

Creators

AFRICAN ART

Morocco's Anti-Colonial "Moon King" Lives—Inside This Artist's Memory

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Jun 18 2017, 12:45am



Mounir Fatmi, "Across the Moon" (2017)

Mounir Fatmi explores postcolonial memory through three artifacts from his childhood in 1970s Morocco

Moroccan-born artist Mounir Fatmi has broken the African continent's North/South divide, launching *Fragmented Memory*, his first solo exhibition in Johannesburg. A small collection of sculptures, photographs, and installations explores the ways in which culture, history, and memory have shaped the artist's identity. Central to the exhibition are three artifacts from Fatmi's childhood home in 1970s Tangier, Morocco: a copy of the Quran, a photograph of a king, and a calligraphic painting.

"It had always been displayed in my house, and until the age of five I thought it was a photo of someone in our family. We didn't have a photo of my father on the wall, but we did have a photo of the moon king," Fatmi laughs.



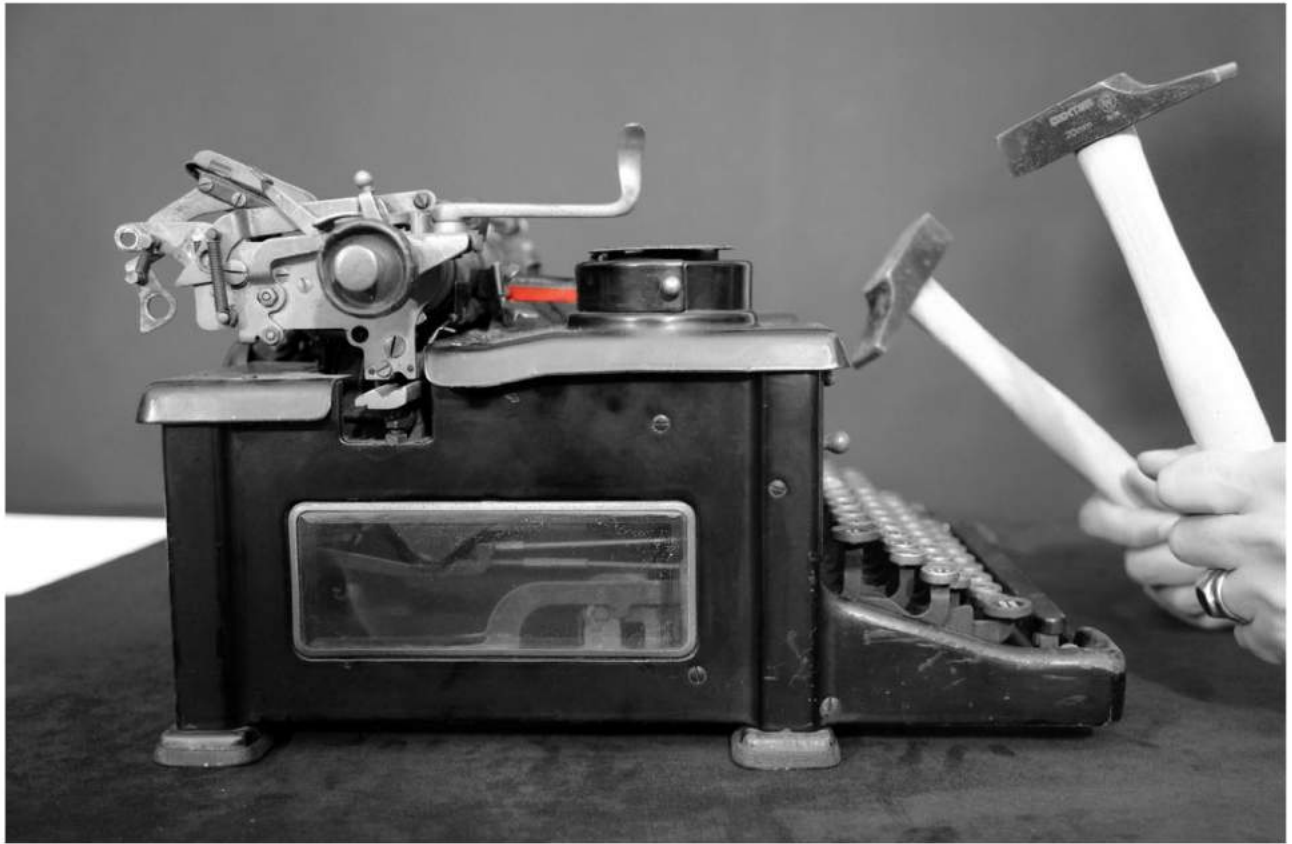
Mounir Fatmi, *Across the Moon* (2017)

He goes on to tell the story of Mohammed V, the Sultan and later the King of Morocco, who negotiated the country's independence from France and Spain in 1956. Prior to this, while the king was in exile in Madagascar, Moroccan nationalists orchestrated what the artist describes as a "collective hallucination," where people reported seeing Mohammed V's face on the moon.

"Distributing images of the king, the nationalists told the people to look at Mohammed V's face for one minute and then to close their eyes and look at the moon," says Fatmi, who likens the use of the king's image as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance to that of Nelson Mandela in South Africa. "I try to explain how just one image can change the meaning of what actually happened... It's a part of a puzzle, a puzzle of my history and at the same time a puzzle of the story of Morocco and our fight for independence."

Fatmi's exhibition is part of a wider drive by Goodman Gallery director Liza Essers—herself the child of a Libyan migrant—to bring together artists from across the continent. "I seek to provide a platform for collapsing the colonially constructed Northern and Southern Africa divide," explains Essers. "The link between artists working in these diverse regions is the way in which they are tackling their heritage as categorized through colonial inventions and how new stories are being unearthed and retold in various non-Western modes."

The artist also looks at the relationship between language and memory, including a piece in which copies of the Quran in French, English, and Arabic are placed on weighing scales, with a large steel sculpture with Arabic letters carved out of it, the cut outs lying on the floor below.



Mounir Fatmi, *History is not mine* (2013)



Mounir Fatmi, *Fragmented Memory*

The artist explains that he doesn't have a mother tongue, as he learned Arabic and French at the same time. For Mounir, this is but another hallucination. "In the post-colonial period, people are always talking about the Arab world. But we all speak different dialects... so it doesn't exist. There is no Arab world. Nor is there a Muslim world. We are not just one place with one language and one religion. It's much more complex."



Mounir Fatmi, *Fragmented Memory* installation view

You can see Mounir Fatmi's *Fragmented Memory* at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg until July 8. Visit his website [here](#).