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PRINT OCTOBER 2021

RAPE IS A BORDER

Michael Dango on the art of Mona Hatoum

Content warning: discussions of violence and sexual violence.

WHAT INSPIRES detached bemusement from a distance—*That looks funny, or at least interesting,* we might think—can, at a more intimate proximity, become brutish, threatening. This is how we encounter many of the turn-of-the-millennium sculptures and installations by London-based Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum. An egg slicer has been scaled up to accommodate a human body. That same set of slicing wires has been used to replace the base of a baby's crib. On a kitchen table lie a set of metal utensils—colanders, slotted spoons—that are connected to an electric wire, seductively inviting a deadly touch.

That Hatoum's objects and scenes are typically domestic brings out the violence that always lurks at home, the abuse that threatens to spring forth from a spouse, a parent, an intimate other who is close enough to hurt. The classic Surrealist move of enlarging a quotidian object helps us see the harm and asks us to look more closely, to reassess the common sense that intimacy means comfort, that domesticity means safety. The magnification of these familiar implements that have been made lethal allegorizes domestic violence viscerally, not cerebrally, in the physical relationship they create. If Minimalism's theatrical quality rests on the specific object's anthropomorphic scale, as Michael Fried famously argued, then Hatoum's gigantic objects stage a mordant satire, effectively shrinking the viewer like a science-fiction ray gun, correlating an overwhelming nearness with threat and distance with obliviousness. Just as we wouldn't normally look too closely at a banal kitchen tchotchke or dwell on its potential to injure us, we might not know what goes on in a relationship and will tend to assume the best rather than the worst: *He seems like a good guy*.

Two decades after Hatoum made them, and four years after #MeToo's watershed moment, these works provoke the question of how abuse ever could have been a revelation; of why so many of us couldn't see already that the unjust distribution of power and gendering of privilege made harm likely rather than improbable, normal rather than spectacular.

In some respects, these sculptures seem to go against the grain of an important strand of feminist art criticism arguing that rape and allegory shouldn't mix. Consider the various aesthetic renditions of the most notorious episode of Rome's origin myth: Giambologna, Poussin, Rubens, and countless other artists all produced works explicitly on the subject of the rape of the Sabine women. The story goes that, after settling what would become the city of Rome, Romulus and his army of followers found themselves with a shortage of women to keep their newly significant bloodlines going. The obvious solution was to steal women from a nearby community, the Sabines. The Latin word from which *rape* derives means theft. That the word posits women as chattel, and that the harm it names is a man's loss of property, is one reason some feminists think we ought to get out of the habit of using "rape" at all and substitute more precise terminology, such as "sexual assault."

Europe's old masters depicted the scene in what Diane Wolfthal has called the "heroic tradition," excusing if not outright celebrating the violation of women as an expression of the militant patriotism of founding a nation. Monika Fabijanska's 2018 exhibition "The Un-Heroic Act: Representations of Rape in Contemporary Women's Art in the U.S." included Carolee Thea's 1991 riposte to Giambologna et al., *Sabine Woman*, which sought to make the brutal reality of sexual violence harder for viewers to avoid: The sculptural tableau portrays a gang rape with life-size bodies outlined in chicken wire. The cage-like nature of the wire bodies connects the historical sexual enslavement of the Sabines with the act of rape itself. Rape is not a mere allegory here. Rape is violence against a body, not symbolism about nation building.