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2010

Adel Abdessemed: The Future of Décor [Exhibition Catalogue]

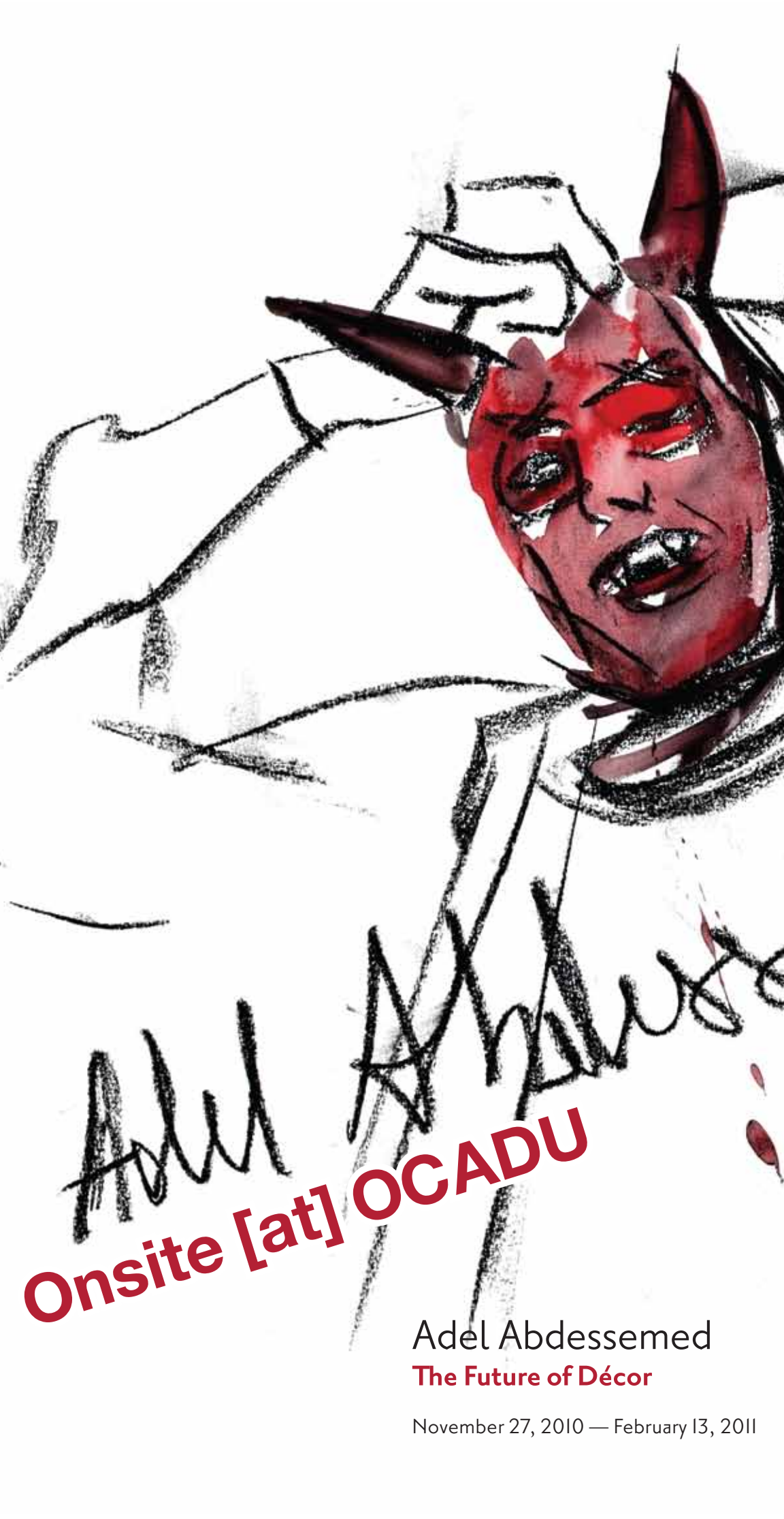
Reeve, Charles

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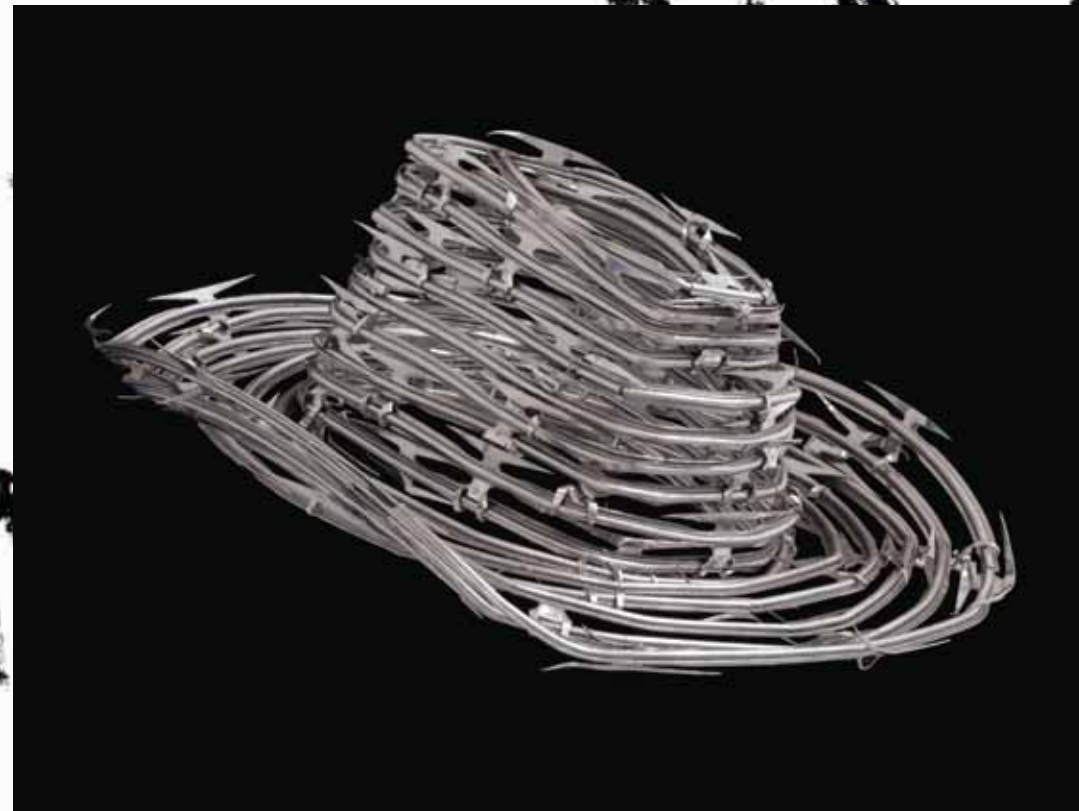
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Adel Abdessemed
The Future of Décor

November 27, 2010 — February 13, 2011



Events

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 25

8:00 p.m. OCAD University Auditorium.

Talk by Adel Abdessemed.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 26

7:00 to 10:00 p.m.

Exhibition Opening Reception.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 2

6:30 p.m.

Exhibition Tour with Curator Charles Reeve

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 1

7:00 p.m. in Jackman Hall at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Lecture by Philippe-Alain Michaud, curator of film and video at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and author of several books including *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* (Zone Books, 2004). Supported by the French Consulate in Toronto.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 3

6:30 p.m. OCAD University Auditorium.

Lecture by Susan Buck-Morss in conjunction with the Faculty of Art's "Art Creates Change" lecture series. Susan Buck-Morss is a Professor in Cornell University's Department of Government and author of numerous books including *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, *The Dialectics of Seeing* and, most recently, *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History*.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 18

Visit www.ocad.ca/onsite for details.

Colloquium: Trauma as Cultural Phenomenon.



COVERS: FUTURE OF DÉCOR, 2010
WATERCOLOUR AND PASTEL DRAWING

LEFT: HAT, 2010
RAZOR WIRE

RIGHT: EXIT, 1996
BLUE NEON

All images courtesy of the artist
and David Zwirner, New York.

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Adel Abdessemed

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Doubt doesn't come easily, especially when it disturbs something fundamental. Doubting that Toronto will be warm in January is one thing. But doubting that what we believe to be good merges with what we know to be true — as Adel Abdessemed invites us to do — that's another story.

For instance, though we love to think otherwise, the care we shower on our pets hardly typifies our relationships with animals. Starting from what we kill and pulp to feed our cats and dogs, a mind-boggling level of violence toward animals supports our demands for shelter, clothing, food, waste disposal, and so on.¹ But that train left the station millennia ago. The bulldozers that built our cities won't suddenly start flattening them so that the displaced wilderness can return. Streets and buildings belong there now, which is why in Adel Abdessemed's photograph *Sept Frères* (2006), the boars look incongruous, not the urban fabric. Indeed, without the artist's apparatus surrounding them, the boars would be shot — a fate befalling thousands of their comrades in an inversion of Darwinism whereby the boars' adaptability becomes a jinx that gets them killed.²

The incongruity depicted in *Sept Frères* of animals in the urban environment returns several times in Abdessemed's

work, as in *Jasmine* (2009) and *Séparation* (2006). These works disturb our expectations only mildly and, in each case, that disturbance plays against an understated but undeniable lyricism. The tentativeness of the boars in the mid-ground, the stillness of the lion that Abdessemed hugs, the nonchalant beauty of the dog and her pups — these elements turn the incongruity back on itself, as the animals seem to take the unexpected in stride better than we do.

Not surprisingly, given their shared atavistic basis, the incoherence that marks our attitude toward death — we love animals so much that we can't stop killing them — also characterizes our attitude toward sex. On the one hand, how can we not feel good about reports of enlightened men in North America and Europe banding together to fight pornography, and not feel outraged by Silvio Berlusconi's antics with underage women?³ Yet this stance contrasts sharply with surveys of Internet usage showing that the on-line porn industry yields more revenue than Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo! and Apple combined.⁴ This disjunction feeds the unease that surrounds Abdessemed's *Real Time* (2003), a video of a performance in which the artist filled a gallery with strangers he brought together solely to have sex with each other, en masse and in public (perhaps raising the stakes of Andrea Fraser's notorious *Untitled* [2003], which documents her having sex with a collector who paid \$20,000 for the privilege).⁵

Ranging thematically from the subtlety and sentimentality of *Sept Frères* to the bombast and outrageousness of *Real Time*, Abdessemed's art also explores media varying from drawing and photography to film, video, ceramics, and more. His sculptures, for instance, incorporate such unorthodox materials as cannabis and — as with the cowboy hats in this show, or his soccer balls of a few years ago — razor wire. However, as Massimiliano Giono points out, this chaos

LEFT: SEPT FRÈRES, 2006
INKJET PRINT

MIDDLE: REAL TIME, 2003
VIDEO PROJECTION

RIGHT: TELLE MÈRE TEL FILS, 2008
INSTALLATION

springs from desperation, not ecstasy. Contrasting the alter egos of Marcel Duchamp and Alighiero Boetti to that of Abdessemed, Giono writes, "Certainly it is a sign of our times if an artist, instead of creating a joyful, sensual alias such as Rose Sélavy, or splitting into two in the case of Alighiero and Boetti, is forced to give birth to a monster like MohammedKarlipot."⁶

Giono's reference is to an alter ego that Abdessemed created in 1999, merging a few ideologues who have shaken the world: Mohammed, Karl Marx, Pol Pot. The calamity evoked by these names, and the fact that this list could include many others, point to Abdessemed's affinity with other contemporary artists — Sharon Hayes, Ei Arakawa, Michael Krebber — who find such ideals as paradise, nostalgia and utopia wildly anachronistic. As the current trend toward "reasonable" restrictions on immigration make clear, exemplified by German chancellor Angela Merkel's declaration that multiculturalism has failed, nothing undercuts the ideology of tolerance more completely than the rising insistence on its triumph.⁷ Today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism, as Slavoj Žižek notes, wants an "Other deprived of its Otherness."⁸ In the space created by neo-Fascism, mainstream politicians endorse "reasonable" restrictions on immigration — as if Hitler didn't use the same rhetorical move in *Mein Kampf*.⁹

However, if Abdessemed's process of turning, overturning and turning back received opinions reaches out to current artistic and social contexts, it also reaches in to an august cultural legacy in Algeria of questioning things as they are: from the writing of Augustine of Hippo in the 4th and 5th centuries to the art and literature of Albert Camus, Frantz Fanon, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, and Rachid Ouramdane in the 20th and 21st centuries.

These historical and contemporary affinities speak to a thematic and formal richness that characterizes

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Constantine, Algeria, in 1971 and educated at L'École nationale des Beaux-Arts (Lyon) and Cité Internationale des Arts (Paris), Adel Abdessemed exploded onto the international art scene in the mid-1990s as France's most exciting artist in over a decade. His expansive practice incorporates drawing, video, ceramics, performance, installation and other media into a visual language that ranges from subtle and sentimental to bombastic and outrageous, often probing the awkward gap between what we believe to be good and what we know to be true. He has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions around the world, including at the 2007 and 2009 Venice Biennials, the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Guangzhou Institute for Contemporary Art, P.S. 1, and MIT's List Center for the Visual Arts. He is represented by David Zwirner and divides his time between New York, Paris, and Constantine.

Abdessemed's art, and that is at work in the pieces in this show. Consider, for example, the three cowboy hats, fashioned from razor wire and suspended from the ceiling. The cowboy hat becomes a crown of thorns, evoking the interaction between steel and skin that gives razor wire the historical significance that distinguishes it from its precursor and close relative, barbed wire. While barbed wire spoke to modernity's need for a material that could cut across geography and into animals and then into people, razor wire restricted its paranoia to people — either keeping "dangerous" persons in concentration camps and prisons, or keeping them out of private property or foreign countries.¹⁰

The razor wire's silence in the gallery thus contrasts with its cacophonous history — a saga of war, strife, fear and danger. The chaos of the show's title work, an Onsite commission made with Abdessemed's frequent collaborator David Moss, reflects our contemporary context back to itself rather than offering an escape from it. The looping pandemonium bouncing off the gallery walls makes us long for its opposite, for the very thing that our current context of spectacle and violence makes impossible. In the gallery, as in the wider world, we find fewer and fewer reserves of the one thing that facilitates doubt and its companion, contemplation: fewer and fewer reserves, that is, of silence.

— Charles Reeve

ENDNOTES

¹ Summarized in eye-watering detail in the opening of *Killing Animals*, The Animal Studies Group, ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

² Catherine Vincent, "Survival of Europe's fittest," *Guardian*, October 19, 2010.

³ Wendy Leung, "More Men Are Speaking Out Against Pornography," *Globe and Mail*, November 2010; Maria Laura Rodota, "Silvio Berlusconi's sex antics disgust me and other Italian women," *Observer*, November 7, 2010.

⁴ Gilbert Wondracek et al., "Is the Internet for Porn?" Ninth Workshop on the Economics of Information Security, June 2010.

⁵ John Menick, "Andrea Frazer at Friedrich Petzel Gallery," *Parachute* no. 116.

⁶ Massimiliano Giono, "In the Name of the Father," *Flash Art* no. 265 (March-April 2009).

⁷ "Merkel: German multiculturalism has failed," www.euronews.net/2010/10/17/merkel-german-multiculturalism-has-failed/.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, "Human face masks same old barbarism," *Guardian*, October 8, 2010.

⁹ Adolph Hitler *Mein Kampf*, Ralph Mannheim, trans. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

¹⁰ Reviel Netz, *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009).