

TRANSCRIPT

Hear, Now
Episode 12

Simone Fattal:
Finding a Way

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

JS: Hello, and welcome to *Hear, Now*, a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the gallery here in the heart of East London. Each episode invites a curator to be in conversation with artists, collaborators and other thinkers about the works and themes explored in the displays, giving you special access to the ideas that shape the artworks. My name is Jane Scarth, Curator of Public Programmes, introducing you to today's episode featuring Whitechapel Gallery curator Laura Smith in conversation with artist Simone Fattal about her new commission at the gallery, her first solo presentation in the UK, a ceramic environment in which elements of an ancient landscape appear throughout the space alongside her characteristic ceramic figures embarking on a spiritual and physical metamorphosis. The exhibition, *Finding a Way*, is free to view in gallery two and is on display from 21 September 2021 until 15 May 2020.

LS: Hello everyone. My name is Laura Smith and I'm one of the curators at Whitechapel Gallery, and I'm thrilled to be talking today with Simone Fattal whose exhibition just opened in our commissions gallery at Whitechapel. So I thought we'd start this conversation with talking about how your thoughts for the commission came about, Simone.

SF: Well, it took some time for me to find the actual subject of the commission because a commission is not always what you were expecting to do or what goes into the flow of your work. You have to pause and actually decide for a body of work that would be a whole statement of its own, and you have to think about the place it's going to be in, and I think the Whitechapel Gallery space is a wonderful big space. And there were some elements that could not be moved so I had to work around it. I had many, many ideas until I found the actual plot, if I can say that. I followed to do what I am

showing here. The pandemic was one element of my thinking because people during these two years, it's practically two years that people have been shocked and relegated to their homes, and they had to think over their lives. Many people wanted to change what they were doing and where they were living and how they were doing all that. So my focus was to actually... it's going to be grand, but it's like the human condition, you are on a way, on a journey in your life and whatever happens on the way you have to go on and you have to find whatever can help to do this. So I devised the body of work that you can see.

LS: And the exhibition is called Finding a Way, and when you enter it you see five figures. The biggest works in the exhibition are five new figures, four made of ceramic and one made of bronze, embarking on a journey. Could you tell us a bit about the title and the journey that they are on?

SF: Yes. So to express that personal journey that every one of us has to do I devised a procession. The five figures represent all of us. One or many. And you can identify with the quest. It's not really a quest for something like a career or a better way. It's a quest for being yourself, finding yourself. So the four men are advancing, and I put on both sides of this procession a few elements that will accompany them which are the psyche, like the ziggurat, for instance. I put a ziggurat because it's presented in Babylon not only the temple of the gods but the link between earth and sky. And when you reach the top you could see yourself, and that was like know yourself before the Greeks. This symbol I thought was important because actually this is what the installation is about. Know yourself. Know yourself and go on.

LS: So the journey is a spiritual journey as well as a physical one.

SF: Yes. Well, that's what we do. Everything you do in life is both spiritual and physical. You can't take away soul from body and vice versa. There's always been this discussion about body and soul and it's a stupid discussion. We are one. One doesn't exist without the other. We haven't seen the soul going up there. Probably it will. But we are here. This is what I want to say: we are here and we have to go on and we have to find help on the way, and the help cannot come except from your own self.

LS: Another of the elements that the figures are walking past or that exist in their psyche are the stele, the carved standing stones, architectural pillars. Could you talk about those?

SF: Yes. The stele, it's something which has always interested me in my work. I have done quite a few. Because I see them in archaeological sites. Inside the city there's always landmarks, moments of memories. Here you have plaques on buildings saying this happened there, this happened there. And the stele represents this. They are written on. There's one which is octagonal, it's exactly a copy of an Assyrian one that exists in the British Museum, and it's all written on it. So people like to write from the beginning of time so they could put their mark and people could remember what they were, how they were, what they were doing. In this case I chose to write representations of the cosmos, the translation into a little ideogram, into a square or writing or a sentence. It's landmarks on the way. And also you remember what's written on there, like a talisman can work for you. You know, you wear your loved one's hair around your neck or his latest love letter. But in this case it's things you want to remember.

LS: Speaking of memories, you've also included in the exhibition some etchings, which are not new works but they were commissioned a couple of years ago by Sébastien Delot. A different commission. But you chose to include them here. And they're based on your memories of Damascus, which is where you were born.

SF: Yes. I wanted to include them because I identify with those men. I put what I have in my own psyche, which is of course the city of Damascus where I was born, and that commission again was completely free. Sébastien Delot did not ask me to do anything on a theme that was prescribed. So it came to me that I will be doing those etchings as plans of the city of Damascus. I had seen this exhibit in the Louvre about etchings in the 17th century where the engraver, the artist had to represent exactly the city planning, the walls surrounding the city for military purposes. So they had to be exact, and they ran like rectangular shapes around the walls. They were very long. Mine are not so long. I went as far as I could that the press could take. It was a very interesting exercise to actually represent what you remember and try to be exact at the same time. So the elements of architecture put together, and they represent Damascus exactly not, but the idea of it. This is what abstract art is about. It's so interesting because it represents the idea of everything and it summarises it and presents it in a way that you can decipher easily because it talks to you without encumbering with details and things that you don't need.

LS: Yeah, the etchings, they feel at the same time very personal but also available to everybody, and quite powerful for that.

SF: Thank you. Yeah, there's the entrance to Damascus where you have gardens on one side and the river on the other. It doesn't exist so much today, but it was famous for that. The

hill overlooking the city, because it was a ritual for people who visited the city to go up there to look upon the city from that hill, and that was a site that was talked about in poems, praised for its beauty, because Damascus is an oasis, and it was surrounded with gardens, with orchards, and this was so beautiful to see, and it was a small city. When I was a young girl there were only 300,000 people living in Damascus. Today you have eight million, or seven. It's tremendous. And those gardens have been partly destroyed because of urban development. I thought why don't they keep this ring of orchards and build beyond, in the desert? People don't do that usually. Anyway, so these are reminisces, and you try to get the essence of a place.

LS: Speaking of orchards and gardens, the figures in your exhibition are walking towards one central point. What is that?

SF: Yeah, it's like you know when in architecture you have a point which holds the whole architecture. I just make it a flower. Somebody said it's the Rose of Damascus, but I didn't really think that it was only the Rose of Damascus. But the flower, you have many epics and many stories about it. One of them being the Epic of Gilgamesh, where after the death of his friend he wants to look for eternity, for immortality, so he heard that someone had lived forever, so he goes to see him and there was a flower there. He said, if I could only catch the flower I will live forever. As soon as he came near, the flower disappeared. It's eaten by a serpent. So I want this flower to be there forever, that's why I put it there.

LS: For everyone.

SF: The flower is what we want to leave alive after we pass away. It's this beauty, this nature that we want to keep going forever. So immortality in that sense, we have to give it to nature.

LS: To pass it back.

SF: Yes.

LS: Just changing the subject slightly, although not really, to the side room of the exhibition we have a reading room where you have selected some books that have influenced you or inspired you, and I know how important reading is to you. Could you tell us a little bit about the books you've selected and why literature and poetry is so important to your work?

SF: I've always been an avid reader ever since I was small, and I find the epics to be what talk so wonderfully well about a culture. When you enter a civilisation you enter through their epics. The Iliad and the Odyssey are the universal doors to thinking, to knowing, to history, to poetry, and I put the Tale of Genji because when I read it, I had an enormous joy to discover the real Japanese civilisation, which you do not think about. It just blew my mind. And then I chose classics really that I'm sure everybody has read or wants to read, like War and Peace, [Fyodor] Dostoevsky. I put a very great book by [James] Baldwin, The Fire Next Time. Chose two or three Arabic novels, Cities of Salt and Migration to the North. And poetry comes before epic and sustains the epic.

Poetry is like abstract art, it tells you a lot through just one sentence. You have these glimpses on the subcultures, on the beauty. It summarises the whole knowledge that you should have. And poetry is quick. People today want

something very quick, so actually in one sentence, boom, you have a lot of things to think about. Poetry was also recited. People knew it by heart. It doesn't need any support. That's also where literature is superior to art in the way that it doesn't need support, you can learn it by heart. A work of art, you have to come and see it, and if you haven't seen it, you haven't seen it. But the book travels on its own. It's magic. You can't stop it.

LS: Can't stop it. I think the commission feels very poetic. It feels like a poem with the elements being different structures of language, and the climax of the rose is a very poetic climax. Was that intentional or is that...?

SF: No, the poetry is not intentional. I think the poetry is a gift that comes through or comes after what you want to say. I was focused on what I wanted to say, and of course the elements, if they are beautiful, I try to make them beautiful, contain poetry. The rose is a real focus, but you have also an angel. We think we have an angel on our shoulder walking with us, telling us what to do or watching over us and helping, and you have clouds because your new work in the desert, it's really what you see in the sky that counts. It's the stars and the clouds that are very important. So I made the clouds and that's all the elements now.

LS: And a tree and a centaur.

SF: Yeah. And the centaur is really a recurring figure in my work. I don't know why I like this figure. I've done quite a few. This one is small, but it also has a colour that I have never used before, which is indigo. The centaur is really a man who is half horse, half man, but it's really a man trying to get to the sky, usually has an arch and... yeah. So these men carry all

these elements in their psyche while they're walking their journey on this earth, in this life.

LS: Let's talk a little bit about the practicalities of how you make the works, because we were talking the other day about how I don't know any other sculptor who can make ceramics of the scale that you do, standing on two feet without falling over. It's quite an accomplishment. And they are very heavy and have the mark of your hands all over them, which is beautiful. So could you just talk to us about how you make them and how they don't fall over?

SF: The first thing I did when I started doing ceramics was a standing figure, a standing man on his two feet without any support, which is very rare. Usually the artist will start with a support and he will put the legs on it to make it stand, and I didn't want any of that intermediary between the man and the earth he's standing on, because man is a standing animal. It's what his definition is, before thinking or anything, before he started thinking he got up. So, I start with the legs and I build my figure, and of course it's always going to fall over.

So I work a lot on it to find the point of equilibrium where it will stand on its own, and my figures do stand on their own, even the small ones, the middle ones, the big one. So I built my figure with my hands, of course, and when I reach that point of equilibrium, I leave the standing figure alone because if I touch it again it will crumble. So you have always the traces of my hands on it because I can't go back and smooth it. It's impossible. And many of them, because when they dry they become so brittle and when you hold them to take them to the kiln quite a few also fall.

LS: They don't survive.

SF: They don't survive. So you will always find the traces of my hands on the pieces. And then they started growing higher. The height came because I worked in a kiln, I worked with a ceramicist, Hans Spinner, when I went to see him in Grasse, I said, how high is your kiln? I wanted to take advantage of my time there. I didn't know if I could go back, so I said I'll go as high as I can. My first two pieces, they were two figures 1.5 metres each.

LS: Amazing.

SF: Because that was the height of the kiln. And I loved doing that height. And someone actually wrote on my work saying usually clay is flat on the earth and you use it to do pots or even pots that are not so high. So you make it stand up. Then I started 1.5 metre. It was the biggest I have done. In this exhibit there's one that is 1.15 metre.

LS: Yeah.

SF: I like tall men. And not only that, it started also with the Islamic mysticism where Adam is portrayed as a very tall man. He was a tall man. So I made Adam, which is my first piece, with very long legs, and that impacted all the other men to have long legs to make them look very tall. But I really work on the torso because then when I get there I find that I have to give it the idea of the person I want to represent. It all came from this idea of Adam and all the other gods and heroes had the same form. But they vary because I try to put the qualities I think I know of Dionysus, for instance, or Agamemnon, et cetera.

LS: And that's something I wanted to ask you about. Your figures, the titles take their names of heroes or famous

warriors or kings, or queens when they're women. Why do you use these archetypes?

SF: I use the archetype to make them available to everybody, because everybody can relate to a god or relate to the king or a hero they have heard about. They don't relate to their neighbour, they don't relate to the guy across the street. It doesn't interest them. And I want them to embody more the idea of what these heroes represented because they also are within the environment of their birth. I feel that if you say King Agamemnon, for instance, you immediately see Greece, you see the Iliad, you see the whole environment. If I say Gilgamesh you hear the whole story. I want that. I don't want the piece to represent itself only as a beautiful or not beautiful piece. I wanted to make people ponder and look at it and make them dream. I don't know if I succeed, but I want them to represent more than themselves. Like all the other playwrights, like Shakespeare or any of the Greek tragedies, they all spoke about heroes. It is in that sense that I use them.

LS: So they become like an example for people.

SF: Yes. Not so much as an example because it's memory and it's imagination rather. I want to talk to their imagination.

LS: Thank you, Simone. It's been a privilege working with you.

SF: Thank you, Laura. And with you. I'm very happy, very grateful too.

JS: Thanks for listening to this episode of Here Now. You can find all of our other episodes online at www.whitechapelgallery.org, on the Bloomberg Connects app, as well as iTunes, Spotify, Sticher and Soundcloud.

Don't forget to visit the exhibition Simone Fattal, Finding a Way, on display from 21 September 2021 until 15 May 2022.
Bye for now.

Transcribed by 1st Class Secretarial Services.