

Algerian artist Kader Attia tackles conflicted identities in his latest exhibition

Posted By [Sawsan Al-Abtah](#) On July 18, 2014



A general view of Algiers with the Kasbah in the background taken on June 5, 2014.
(FAROUK BATICHÉ/AFP/Getty Images)

Beirut, *Asharq Al-Awsat*—A precondition for visiting the *Contre Nature* exhibition featuring work by Algerian artist Kader Attia is that you must don appropriate footwear. At the entrance of the exhibition held in the Beirut Art Center the artist has placed scrap metal, tires, parts of tanks, satellite dishes, and doors so that visitors are forced to scramble across the debris on their way to the rest of the displays.

But this initial clamber sets the scene for the show and helps visitors to understand the theme and significance of the collection. Each spectator will have to think carefully before stepping forward if they are to cross the booby-trapped passageway successfully. The piece titled *Kasbah* (2009) was inspired by the 'Kasbah,' or citadel, built by Algerian laborers under the French occupation.

Attia himself was born to an Algerian family in Paris and spent much of his childhood between France and Algeria. He is now based out of Berlin.

As for the scrap used in the installation, they are from a Kasbah of a different kind; the fragments were collected from a Palestinian refugee camp. It emphasizes the necessity of salvaging, repairing and reorganizing in order to move to a new reality.

If you make it across this hazardous walkway—and this is no exaggeration as it is easy to stumble on the uneven paving—you will enter a stylish, well-illuminated room full of pieces that show certain dualities and contrasts. A lute is displayed with a helmet in its circular heart. Photographs show old houses and modern skyscrapers. Collage is deemed the closest technique to the artist's heart, perhaps because it most starkly shows off the contradictions and the restoration he wants to express.

The exhibition, which runs until August 22, lacks a unity of ideas, and Kader Attia, who studied philosophy, seems to be immersed in this vague creativity.

One of the most striking pieces is of artificial legs arranged in a circular form so they look like rays of the sun but at the same time they are reminiscent of violent wars where limbs are torn off and later restored. There is also the circle surrounded by winding nails that suggests savagery and torture.

Colonialism, the ideologies that came with it, and the way occupied countries were treated and viewed, are all displayed in the exhibition. It appears that Attia is first and foremost an Algerian, but his time spent in the West has led him to search ethnic identities and explore different lifestyles and cultures. He enjoys drawing comparisons between the East, Africa and the West, especially during the colonial era when foreign powers forcefully intruded on other cultures in a bid to change them.

In one of the paintings there are Eastern women in traditional dress next to others in Western outfits. In another, old, ramshackle buildings appear to want to hug a modern construction.

There are two screens where the faces of people from different ethnicities morph one into the other. A human is a human, but the nose, the mouth, the eyes and the hair all reveal different origins and environments.

Mimesis as Resistance (2013), another video installation, presents the lyrebird, a bird known for its superb ability to mimic natural and artificial sounds from its environment. In the videotape, the bird mimics the sound of a chainsaw and a camera. But again, this piece at the start of the exhibition does not seem to have any connection with the rest of the exhibits.

The heavy reliance on theories and texts—where the viewer needs to work out the links for themselves—without the provision of a visual or audible thread, other than the explanation written next to the piece, somehow detracts from the viewing experience.

Each piece has been put together through the exploration of numerous ideas, which provoke many questions: questions about colonialism and the divisions it wrought, identities and how they have been changed, violence and its repercussions. Everything in the exhibition seems so interlocked that the individual displays cannot fully express themselves.