. "Sometimes I have to work in bronze, but it doesn't talk to my heart in the same way."

Lately Fattal has had more attention than ever in her long career. A retrospective of 260 works at New York's MoMA [PS1 in 2019](#) — her first solo show in the US — unleashed a surge of interest. She was recently part of a group show at Berlin's [Klosterruine](#), where she exhibited ceramic globes inscribed in Arabic lettering. On September 8, an exhibition will open at the [Fondazione ICA](#) in Milan of new ceramic works derived from studies into the archaeological site of Pompeii. “It was a place destroyed by a single moment, not by time, and that fascinates me,” she says.



'Stele' (2008) © François Fernandez



'The Master' (1998) © François Doury

While the remains of Pompeii are reminders of the fragility of human of life, Fattal's near-human figures speak of both fragility and fortitude. Her work — with its continual references to myths and histories, from Hermes to Gilgamesh via the Koran, as a way of explaining the here and now — collapses time and history.

Later in September, her first UK exhibition will open in London's [Whitechapel Gallery](#). Five figures — each a metre or higher; one bronze, four ceramic — will stride through dim lighting and an array of objects suggesting stages of human existence, on a metaphysical journey. The show's title is *Finding a Way*, something Fattal has done throughout her life.

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We had no problem with our relationship. Though the US felt much more prudish and conservative than Beirut

She was born in Damascus in 1942, educated at a Catholic convent in Beirut from 11, and studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, where she was influenced by the phenomenological approach of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Returning to Beirut, where her family had settled, she began to paint, translating the

expansive light-washed views from her 11th floor apartment/studio into abstract works in the palest of shades.

In the early 1970s she met [Etel Adnan](#), a cultural journalist 17 years her senior. Adnan was also beginning to paint, and making intricate pleated books called *leporelli* containing images and Arabic script. The women became a couple and together they left for northern California in 1980. “We had no problem with our relationship,” says Fattal. “Though the US felt much more prudish and conservative than Beirut.”

But Fattal found herself unable to carry on painting in her new country. “I had nothing to say about the landscape,” she says, “even though it was beautiful.” Instead, she set up the Post-Apollo Press (named for the moon landings) to publish experimental works, including the novels and poetry of Adnan, who had become a major voice in Arab feminism.

By 2006, Fattal was back in the studio, studying at Marin College and then the San Francisco Art Institute. The first abstract figure she made was called Adam, after the prophet in Islamic texts. “He’s described as a very tall guy, so I gave him these long, long legs,” she says. It has informed every figure she has made since, whether Dionysus or one of the travelling companions striding through the Whitechapel show.

Fattal’s influences come largely from the Islamic world. “I like abstraction,” she says. “I grew up in a house of carpets, not just on the floors but on the walls, because my father was a great collector and was crazy about them.”



'Au bord du Barada 2' (2020) © Galerie Lelong/Simone Fattal

Regular visits to historical sites also left their mark. “I’ve been to Palmyra a thousand times,” she says. “We used to go every weekend when I was young. Aleppo and the [nearby 5th-century] Church of Saint Simeon Stylites, they informed my way of seeing and my sense of humanity.”

At the Whitechapel, Fattal’s figures will be surrounded by representations in clay of their psychological landscapes: the ziggurat whose ascent represents the growth of self-understanding, the tree that contains knowledge and the passing of time, the angel that protects.

Around them will hang Fattal’s own imaginings of the city of Damascus, dug out deep from her memory and rendered in engravings as the most minimal of lines. “This is the souk,” she says, pointing to pale brown curved lines. She hasn’t returned to the city since the Syrian civil war started in 2011.

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Paris was like putting on your old slippers

In 2012, Adnan found almost instantaneous art-world success when her paintings were shown at the German art festival Documenta. Since Paris felt like a central point in the European art world, as

well as familiar to both women, they moved here.

“Paris was like putting on your old slippers,” says Fattal. She closed the Post-Apollo imprint, sadly, after 30 years, and started working with the ceramicist Hans Spinner in Grasse — the town near Nice famed for making perfumes — known for his work with artists from Joan Miró to [Anthony Caro](#).

It is only recently that she has returned to painting. One of the large canvasses has vibrant blocks of pink and gold, dotted with deep red circles. “It is a homage to Etel,” says Fattal, “with the glowing sun.” Another is made by applying oil paint directly from the tube to the canvas; the resulting brightly coloured raised lines represent walks taken by modernist Swiss-German novelist Robert Walser around his home town.

She talks passionately about embroidery. “It’s beauty alone. You can’t go fast, it’s a school in itself, a meditation. It’s the next thing I’d like to do.” Fattal, it seems, isn’t just basking in late-arriving international recognition, but still has plenty to bring to the party.

‘A Breeze Over the Mediterranean’, ICA Milan, September 7-January 9,
icamilano.it

‘Finding a Way’, Whitechapel Gallery, September 21-May 15,
whitechapelgallery.org