

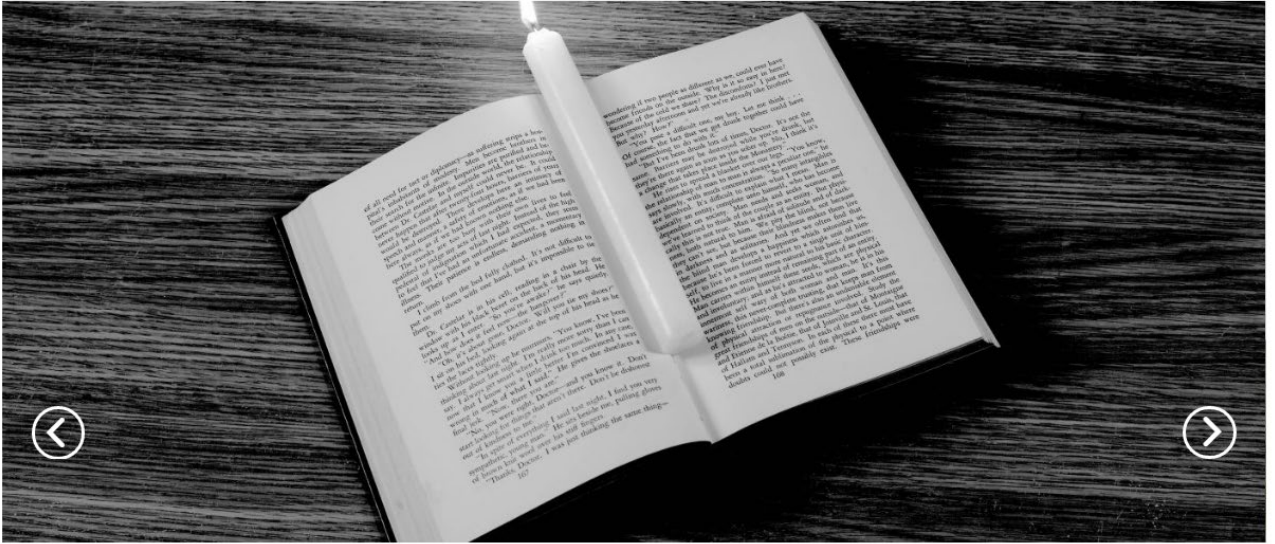


ART



RING OF FIRE

09 APRIL 2017 | ANNA WALLACE-THOMPSON



MENU +



Mounir Fatmi's work is striking for its ability to operate on both a micro and a macro level, drawing on specific historical events as well as overarching ideologies and current political and cultural event arcs. The works themselves, like the issues he brings up within them, are often cutting. *Coup* (2009), features steel saw blades engraved with lace-like filigree calligraphy. Or take, for example, *Save Manhattan* (2003-4, 2005 and 2007) in which the legacy of 9/11 is evoked through speakers, soundtracks, light and shadow, empty VHS tapes and even a series of speakers. Each of Fatmi's pieces is tinged with a hint of violence – whether hookahs with pipes mingled like a pit of snakes (*Assassins*, 2010), or the incendiary nature of books showcased to us like terrorist bombs (*Evolution or Death*, 2007).



“How would humanity choose to use this energy of knowledge and understanding? To enlighten the world or completely burn and destroy it?” - Mounir Fatmi

In his solo show at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery – his first in Dubai – *Inside the Fire Circle* (8 March – 27 April 2017), sees Fatmi draw inspiration from the life of American activist John Howard Griffin (1920 – 80). Best known for his book, *Black Like Me* (1961), Texan-born Griffin darkened his skin and travelled to the Southern states of America to experience and document what life was like for African Americans during the 1960s. With the help of Roberto Bonazzi, who looks after the Griffin archive, Fatmi has created a new series of stand alone and wall sculptures, photographic C-prints and a film that explores both Griffin's legacy, as well as the enduring issue of racial tensions, the circularity of history, and the borders that so easily separate us – white from black, poor from rich, etc. We speak with Fatmi about some of the themes and highlights of the show.



Anna Wallace-Thompson: The life of John Howard Griffin is a very specific starting point – how did it pique your interest, and why now?

Mounir Fatmi: I discovered the work and history of John Howard Griffin in 2006 when I was doing research on the Black Panther Party. I was working at the time on the notion of archives and their use in contemporary art. Reading the book *Black Like Me* completely transformed me and I began to develop ideas for videos, photographs and installations around Griffin. I also had the chance to get in touch with Robert Bonazzi, his biographer, who helped me a lot. When Lawrie Shabibi invited me to make a personal exhibition, I decided to create the whole show around him. For me to talk about Griffin and pay tribute to him is essential, especially now with this rise of extremism and racism that we see in the United States as well as Europe.

Was there a particular incident that has had you thinking about historical cycles, vis-à-vis race relations?

Unfortunately history functions as a machine that repeats itself in a cyclical way. I get the impression that most people quickly forget and that each generation creates and falls into the same problems as the previous generation. It is true that the arrival of President Donald Trump in the United States and the exit of the United Kingdom from Europe have only accentuated this feeling. It must never be forgotten that the creation of Europe was above all to prevent further wars within the European Union.

Tell us about the photo work *As a Black Man*, in which you depict Griffin from white to black through shades of grey.

This piece was the first work I did for this series of works around Griffin. Right after reading all of his books and his biography, I realised that he was a character with many nuances. The idea was also to show his transformation: a white man who decided in 1959 to blacken his skin, shave his head, and travel for six weeks in the segregationist states of the southern United States. The photographs in this series are very difficult to read. The almost monochrome and brilliant surface reflects Griffin's portrait, and works like a mirror. It accentuates the feeling that nothing is quite black or white, and there are so many nuances to see in a man. The photographic treatment of this work brings to the fore the problem of visual representation in order to define, propagate and challenge racial constructions, political representations, and the sense of belonging.

***Inside the Fire Circle* seems to draw from the work *Calligraphy of Fire*, as well as notions of burning of skin (UV to make it black), the incendiary nature of words, and the flaring up of historical events again and again. Could you expand on this?**

You are completely right. In this exhibition we have the notion that there is a fire burning. This is clearly seen in the series *Calligraphy of Fire*, in which I use a candle as an element to illuminate but also to consume and burn the author himself. We find the same feeling in front of the photographs of Griffin, who very literally burned his skin to become another and understand the dramatic situation of the American blacks in the 1960s. I wanted to highlight this double meaning that light or fire can evoke. It is a very old question that I ask myself in this exhibition: How would humanity choose to use this energy of knowledge and understanding? To enlighten the world or completely burn and destroy it? I hope that history will not repeat itself, because humanity unfortunately is more attracted to the destruction rather than the creation of the world in which it lives.