

The Stories We Tell: An Interview with Simone Fattal



Installation view of "Thus waves come in pairs" at Ocean Space, Venice, 2023. Photo by gerdastudio. Courtesy Ocean Space and TBA21-Academy.

As a professional storyteller, there is perhaps no better history for Simone Fattal to divulge than her turbulent, inspiring own. After enduring a riotous and fraught youth in Beirut, the Damascus-born artist studied philosophy at the Ecole des Lettres before moving to Paris to attend the Sorbonne. But Fattal soon grew tired of the Western canon's confines, returning to Beirut in 1969 and abandoning her prior philosophical pursuits in favor of creation. She started working as a visual artist (initially focused on painting) and before long was exhibiting in local galleries. In 1975 the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War halted her success, and five years later she fled to California and founded The Post-Apollo Press, an experimental publishing house responsible for publishing her late partner Etel Adnan's poetry, among other innovative works.

My conversation with Fattal took place in Paris, where the artist now lives and works, shortly after her recent exhibition in Venice, “Sempre il mare, uomo libero, amera!” which was curated by Barbara Casavecchia and displayed in the deconsecrated, restored ninth-century church of San Lorenzo—now TBA21–Academy’s Ocean Space—to coincide with the 18th International Architecture Exhibition. Subjects ranged from deconsecrated churches and Fattal’s adolescent experiences with Bible-thumping nuns to *Printing out the Internet* à la Kenneth Goldsmith in 2013, Mediterranean legends, and the power of reading in a world fast losing its attention.



Portrait of SIMONE FATTAL. Photo by Kathleen Weaver.

It is hard to ignore the character of the exhibition space, which has a presence all of its own. How do you think your work interacts with the church—from the large glass balls on the floor to the sculptures in the high niches overlooking the large Baroque altar?

This is the first time I have worked in a church. It is now a cultural place, but the site was a church for a very long time, which is something one cannot forget. In many ways it still functions like a church, and while we no longer gather there for Mass it still brings people together. This church in particular is splendid and differs from many others because, despite being quite large, it remains intimate. I like Greek and Oriental churches because they tend to be smaller, allowing people to see the priest and view the interior.

For “Sempre il mare,” the planning of the artworks evolved gradually. I was initially asked to fill the church’s niches on the sides of the altar, and my immediate response was to plan a sculpture of a young boy for one of them. Niches are usually peopled with saints, angels, and political or religious figures, rather than boys. However, a scene in the Gospel has always touched me, when Jesus Christ as a young boy is arguing with the Doctors of the Law. In the other niche I decided to place a tondo (round plaque) inscribed with the ancient Greek exhortation “know thyself,” from the temple of Apollo at Delphi—a very famous historical saying. I liked the idea of a sacred place advising you to know yourself so that you can understand the meaning of life, rather than telling you to worship God.

I like how you put that. This site is still a place where we gather and perhaps expect a revelation. And though the hierarchy of the interior is erased, so to speak, in that we do not face and pray to an altar, we are nonetheless drawn to the altar by the figure of the little boy and the inscription, as if they contained some redemptive truth about how to conduct our life.

In essence, the question is: what is a church? What is religion? I believe their teachings instruct us how to conduct ourselves, how to coexist with others, and how to organize ourselves. Otherwise, there would be chaos, war, killing, and stealing. I chose this famous motto to highlight that one must first learn to govern oneself. After the installation I wondered whether I had produced enough works. Visitors would have an interesting experience because they would see more of the church’s interior than they would actual artworks; moreover, these would be dwarfed by the setting. This is what San Lorenzo did so well. It pushed visitors towards the artworks.

Your sculptures have the power to be present while remaining unassuming. They draw you in. The space is so large that it swallows them up. Not only do the works feel small, so do the visitors. And in a sense, that is the point. Speaking of vast expanses, how did the church’s location on the Mediterranean Sea impact your work?

As part of her curatorial project, Barbara Casavecchia asked me to tie my work to the Mediterranean. I chose to link it to my personal history. When you think about Venice’s crucial role, from the Medieval and Early Modern periods through to the eighteenth century, you see how critical the Mediterranean was for commerce with the Orient. The Arabs had a monopoly on sea trading and their routes ran from the Gulf to India, Indonesia, Thailand, and then from China to Syria, with ships constantly sailing back and forth. This inspired me to look at legends tied to Mediterranean culture, especially the story of Mayya and her lover Ghaylan, a couple celebrated in classic Arab poetry, folktales, and legends, with variations in every country. In the Gulf version, they both own fleets engaged in the pearl trade. Mayya’s are faster and more efficient and Ghaylan wonders how he can compete, until one day he realizes that, like a firefly, his ships can use wings and air. This leads him to invent the sailing vessel, where the wind in the sails propels the boat forward. This story shows how the cultural interactions and dialogues occurring on the Mediterranean because of commerce inspired such innovations. For this reason, my series of glass spheres manufactured in Venice are inscribed with words written in these merchants’ ancient lingua franca.



Warrior II, 2011, stoneware fired in a wood kiln, 132 × 60 × 40 cm. Photo by Francois Fernandez. Courtesy the artist.

Tell me more about this dialect. Which terms did you choose to use and why?

The language of Sabir was invented by merchants trading across the Mediterranean basin. It was part Arabic, part Greek, and part Italian. Everyone understood it and enjoyed using it. I had received a large volume of translated texts from gallerist and publisher Yvonne Lambert and randomly chose passages that spoke to me. Glass was also a crucial commodity for the Mediterranean, connecting Syria to Venice; I was especially pleased to be able to work in Venice itself, along with the artisans producing the glass spheres.

I read a conversation between you and the late Etel Adnan, in which I felt a strong current of nostalgia when you spoke about the Mediterranean. You referred to it less as a physical place than as an idea which evoked innocence, wonder, and curiosity. Today it is hard not to think of the Mediterranean as a watery grave for Black and Brown bodies.

Geographically speaking, more than half the Mediterranean is Arab. I mean, the Arab world extends from Morocco to Syria, and Greece and Egypt interacted 3,000 years before the contemporary era (i.e., the era of Christ). People seemed freer then to travel for commerce and pleasure. Just look at Ibn Battuta, who traveled for 29 years from Morocco to Mecca and other places. The Mediterranean Sea is made to be crossed.



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The Mediterranean is a kind of medium or mode of transmission; people, ideas and artifacts traverse it. Like you, I am slightly guilty of this nostalgia. You journeyed through various artistic media yourself—from painting, sculpture, and collage, to books— all of which seamlessly fuse into and inform each other.

The medium I choose at a certain time depends completely on where I am living, what is available, and what is easiest to use. When I stopped painting, I started making books. Books were my passion; I was born to read books. I was always reading as a child, never really playing with other children. Making a book is a beautiful thing, it is like making a child who goes on to make a life of their own. You know a book simply travels, it moves and you cannot stop it. It is not like a work of art that one must go to see. The freedom of a book is fascinating, and some try to control this through censorship.



Ziqqurat, 2013, stoneware fired in a wood kiln, 50 × 70 × 46 cm. Photo by Francois Fernandez. Courtesy the artist.

The fascination you have for publishing is very refreshing. Time and time again people have announced the death of the printed medium.

Print will never die; it will never go away. I know a very modern publisher here in Paris who publishes everything that is on the internet. Without print we would not know anything. For one, we would not know about the past, about the Egyptians and Sumerians. They wrote texts, and this is quite different from creating paintings. In ancient Egypt, for example, no one was supposed to see the tomb paintings meant to accompany the rulers in their afterlife. They were not intended for you and me. Writing, in contrast, is made to be visible and to last.

Tell me more about your publishing house, Post-Apollo Press. Why did you name it after the moon landing?

When humans first landed on the moon it felt like the beginning of a new era. The invention of printing was similar.

Your figurines evoke a type of archaeological display, almost as if they have been recently excavated and are the subjects of an academic study. Would you say that you are creating fictional history—one laced with poetry, perhaps?

I like talking about today with vocabulary from the past. I research past years and centuries because they speak to me. I reinvent ancient stories, of Ulysses, Mayya and Ghaylan, and of Apollo and Dionysus. I also really like abstract art. My paintings are abstract and my figures are abstractions as well. Abstraction can convey a lot with very little, which is what poetry does as well. My figures are carriers of history, of ideas, and of a past way of life. I recently picked up an illustrated book of one-page Snoopy stories and could not understand a thing. You flip the page and there is another story, so you do not bother spending any time [on one thing], an idea which is very foreign to me.



Installation view of **SIMONE FATTAL**'s "The Manifestations of the Voyage" at Portikus, Frankfurt am Main, 2023. Courtesy the artist, Balice Hertling, Paris; Greene Naftali, New York; Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna.

It is the new attention span, with brains that have rotted away.

One Thousand and One Nights consists of 16 volumes, each 1,000 pages long. This is the epic I discovered and read as a child. It is not Snoopy, you know. What was wonderful about those days was that we would go to a *hakawati* (Arabic for “storyteller”). A story was an event, not something you tried to read in your room and ended up being bored.

Netflix is the new *hakawati*.

I canceled my Netflix subscription within five minutes. I much prefer LaCinetek or Mubi.



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Apart from mythology and poetry, which appear quite strongly in your work, are there other influences today?

Politics. Etel Adan and I were terribly aware of politics. We talked about it all the time and we were very involved. I am also heavily influenced by the books and poems I read. Everyday life nourishes my work. I mean, I live and I work. It is the same thing, right?

You have referred to your childhood and your memories by the sea. Tell me about your adolescence. They seemed like formative years.

It was absolutely dreadful because I was in a boarding school, away from home; it was terrible and cold, with food so ghastly you cannot even imagine. Thank God we had good professors in mathematics, history, and literature, but life itself was horrible, truly horrible. They did not let us read good books. I remember you had to get permission to borrow a book. I asked a nun to read *Gone with the Wind* and she refused me permission. I had to read on weekends and race to finish all the chapters before the week began. Sadly, that was quite traumatic.



Installation view of SIMONE FATTAL's "Works and Days" at MoMA, New York, 2019. Photo by Matthew Septimus. Courtesy MoMA PS1.

That is not unlike my high school experience in Saudi Arabia, where I had to get permission to put on nail polish. Even exchanging books with my classmates was viewed with suspicion. We had to declare what we were exchanging. To some extent we shared the same trauma, though perhaps in varying degrees.

School is meant to give you the means, to show you the way, and then everything else comes from you. You know, a nun once told Etel Adnan that she could not draw and that she should stop.

You studied philosophy in Sorbonne; which philosopher inspired you the most?

The Existentialists, specifically Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger. Above all, however, I was drawn to Plato. Studying philosophy, you think you are going to find answers to everything, and I was shocked because I mainly discovered more questions.

Is there a line of poetry you would like to leave us with?

Baudelaire was a great art critic and he has remained a good companion. During my time in boarding school his books were always by my bedside. [So] I would like to repeat the line I used for the title of my Venice exhibition, taken from his poem “L'homme et la mer”: “Free man, you will always cherish the sea!”