

David Zwirner

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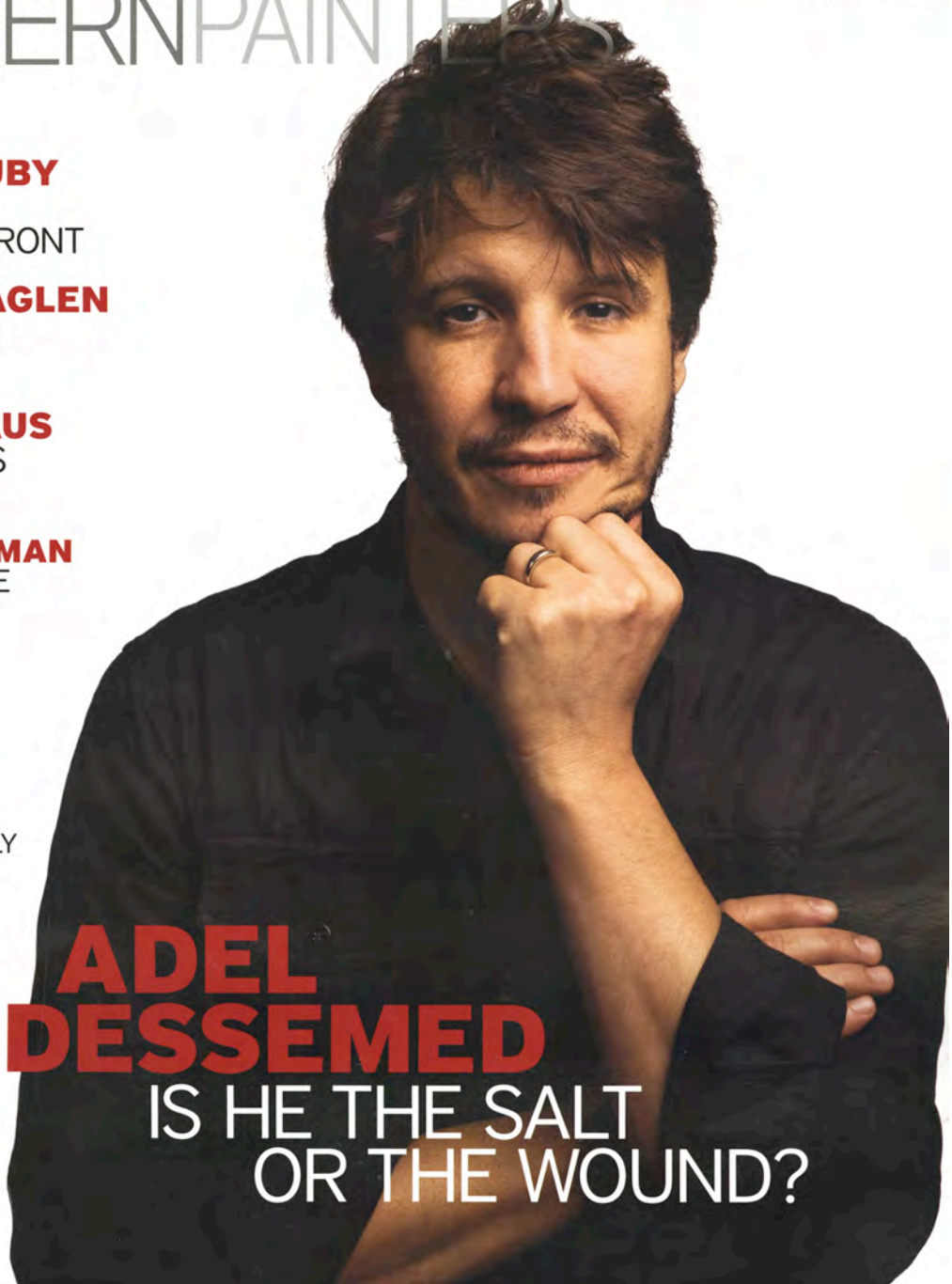


INTRODUCING

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**ADEL
ABDESSEMED**

IS HE THE SALT
OR THE WOUND?



David Zwirner

FEBRUARY

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ON THE COVER:
Adel Abdessemed, photographed in Paris by Ed Alcock for *Modern Painters*, 2012.



David Zwirner



ADEL ABDESSEMED

IS HE THE SALT OR THE WOUND?

BY COLINE MILLIARD

ADEL ABDESSEMED, ADAGP PARIS 2012, AND DAVID ZWIRNER



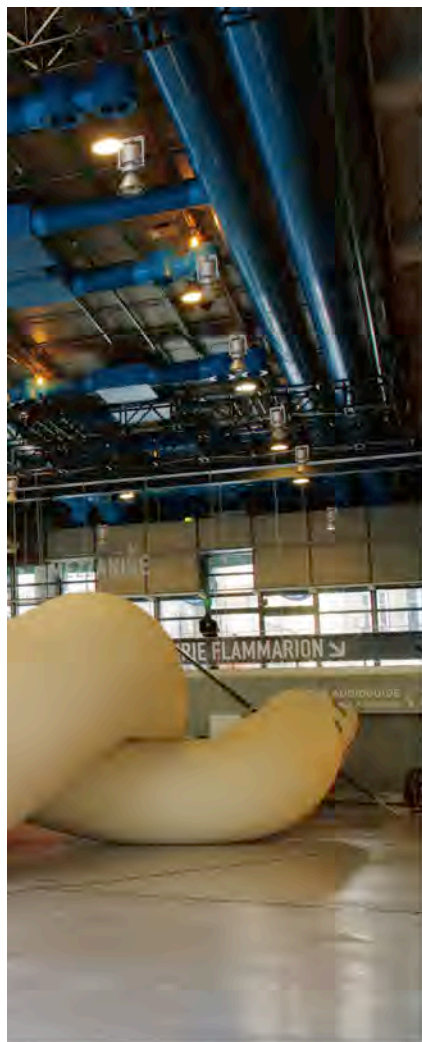
Halfway through our conversation, Adel Abdessemed dashes out of the room. He comes back, Bible in hand, and launches into Saint Matthew: "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?" There's mischief in his voice. The artist is well aware of his reputation as a provocateur; he knows that I didn't come to his studio in the 10th arrondissement of Paris expecting to hear the Gospel. "There you are, I read you the Bible," he says with undisguised glee as he claps it shut.

Abdessemed is one of France's most

successful artists in recent years. He is also one of its most controversial, acclaimed by an international cultural elite yet criticized for his sensationalism—and loathed by animal-rights activists for his unabashed use of live creatures in his work. Granted a solo show at the Centre Pompidou last year at only 41, a rare feat in conservative France, Abdessemed's presentation included short videos featuring snakes, dogs, and frogs fighting to death (*Usine*, 2008), a series of Grünewald-inspired Christs made of razor wire (*Décor*, 2011–12), and a star-shaped hashish slab, *Oui*, 2000. Outside, a 17½-foot-tall bronze statue of football player Zinedine Zidane head-butting Marco Materazzi during the 2006 World Cup final, *Coup de tête*, 2011–12,

reigned over the Pompidou plaza. Shock tactics have long been Abdessemed's trademark. Centre Pompidou director Alfred Pacquement compares his works to "punches to the viewer's face." But the exhibition's title, "Je suis innocent" ("I am innocent"), clarifies the artist's intent: Abdessemed doesn't see himself as an engineer of violence but as a reporter on the brutal reality around him. Like Pontius Pilate, he washes his hands.

"What does it mean to provoke?" the artist responds when I ask him about his methods. "What is certain is that power uses provocation to justify repression." On the cover of the Pompidou catalogue, Abdessemed is pictured standing ablaze in a Parisian street, a new Mohamed Bouazizi about to ignite the



ADEL ABDESSEMED, ADAGP PARIS 2012, AND DAVID ZWIRNER

complacent French capital. In person, though, he's soft-spoken, witty, eager to please. He takes me on a tour of his vast studio, a stone's throw from the Canal Saint-Martin. Rolled-up drawings lie everywhere, bits of sculptures and other knickknacks crowd the large trestle tables. Among the piles, I spot a blingy Star of David. A small Christ is held on the cross by two drawing pins. Abdessemed shows me the maquette for his solo show at David Zwirner, opening in London this month. Three months in advance, it's impressively resolved. "I started from England as a former empire, with the still very vivid impressions of its history and mythology," he explains. "Empire has always meant power, and power is a vicious thing."

Abdessemed envisages a large

sculptural installation, *Vase abominable*, 2012, occupying most of the gallery's ground-floor space like imperial spoils. He intends to place a 6½-foot-tall terracotta pot on a monumental plinth made from electronic scraps and bristling with dynamite sticks, as if about to be blown to pieces. Lined up on the floor against the wall will be five smaller pots made of gold, hashish, gum, clay—and salt. "It's the formal and material sign of alchemy," the artist says cryptically. "I want to deal with something that has to do with substance, in the alchemical sense of the word." Elsewhere, the royal throne has been re-created in barbed wire. Amid the euphoria of a post-Diamond Jubilee and with Britain awaiting a new royal baby, this spiky chair is sure to create a storm. I can already see the spluttering headlines splashed across the tabloids—and no doubt so can Abdessemed. The piece is entitled *Le bruit sec du vide* ("The sharp sound of void"), 2012. "I should call it L.H.O.O.Q.," he jokes with his assistant, Lisa, as he points out the piece's model to me.

This nod to Marcel Duchamp's mustachioed Mona Lisa is no coincidence. Abdessemed shares with the father of the readymade an enthusiastic iconoclasm, and Duchamp is only one of his multifarious sources. The man is a voracious cultural omnivore. Mentions of Brecht, Kafka, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, and Goya pepper his speech and his work, firmly (some might say forcefully) anchoring his practice in an artistic lineage harking back to the Lascaux paintings we end up discussing that morning. His book-lined office is crammed with volumes on literature, philosophy, and art history. On the coffee table, facsimiles of Diderot & d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* stand next to Werner Herzog's diary, *Conquest of the Useless*. Throughout the interview, Stravinsky blasts from speakers. "The references are so numerous that the work seems to hide behind them," writes Blouinartinfo France's Céline Piettre of the Pompidou show. Abdessemed is unfazed. "These artists are like my friends," he tells me. "It's only those who are scared who don't quote."

The artist is notorious for poking where it hurts. Two pieces in the forthcoming exhibition take as a starting point Richard Hamilton's celebrated triptych on the Northern Irish Troubles, the paintings picturing a Republican detainee in a shit-smeared cell at the Maze Prison (*The Citizen*, 1983–85), an Orangeman (*The Subject*, 1988–90), and a patrolling British soldier (*The State*, 1993). They resurface in Abdessemed's work as a video animation of a feces labyrinth in *State*,

2012, and as expressive wall drawings of troopers in *Soldaten*, 2012. The loyalist is gone. Talking to the artist, I angle for his views on the political background surrounding Hamilton's paintings, the Continuity IRA's recent "dirty protests" at Maghaberry Prison, or Steve McQueen's feature film *Hunger*, 2008, about Bobby Sands's 1981 hunger strike. But Abdessemed refuses to go there. "This isn't about Ireland," he says. Why then pick the scab of this still highly sensitive topic? And why pair it with such obvious—not to say facile—English subjects as the Queen and the Empire?

One can venture an answer in considering another sculpture in the show, *Cri* ("Cry"), 2012. This small statuette made of mammoth-tusk ivory features Phan Thi Kim Phúc, the naked Vietnamese girl running away from her village burning with napalm in Huỳnh Công "Nick" Ut's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph from 1972. In Abdessemed's piece the context has been erased. Frozen in the bony material, all that remains is the child's scream of sheer terror, a cry that defined the war's horror for a generation. I ask the artist how this compares with his barbed-wire Christs. "With Christ, it's a cry for the whole of humanity," he answers. "It's the cry of a son to his father. The ivory cry is the cry of wounded innocence," *Cri*, perhaps, doesn't deal with Vietnam in the same way that *State* and *Soldaten* don't deal with Ireland. The works in this show attempt to capture something of the very essence of war, of its tragic inevitability. And not only wars between nations—imperial wars, dynamite-strapped suicide bombers—but the war led by each individual as he carves out his personal history. "We are all at war," the artist says.

Abdessemed more than most. Born in Constantine, Algeria, in 1971, he grew up in the Berber town of Batna, studying art from age 16. He enrolled at l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Algiers in 1990 amid increasing terrorist unrest. Following the murder of the school's director, Ahmed Asselah, and his son, Rabah, in 1994, Abdessemed hurried to France and picked up his studies at l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Lyon. Unable to go back home for his sister's wedding in 1996, he produced *Exit*, a small neon sign spelling out *exit* (more than a decade later, versions of the piece replaced all the exit signs at Robert Storr's Venice Biennale in 2007, a modest but poignant gesture that won David Zwirner over). Abdessemed moved to the Cité internationale des arts, in Paris, in 1999 and reached New York in 2001 on a MOMA PS1 grant. The American sojourn didn't

Telle mère tel fils, 2008. Airplanes, felt, aluminum, and metal, 88½ x 13 x 16½ ft.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: FROM LEFT: *Je suis innocent*, 2012. Digital C-print, 90½ x 69¼ in.

Décor, 2011–12. Razor wire, four elements, each 82½ x 68½ x 17 in.



Cri, 2012.
Ivory, 52 1/2 in.

last. Suffocated by what he described to curator Abdellah Karroum as the “unlivable” atmosphere for people of Arab descent post-9/11, Abdessemed relocated to Paris and then Berlin before moving back to the French capital. The artist has been a Parisian for the last three years, and I sense he has itchy feet. Does he see himself as a nomad? “This is a very difficult word for me,” he says. “I sometimes feel like Joyce’s Leopold Bloom.”

Several times I have read and heard Abdessemed saying that he didn’t choose art, but that art chose him. “A monk would say that he was ‘elected,’” he told art critic Pier Luigi Tazzi in their book-long *Conversation*. It would be tempting to dismiss such a grandiloquent claim, smacking as it does of quasi-mystical predestination. But the declaration isn’t as arrogant as it first sounds. When I ask Abdessemed about it, he explains that he was raised in a very modest family, with virtually no cultural life. Yet early on he was drawn to art, creating from metal scraps toy cars he would give away to the neighborhood children. Abdessemed’s bold statement is his way of explaining an extraordinary trajectory: from Batna street kid to megacollector François Pinault’s darling, from the rushed arrival in Lyon in the 1990s to the global fame of the 2010s. The artist was even shortlisted to represent France at the Venice Biennale this summer, but the accolade finally went to

Anri Sala, who was less likely to offend the mandarins of the diplomatic intelligentsia. Postcolonial wounds are slow to heal, and it could well be that the country isn’t ready to have an Algerian-born representative, no matter how deserving.

Although Abdessemed doesn’t particularly enjoy dwelling on his past, he freely asserts that “all artworks are autobiographical.” And while most of his work gestures toward the human tragedy at large, his extensive oeuvre is often a translation of lived experiences, his own as well as others’. It’s not by chance that two of the works alluding to his mother are made with the bodies of actual airplanes, plaited together in the monumental *Telle mère tel fils* (“Like Mother, Like Son”), 2008, or

rolled up like a gargantuan pastry in *Bourek*, 2005. These not-so-subtle metaphors for displacement have a striking sculptural quality. Interweaving intimacy with disaster, they stupefy by their ambition.

The primacy Abdessemed grants to real experience and events has always been key. As a student in 1994 he filmed a

Valérie Duponchelle. “I wanted to capture the dark side of the hero, the taste of ineluctable destiny, and the resounding immediacy of an act.” In France, the national team’s captain was celebrated, and the head-butt, far from appalling the masses, made the idol more accessible, fallible, human—a man not afraid to stand up for his family (Materazzi is said to have insulted Zidane’s mother or sister). And although it wasn’t unanimously acclaimed in the press, Abdessemed’s monument was a popular hit outside the Centre Pompidou; people crowded at its feet, clutching their camera phones.

“Immoderation is one of his best allies,” writes *Le Monde*’s art critic Philippe Dagen. Abdessemed admits it: “I’m an artist who exaggerates.” It’s as if the artist were constantly trying to outdo himself. Drawing while suspended from a helicopter (*Helikoptère*, 2007), he tests the limits of his physical abilities, Matthew Barney-style; displaying illegal substances like hashish, he tests the institutions he works with. The artist also relentlessly challenges his audience, daring it to embrace his disquieting images. Abdessemed is a prolific experimenter, but his commercial success has occasionally led to a regrettable lack of editing. The most telling example is perhaps his series of barbed-wire pieces. The first, *Sphere 1*, 2006, is one of the artist’s most powerful works—a circle, scaled to the diameter of his own body, drawn on the wall with razor wire. *Sphere*’s efficiency lies in its simplicity: It conjures up an image of Vitruvian perfection with a material encapsulating agony. *Salam Europe*, 2006, embraces the same minimal aesthetic. Uncoiled, the

“What is certain is that power uses provocation to justify repression.”

young woman removing her veil in *Ombre et Lumière*—a direct response to the polemic on the Muslim veil fueled by a ministerial memorandum of the same year forbidding pupils to wear “ostentatious religious symbols” in French schools. In the wake of the riots that shook up the Paris suburbs, Abdessemed produced the life-size terra-cotta sculpture of a burnt car, *Practice Zero Tolerance*, 2006, titled after New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s motto adopted by then interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy. The shock of experience is also behind the Zidane statue. “I was hit by the violence of Zidane’s gesture on the screen,” Abdessemed told *Le Figaro*’s

gigantic roll of barbed wire measures 10 miles, the distance separating Europe from North Africa.

But Abdessemed’s work can be less convincing when, seduced by the material’s striking narrative potential, the artist succumbs to the temptation of overuse. For *Décor*, he produced four razor-wire sculptures modeled on Christ in Matthias Grünewald’s famous Isenheim Altarpiece. Here the crucified figure and the barbed wire play the same part as symbols of suffering, rendering the piece frustratingly tautological. What redeems it, though, is the number of sculptures lined up—not three for the Christian

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trinity or the three main monotheist religions, but four. This decision radically displaces the point of *Décor*. The subject of universal pain gives way to the hollowing out of an icon. As the title suggests, Christ is reduced to a mere ornament. The piece, purchased by Pinault for a rumored \$2 million, was exhibited next to the Isenheim Altarpiece at the Musée Unterlinden in Colmar last summer (at the suggestion of its owner's art adviser, former culture minister Jean-Jacques Aillagon, the local newspaper *L'Alsace* reported). In light of this second reading, it seems that what was at play in Colmar—beyond Pinault's muscle flexing—was not just an obvious art historical riff, but the contrasting of an artwork conceived to foster spiritual belief with another, negating the very principle of religion.

"My childhood was marked by terror and hatred, the terror caused by war and religions," Abdessemed confided to Tazzi. "I experienced the establishment of what was to become fanaticism." In the studio, the artist tells me he treats religions as "beautiful fables." "But they are bloodthirsty," he adds. "Humanity's tragedy comes from the three monotheist religions." The artist picks and chooses from the wealth of symbols religions provide to better undermine them. For *Joueur de flûte* ("Flute Player"), 1996, he asked an imam to play the flute stark naked, a way, he explains, "to somewhat demystify Allah." In *Vase abominable*, 2012, on view at David Zwirner, the pot made of salt is a reference to Saint Matthew's Gospel. Yet in this piece, as in *Joueur de flûte*, there is a sense that Abdessemed is looking beyond the religious folklore, continuing his probing of human tragedy. This is also noticeable in the black-and-white animation *God Is Design*, 2005, which combines freehand drawings of Moorish patterns, Stars of David, and amoeba-like cells—a mock creationist myth.

One of the most unsettling images in the Centre Pompidou exhibition was in *Usine*: One dog bites the head of another so hard it seems about to crunch its skull. Shot in Mexico, where animal fighting is legal, the video features snakes, tarantulas, scorpions, frogs, and cockerels thrown together in a pen. The gathering doesn't turn out to be as hellish as one might predict—the animals mostly attack their own species—but it remains an in-your-face expression of the need to kill to survive. Abdessemed is adamant that he never uses animals as metaphors, but looking at *Usine*—particularly in light of its title, "factory" in French—it's hard not to recognize humanity's dog-eat-dog *modus operandi*.

"I wanted to show this violence I experienced," says the artist. His work functions like a mirror, sending back to the

world its own horrifying image. *Don't Trust Me*, 2007, Abdessemed's most controversial piece to date, shows animals being slaughtered with a sledgehammer. Goat, pig, cow, and doe collapse under the dull blow. The six videos, each two seconds long, were filmed on a farm in Mexico, where this technique is routinely used. Unlike the carefully staged *Usine*, or, say, Kim Jones's infamous 1976 *Rat Piece*—in which the California artist set fire to a cage of live rats to protest against the Vietnam War—Abdessemed didn't engineer *Don't Trust Me*. He was simply there and recorded what he witnessed, he claims. "There's nothing more violent than the sledgehammer or the machete. I was talking about the hammer," he tells me. "What's the nature of the individual crime?" he asks. This philosophical stance didn't prevent the artist from coming under the fire of animal-rights activists, who managed to get his 2008 exhibition at San Francisco Art Institute shut after only five days, dubbing *Don't Trust Me* an "animal snuff video." There were similar protests in Turin, Italy, the following year, when the piece was shown at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo. Then again, the artist isn't beyond teasing his detractors—the piece's title is once more revealing.

For all its unapologetic sensationalism, it's clear that Abdessemed's art has a knack for getting under one's skin. *Don't Trust Me* is an actual chunk of reality—not a representation of the world but a Duchampian re-contextualization of something it would be easier to ignore. Abdessemed wants to touch, to cut through the entertainment culture's deafening hubbub, even if that means borrowing some of its tropes. And despite the often heavy

production involved—dismissed by the *New York Times's* grande dame Roberta Smith as "expensive spectacle"—a raw emotion transpires. "I'm an artist of acts," Abdessemed has said. "I don't tamper with my images. It's a gesture, it's a cry." For philosopher Emmanuel Alloa, the Abdessemed cry is like Pan's: directed at nothing, demanding nothing but a disruption from the prevailing torpor. The artist has no illusion as to art's ability to make a difference. "An artwork has never caused the fall of a state," he tells me matter-of-factly. "But this doesn't mean I'm not a militant—I am, more than ever." MP

BELOW:
Abdessemed's
Paris studio,
2012, with the
pedestal for *Vase
abominable* in
the foreground.

Coup de tête,
2011–2012. Bronze,
17½ x 11½ x 7 ft.

