

Kader Attia at the Berlinische Galerie, Berlin. 2024.
Photography by Harry Schnitger

KADER ATTIA

Ever attuned to the power of overt and subliminal histories, the artist avidly unpicks enduring inequities in his quest for creative freedom.

Words by Digby Warde-Aldam



PROFILE

Kader Attia. *La Piste d'Atterrissage (The Landing Strip)*. 2000–02. Detail. Two channels slide projection, color and sound. Image courtesy of the artist and Collection Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris



Kader Attia is an artist who understands the value of a good story. His work is full of them, often deployed as microcosmic metaphors standing in for a broader, more serious subject than might not be immediately apparent. Perhaps it is appropriate, then, that when asked about his creative sensibility, he likes to respond with an anecdote. Late one winter night, perhaps 20 years ago, he was walking home through Paris's bleak Stalingrad neighbourhood when something strange happened. "I noticed this empty can of beer, a super-strength brand associated here with serious alcoholics and drug addicts," he recalls. "The wind was blowing it down the sidewalk next to me, and it was almost as though it were following me like a little dog, for maybe 90 seconds. The wind was rattling through it so that it made a kind of whistling noise... and in that, I thought, there was a real poetry – a sublime poetry."

It's a neat way of summing up an intangible quality – a 'poetry', if you like – that runs through Attia's multifaceted,

pluridisciplinary practice like an invisible signature. He is a tricky artist to pin down, jumping between visual idioms and consciously avoiding the temptation to cleave to any emblematic style. His breakthrough pieces set a bafflingly diverse bar ever higher, taking in everything from a series of photographs of gender-nonconforming Algerians living illegally in Paris (*La Piste d'atterrissage*, 2000–02) to *Dream Machine* (2003), a vending machine full of products that he had branded with a "halal" logo, reflecting the way in which young French Muslims were effectively locked out of consumerist society at the time.

Attia has since addressed any number of societal ills and structural injustices in his art, from collages, films and installation work exploring the prison-like planning of France's peri-urban social housing projects (including 2018's *La Tour Robespierre*) to *Shifting Borders* (2018) to a series of videos investigating the nature of post-traumatic stress disorders in Southeast Asia. Between 2016 and 2020, he even ran *La Colonie*, a bar-cum-



Kader Attia. *La Machine à Rêves (The Dream Machine)*. 2003. Sculpture, mannequin and vending machine with ready-made and custom-made halal objects. Photography by Kader Attia. Image courtesy of the artist

Kader Attia. *Shifting Borders*. 2018. Mixed media installation: 3-channel digital colour video on 4 screens, with sound; 7 chairs, prosthetic legs and shoes. Photography by the Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Image courtesy of the artist and the Gwangju Biennale Foundation





Kader Attia. *Mirrors and Masks*. 2024. Series of sculptures, wooden copies of African masks, shards of mirrors, glue, pigment, metal stand. Photography by Laurent Lecat. Image courtesy of the artist

events space near Paris's Gare du Nord in which marginalised or unconventional voices could make themselves heard – perhaps not strictly a work of art, but certainly a blurring of the boundaries of artistic practice.

"I struggle against adopting any aesthetic standard," he tells me when we meet at a café next to the Centre Pompidou on a wintry December morning. "I'm very instinctive when it comes to making art. I'm not interested in hitting the same grooves over and over again throughout my life." Nevertheless, whether he's working in photography, sculpture, installation, video, sculpture or in an altogether more conceptual register, his work grapples with complex historical and philosophical processes that would, in less imaginative hands, be all but incomprehensible to most gallery-goers; those elegiac, humanistic – indeed, poetic – undercurrents make even the most daunting of subjects relatable. This, it turns out, is no accident.

Born in 1970 in the tough north-eastern Paris suburbs, Attia grew up between France and Algeria, from where his parents had emigrated. The latter country had won its independence from the former less than a decade before the artist's birth, following a vicious eight-year guerrilla war in which as many as one million people were killed – the vast majority of them Algerian Muslims. The trauma of that conflict, and of the century and a half of French rule that had preceded it, hung heavy in the minds of the large Algerian diaspora in France. It seemed only reasonable to Attia that the historical trauma should be brought into the open.

However, this was not a conversation that French society was

willing to have. "Back when I started," Attia explains, "it was scandalous to talk about colonisation. I was 'cancelled' at every turn by the establishment for talking about colonialism. It was unbelievably unfashionable in France, so difficult." Things have changed, however, in no small part thanks to Attia and the handful of other artists who have dared to address the subject. Now that the colonial process and its after-effects have become mainstream topics of discussion, it's reasonable to wonder, does the artist feel vindicated?

"I'm uncomfortable with the idea of 'vindication'," says Attia. Decolonisation, he insists, is a process that did not end with former colonies winning their nominal independence from the European imperial powers: rather, it is a much wider process of breaking free from imposed thoughts and received truths. "Perhaps we need to coin new words here, to speak of 'de-modernisation'," he suggests, "because the traditional notion of the 'modern' was of an hegemonic system that transformed the world, taking in myriad administrative systems, notably with art. 'Modernity', in this day and age, is a highly problematic lie, because it contains countless blind spots, such as fascism, total certainty – [ideologies based on] reason, but segregational reasoning [...] we have to reinvent our understanding of decolonisation."

This probing of European modernity and all it has wrought is a theme that recurs frequently in Attia's art, notably in *Mirrors and Masks* (2013–15), a body of work created in response to a 2009 exhibition at the Grand Palais exploring Picasso's artistic influences. Attia was struck by the fact that while the curators



Kader Attia. *Shifting Borders*. 2018. Mixed media installation: 3-channel digital colour video on 4 screens, with sound; 7 chairs, prosthetic legs and shoes. Photography by the Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Image courtesy of the artist and the Gwangju Biennale Foundation

cited many canonical European painters, there was almost no mention of the Spanish master's debt to African sculpture, not least the carved masks incorporated into *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907).

His response was to source a number of replicas of these traditional masks, from markets in West and Central Africa, and cover them with fragments of mirror glass, the resulting pieces giving off reflections from any number of perspectives. "What interested me was re-inserting the visitor into the spectacle, in which Modernism collided with 'primitive' art from Africa and Asia, to show how non-European sculpture was in fact very modern, defying the theory of perspective and showing multiple 'zero points' – and therefore fragmenting the representational space," Attia affirms. Beyond this, there was a psycho-analytical aspect. "The mirror is the oldest manifestation of the unconscious – just think of the myth of Narcissus," he continues. "Unconsciously, you'll project yourself onto any work of art to put it into your own context, to see a part of you reflected."

Art, Attia believes, is the last truly free space left to us – and where, at the root of this place of resistance, lies the freedom – the imperative, even – to make mistakes. "Error is an important creative element," he says. "At the beginning, when I wanted to create, say, a nose or an ear or whatever, and I messed up, I'd take my tools and try to do it again. But four or five years ago, I started to wonder why I wasn't leaving these errors in place. Making a work, especially something tangible like a sculpture,

is to channel something from nothing – it's a bit like giving birth. There's a lot of pain in this channelling process, because the work resists you – it doesn't want to be birthed. And that's why there are mistakes. With experience, I learned that errors aren't really errors – they show a moment of conversation between the work and the other. Which is to say: it isn't the work of the artist, it's something else – a force, a force of resistance."

Resistance on an individual level, however, is becoming increasingly difficult to mount. Technology, Attia believes, threatens to asphyxiate any such agency. "We are surrounded by networks and messengers and social media," he says. "I call this the new colonialism, the colonialism of our time [...]. Today, our desire – I would even call it our free will – is almost totally curbed by the permanence of collected data, created by our own compliance. The problem isn't so much the collection of data as the harvesting, and to harvest you need to sow seeds. The problem today is the transformation that is engendered by technology and by techno-capitalism, and the effect on who we are."

Attia points to a Jean-Paul Sartre quote to concretise his opposition to such impacts: "[Sartre] wrote that freedom was really the scope to 'want to want'," he says. "In many respects, we no longer have the autonomy to 'want to want' [...], yet we must struggle to remain artists, to cling to this last space of liberty, to want to want, and be able to create a space of discussion through poetry, plasticity, whatever. Keep the conversation open, that is the imperative." ■