



Mounir Fatmi's *Inside the Fire Circle* uses art to reinforce lessons of history. Jump leads spill from typewriters and photos reveal John Howard Griffin's 'colour change'. Courtesy Lawrie Shabibi and the artist

Lessons of history come full circle in Mounir Fatmi's exhibition

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The central installation of Mounir Fatmi's new exhibition gives the show its name. *Inside the Fire Circle* features a row of old-fashioned typewriters on an iron frame. From these obsolete objects, black and red jump leads spill out, the ends clipped to a page of plain, white paper.

Initially this might seem to question the transfer of information and provide a visual representation of the development of digital and future technologies – but it is also about the past.

"With this installation, I want people to remember history," says Fatmi, a French-Moroccan artist, of his first solo show in Dubai. "Unfortunately people have a short-term memory these days."

Fatmi describes the work as an aesthetic trap that draws viewers in but throws them into a circular motion of repetition.

"All these materials are going to disappear, so they are historical, but there is the notion of archive, which is constantly present," he says. "We see history repeating itself over and over again, like a palimpsest."

Palimpsest is a word for a manuscript or other writing surface that has been reused or altered but which still has visible traces of its original form.

This installation then, reflects the artist's preoccupation with the circle, a recurring symbol throughout his practice.

On the wall are several pieces made with coaxial antennae cables – another largely obsolete object – arranged and fixed in partly-circular and geometric patterns, encased in glass boxes.

Again, they draw the viewer in to the idea of repetition and infinity but also pick up the theme of physical material that is now part of history, soon to be discarded from use and, perhaps, even from memory.

By using such objects, Fatmi raises the question of whether when something is forgotten, does it mean it never existed? Why do we often fail to learn the lessons of history? If an incident falls out of the reaches of archive or memory, it can happen again, and we risk making the same mistakes.

This idea is highlighted in the story of John Howard Griffin, the subject of several pieces of work in the exhibition. Griffin was an American journalist and author from Texas. He was white but in the racially-segregated United States of 1959, he took medication and subjected his skin to ultraviolet rays to make himself appear black. He then went on a tour of the country's Deep South.

"I discovered the history of this amazing person who completed this experiment and I realised that many people hadn't heard of him so I decided to use his story to show others," says Fatmi.

A series of 10 photographs, titled *As A Black Man*, shows the gradation of Griffin's skin from white to grey to black. Another set, this time in black and white, show his legs crossing a white line in the street – which has several metaphorical and symbolic connotations.

"This story is especially relevant because of what is happening in the United States now," says Fatmi. "People forget the original American dream was in fact, the immigrant's dream. You can't imagine America as it is today without immigrants.

"So, I want to show people that back then, there was a white, educated person who was willing to literally burn his skin because he wanted to understand 'the other'. If people were to think like him now, it would help a lot."

Fatmi's interest in forgotten stories, and in inspiring his audience to think for themselves, comes from a childhood spent in an impoverished Moroccan village where access to information was scarce.

He remembers there was only one dictionary in the village and he had to search it out. When he began creating art in an age of information saturation, Fatmi never forgot the importance of memory, and he hopes to harness the power of art to make a difference.

"Art changed my life," he says. "I try to understand life, history and everything with art – it is the key. And yes, it is a romantic idea but I do have a hope to be able to change something with my art."

• *Inside the Fire Circle* is at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, Alserkal Avneue, Dubai, until May 15. www.lawrieshabibi.com

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