

Mousse Magazine

CONVERSATIONS

Traveling Translations: Simone Fattal



Simone Fattal, "demeter and dionysus" installation view at kaufmann repetto Milan, 2019
Courtesy: the artist and kaufmann repetto Milan / New York. Photo: Andrea Rossetti

Simone Fattal and Barbara Casavecchia in conversation

In this conversation, artist Simone Fattal (b. 1942, Damascus) touches on several topics relevant to her practice: the attempt to transpose knowledge into a syncretic image; representing the experience of listening; her passion for poetry, ancient myths, and languages; the temporal element suspended between encounters; the belief that one must always look into the global history of a place; and why angels are ubiquitous throughout human history. They, she says, "are part of our psyche and our civilization."

BARBARA CASAVECCHIA: Let's start from the end. After a life together, you and Etel Adnan have signed your first collaboration for an exhibition: the installation *Garden of Memory* (2018)—part of the current group show *Luogo e Segni* curated by Martin Béthenod and Mouna Mekouar at Punta della Dogana in Venice—where your sculptures are immersed in “Conversation with my soul (III)” (2018), a poem by Etel, interpreted by Robert Wilson and accompanied by string music by Michael Galasso. How did it come about?

SIMONE FATTAL: When you work on a project, not all the ideas come at the beginning. It's a long process: you live with it, and it gathers everything you find along the way. I had been asked by Mouna to think of a project for the exhibition *Garden of Memory* at the Yves Saint Laurent Museum in Marrakesh in 2018, and then Etel's poem became a key part of it, as well as Robert's voice. Etel, Bob, and I got to know each other a long time ago, in Beirut. It was 1972.

Poetry is about sound. Etel speaks about clouds, waves, time—all abstract ideas. There is no way one can illustrate a poem: you have to listen to it. Therefore, I have tried to represent the act of listening. At that very moment I was reading a text on angels in *The Meccan Revelations* (1203–40) by [the thirteenth-century Arab Andalusian scholar, mystic, poet, and philosopher] Ibn 'Ārabī. In Sufi mysticism, angels are celestial creatures who have the ability to listen to people's inner thoughts. During my last visit to Milan, I had also seen an amazing fresco with swirling angels, and I remembered it. In churches angels are usually depicted as standing, but I had this vision of angels flying by while wearing a long Sumerian ruffle skirt, as if the wind could move them by blowing through it. I had been given complete carte blanche, so to say, so that's where these glazed angels came from.

BC: They remind me of a movie I haven't seen in ages, *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Wings of Desire*, 1987) by Wim Wenders, where invisible angels listen to the thoughts and memories of Berlin's inhabitants, still divided by the Wall, and try and comfort them. In one scene, the angels meet and follow an old man called Homer. Before we sat down, you were talking about Ulysses.

SF: I've heard it's a beautiful movie, but I have never seen it. Angels appear in all traditions. When we were kids we were told that there are two angels sitting on our shoulders, right and left. One tells you to be good, the other to be bad. There are always angels around you if you believe in religion. Actually, I think angels predate monotheistic religions. At the very beginning of what we call history, in the Mesopotamic area, in Sumerian and Assyrian mythologies, not only finds one angels but also many winged animals and creatures who can fly. It's a very old idea, transformed over and over again. Angels are part of our psyche and our civilization. This whole thing of having something going by is essentially movement, which is in turn transformation. By being alive we are constantly moving. Life is not static, it's about transformation. That's why you can think you have had many lives: you die and come back, die and come back. Well—hopefully! Because sometimes we die and boom, that's it. *[laughs]*

BC: This past summer I visited the History Museum of Armenia in Yerevan. The archaeological collection there is stunning. There is a perfectly preserved chariot in thick oak wood from the fifteenth century BCE, emerged intact from the necropolis of Lchashen, sunk under water until Lake Sevan was drained in Soviet times. Every inch of it is still extant. There are also a series of bronze statuettes and items from the Iron Age kingdom of Urartu [corresponding to the biblical Ararat] that I imagine you know. I've brought some pictures that I wanted to show you, because I see many connections with your figures.

SF: So beautiful! Do you see the winged creatures in the throne decorations? And here, on this cauldron?

BC: Yes! What a coincidence. Very naively, I have been hit by the physical evidence of an ancient civilization I had completely ignored. There, right in front of me, across millennia. There are so many gaps and silences in our ways of thinking about history. It's somehow shocking to realize how much our understanding of it is—

SF: —sketchy, to say the least. We only have fragments; we do not and cannot have any real knowledge of the past. Do you know everything that goes on today? And we have so many means. We can travel, watch films and documentaries, but we still only know one thing in a million. So much has been destroyed, so we have to reconstruct. Knowledge is not given, especially not in our schools. Everybody has to undertake their own travels toward knowledge, and then make a choice. What you have chosen and showed me today is very close to Assyria, Syria, Iraq, whose people lived and fought together. All is interconnected. Archaeologists can discover something of the matter of fact. For instance, they discovered that the Cretan language has Canaanite origins, it came from the East, and that the Phoenician alphabet is at the root of ancient Greek. We always need to look into the global history of a place.

As a student I was fascinated by the French historian Jean Bottéro, who used to be a priest and then became an Assyriologist and a major expert on the ancient Near East and Mesopotamian religion. Fluent in Latin and Greek, he decided to study the Bible in the same place where it originated, so he moved to Jerusalem, and then went on to study German, Hebrew, and the cuneiform alphabet. He worked on the Code of Hammurabi and translated from Akkadian the tablets of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a book I love. I think Bottéro could master ten languages. We could learn so many, but most people are happy with just bad English.

BC: How many languages do you have?

SF: Only three: Arabic, French, and English. I wish I could read German. When I was younger, everything important—literature, archaeology, poetry—was in German. Each time we lose one language, we become poorer. People think they're getting richer. They're getting poorer by the minute.

BC: When it comes to poetry, in which language would you prefer to read?

SF: Ideally, I would like to read everything in the language it was written in, but I can't go very far.

BC: You have worked as a translator for Post-Apollo Press, the publishing house dedicated to experimental literary works you established after moving to California with Etel in 1982. It's named after the NASA lunar mission: "therefore, we could count the years... the way we did with BC and AD," as you wrote.

SF: For instance I translated from Arabic and French into English *Rumi and Sufism* (1989) by [the French doctor of Islamology] Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch. I have translated poetry, which I somehow find easier, because it relies on vocabulary much less than prose does. With poetry you have to be exact, you cannot be approximate. And I should add that translation is so important—we would know nothing about history without translations—but it's the least well-paid job I can think of.

BC: You have moved through many different cultures, so you are a kind of traveling translation yourself. What did you bring along?

SF: Things pile up; they don't replace each other. It's not either-or, it's one plus one plus one, and it gives you what they call experience, or knowledge. Anyway, it's very interesting.

BC: Do you think one can translate images?

SF: I read about Ulysses, and then I make a *Ulysses*, so in a way I do, yes. I translate my ideas and my knowledge of him in one image. An image is syncretic—it can achieve in a moment what many pages might be unable to describe. It provides quick and strong information that stays in your mind. In the end the result is the same, but to read a whole book you need a lot of patience. With *War and Peace* (1869) by Leo Tolstoy, for instance, in the end you will have an extremely good picture, but you'll need an entire winter! What a wonderful book, the best of the best, most certainly!

BC: When I read it I was so young, I had no idea about love, war, society. It was the discovery of many planets.

SF: It's just a fragment of the age of Napoleonic wars, but also much more than that, when you think about the temporal element. Managing to include time in a work is so important. In the installation at Punta della Dogana, by sculpting the angels as moving, you insert time. But with the encounter between two persons at the center—*The Meeting* (2018)—you stop movement and condense time into one single moment, so there is this dialectic. You can ask anybody to recall when they first met their friend, husband, love. They all know exactly, even if it happened fifty years ago. That extraordinary vivid moment gels into one image, one story. That's what art is supposed to be: that *coup de foudre*.

BC: Is there any element of autobiography in your figures of couples and encounters?

SF: Who knows? Ah! [laughs]

BC: This is a question I really wanted to ask you: Can we talk about love?

SF: Talking about love is hard, because it's very private. You don't want to share your emotions, show yourself as vulnerable, without any defense.

BC: Even talking about loving art can be embarrassing. It's difficult to admit that you really, deeply love something.

SF: How come you love a certain painting so much? You may know nothing about the painter's life, or even their name, and still you feel an extraordinary relation unfolding. How is it possible? It's because good artists put their life in a painting. They do not paint the same scene again and again, but it's always their existence that goes into it. And therefore this charge, this current of feelings and experience, comes to you and you're able to catch it.

BC: Are you saying that art moves things that we are not able to articulate otherwise?

SF: It's a side of the psyche that we don't even know. I saw some paintings by Vincent van Gogh that were so strong, to me, that I was about to faint. I felt his sorrow and despair. It took me like a shot to my head. He put this in every single painting. If you are able to feel it at a given moment, you are in a relationship.

BC: Did you decide to move from painting to sculpture when you felt the need to find some distance, or detachment?

SF: It was not conscious. I was a painter and I had to stop, and when I started again I took up sculpture. But I had already started doing assemblage, so I was already moving out of the frame. Then I went back to painting again. But it's not that I go backward or forward, I just do something else. You need to have many different media. I do collage, I do watercolors. It's not a decision. My paintings are very different from my sculptures. They are even more abstract. They don't come from the same place.

BC: What do you mean?

SF: I don't say the same things. When I started working with clay, I got in touch with something primal. All these archetypal types that I had not been thinking about before came to me like apparitions: first Adam and Eve, then Ishtar, Dionysus, Apollo, Ulysses, Demeter. One brought the other, and then whole stories unfolded. It's like when you are painting and start a new series: there is one canvas, and then another, until the series is finished. Except in this case it's not finished, I'm still in the middle of it.

BC: Carl Gustav Jung believed that the ancient gods sought refuge inside of us, deep down, and morphed into our pathologies.

SF: They always had very definite qualities, like Venus, who ruled over love. All were destroyed by monotheism, where a single god has all such qualities together or none at all, because it's indescribable. Somehow they have survived in saints like Saint Anthony of Padua, who would return to you something you have missed, Saint Rita if you are sick, or Saint Joseph, who protects carpenters. Humans are poor in front of the universe and when they get sick, or afraid to die, they realize they need help. The gods are there to tell them: never mind.

BC: At the Freud Museum in London, Sigmund Freud's studio is still occupied by the dozens of statuettes of ancient gods and goddesses that he kept with him. It's an incredible family, or pantheon, that suggests how each one of us is inhabited by many different entities.

SF: You have all these needs in you. Old gods were intelligent, in tune with such needs. They were at least helpful. *[laughs]*

BC: You go toward the gods yourself, somehow, by feeding your need to read mystical and religious texts.

SF: I don't know, I had no idea these figures would come to me. There is the beautiful Apollo, there is Dionysus, and Demeter. They are forces of nature, and you want to be in communication with these forces that take the form of this transcendental man.

BC: Or woman.

SF: Or woman, yes. Sure!

This conversation took place on September 24, 2019, in Venice, where the artist was invited to Teatrino di Palazzo Grassi for a talk with Mouna Mekouar, co-curator of the exhibition at Punta della Dogana, and Lorenzo Giusti, director of GAMEC, Bergamo. It continued in Milan two days later on the occasion of Fattal's opening at Kaufmann Repetto.