

# Kader Attia's Work Holds a Mirror to the World's

## Injustice. By Naomi Polonsky, 2019

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A cluster of snails are glued, like barnacles on a ship, to a disused metal post, which stands in a field of dry grass, a shabby apartment block looming in the background. In the photograph, *Snails* (2009) by French artist Kader Attia, the molluscs are not a culinary delicacy served on a platter with garlic butter, but a symbol of the squalor and degradation of the Parisian suburbs. Attia has a talent for verbal and visual puns, for linking seemingly disparate things and giving them new meanings. He mines history, politics, literature, religion, art, anthropology, and medicine and finds echoes everywhere: between the facial scars of World War I veterans and members of African tribes, between the emotions roused by authoritarian dictators and jazz singers, between a Congolese "sickness mask" and Edvard Munch's "The Scream." But there is nothing distanced or clinical about Attia's method. The current retrospective of his work at London's Hayward Gallery, aptly named *The Museum of Emotion*, proves the artist's simultaneous capacity for academic rigor and emotional depth.

*The Museum of Emotion* begins in the suburbs — or *banlieues* — of northeast Paris, where Attia grew up. It is a bleak and brutalist place. The snails are the only living beings in an urban landscape dominated by grey cement blocks. In the 2018 video work "La Tour Robespierre (The Robespierre Tower)," the camera slowly and shakily rises up a concrete tower block, story by story, revealing the minute differences of decor on an otherwise monolithic facade. The work is mesmerizing and claustrophobic. Another video piece, "Oil and Sugar #2" (2007), shows a stream of black oil dissolving a mountain of sugar cubes, which glimmer disgustingly in the sun. The wall label explains: "For Attia the modular form of these sugar cubes recalls the archetypal form of modernist architecture — the white cube — as well as the Kaaba, the black shrine at the centre of the Grand Mosque, in Mecca." Contemporary global trade, twentieth-century European architecture, and ancient Islamic devotional practice all converge on the tiny and unassuming television screen. Nearby Greek mythology enters the scene,

in an installation comprising a concrete block suspended over a mirror, wittily titled “Narcissus.”

In the next gallery is one of Attia’s best known works, “La Piste d’atterrissage (The Landing Strip),” a photographic series of a group of Algerian transgender sex workers living in Paris in the late 1990s and early 2000s, firmly on the margins of society. The snapshots, which are scattered across the wall as though stuck in the pages of a scrapbook, are by turns joyous and vulnerable. The title comes from the nickname given to the street on which the women work, but also connotes both migration and pubic grooming. Individual portraits of these women are also dotted around the rest of the exhibition: when we first enter we are greeted by Mounira from Oran, who jogs towards us gleefully in a green belly dancing outfit stuffed with banknotes. As we exit, we see Djamila from Maghnia standing on a street corner in leopard print shorts and PVC boots.

Attia, who himself is of Algerian heritage, has often explored the treatment of colonial subjects in contemporary France. In the video work, “The Body’s Legacies, Pt. 2: The Postcolonial Body,” a number of interviewees, including a journalist and an academic, discuss the “Affaire Théo,” the legal case concerning a young French-Congolese man called Théo Luhaka, who was attacked by four policemen outside Paris in 2017. Attia creates a kind of oral history of the event, documenting the legacy of this violent encounter from a number of different perspectives.

This process of memorialization is also at play in “Shifting Borders” (2018). In the three videos, survivors, academics, mental health professionals, and traditional healers talk about traumatic political events in East and Southeast Asia, such as the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea, in which over 600 people were killed by government troops. Amongst the screens are a number of chairs on which are seated pairs of old-fashioned prosthetic legs. For the artist, they are a symbol of the “material and immaterial scars” left by wars, famines and genocides.

Broken bodies appear elsewhere in Attia’s work. In “The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures” (2012), a full-room installation which resembles an enormous archive, Attia compares the different attitudes to facial scarring in Europe and Africa. On industrial shelves, images of soldiers after rudimentary plastic surgery are placed

alongside African masks and busts with intentionally visible scars, as well as vintage photographs, newspapers and books, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss's work of Structuralist anthropology, *La Pensée sauvage* (*The Savage Mind*). Attia's installation is as much about how we present objects, as about the objects themselves. It is a museum display about museum displays.

Towards the end of the exhibition hangs a work called "Repaired Broken Mirror" — a mirror with a big slit down the middle, which has been stitched back together with wire. It is a fitting metaphor for Attia's work generally. The artist holds a mirror up to the world, exposing it in all of its ugliness and injustice. But despite the grotesque visions of ourselves which we see reflected back, there is hope of repair. Attia wants the world to be a better place and tries to make this happen through his erudite, emotional, devastating art.

Published on [www.hyperallergic.com](http://www.hyperallergic.com)