

## THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Ruth Clark

# 2

## COMMENTARIES

# Adel Abdessemed

11 April 2008 – 7 June 2008



## 'TRUST ME'

"Trust Me", implores Adel Abdessemed's first solo show in the UK, the phrase also the title of one of the works in the show. The exhibition is infused with references to leaders, prophets and visionaries, as well as political and national allegiances.

Abdessemed has attracted increasing attention and critical acclaim in recent years for his both punchy and poetic work. His works are characterised by a simple, straightforward and transparent use of his media, whether video, sculpture or drawing, and an often playful, always energetic, approach to existent forms, symbols or conventions.

The exhibition at The Common Guild brings together a number of recent video works, all documenting actions or performances, as well as a small but important work on paper. This apparently modest piece, hung in the entrance hall, is entitled *La naissance de MohammedKarlpolpot (The Birth of MohammedKarlpolpot)* (1999). It is a key work for Abdessemed, made the day he was granted French citizenship, having moved there from his native Algeria at the height of the civil war in 1994. The handwritten note suggests the 'birth' on 20 October 1999 of an auspicious or monstrous new character. Of the work, which fuses the names of three figures, variously prophets, leaders or ideologues, each of whose legacy has seen atrocities carried out in his name, Abdessemed has said that he was struck by the realisation that "the great ideologies which dominated the last century are all embodied by fathers".

Opposite this in the hallway at TCG is *Helikoptère* (2008), one of two works in the exhibition to show the artist attempting to draw in almost impossible circumstances. This first piece shows Abdessemed suspended by his feet from a helicopter hovering over sheets of plywood on the ground. His actions are affected by the jolts of the machine, the wind and the swaying movement of his own body.

*Trust Me* (2007), presented as a large projection on the ground floor, shows singer David Moss as a deranged, vampire-like figure, screeching his way through a composition derived from the national anthems of several

different countries, including Germany, France, Algeria, Brazil, Britain and Russia, as well as 'The Internationale'. Like many of Abdessemed's works, the piece is cyclical, looping over and over. Filmed against a semi-derelect urban space, a kind of no man's land, he is an alien attempting to belong; what one critic has described as "an outsider's version of the ultimate insider anthem". In the library, *Man* (2008) is a record of a performance with Douglas Gordon at Le Magasin in Grenoble on the occasion of the opening of Abdessemed's solo exhibition there earlier the same year.

Upstairs, *Also sprach Allah* (2008) shows the artist attempting to write the phrase "Also sprach Allah" on the underside of a carpet, while being bounced up and down by a group of men in white shirts. Recalling the flying carpets of many fictions, not least *One Thousand and One Nights* (also known as *Arabian Nights*), the work also references one of the most famous works of German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche: *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883–5), in which he expands on his famous theory that: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him"! In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche goes further to state that "Dead are all the gods".<sup>2</sup> This work therefore offers an ironic twist on the original text, 'Allah' being standard Arabic for 'God'.

In the same room, *Talk is Cheap* (2006) is one of a series of short, looped videos, of one or two minutes, made on the streets around the artist's studio in Paris, each one a brief, direct action that resists interpretation but offers succinct expression in purely visual form: a bare foot crushing a can of Coke; in this a microphone being trampled by the artist's foot. Such a potent action is characteristic of Abdessemed's works, often made in the street, his preferred arena and the place of the contact between the personal and the public, between the individual and the body politic. "I am an artist of acts, not a conceptual artist".

**Katrina Brown** is director of The Common Guild, Glasgow.

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Madman' (s. 125), *The Gay Science*, Leipzig 1887, p. 181.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Bestowing of Virtue', *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, Frankfurt am Main, 2018 (reproduction), p. 84.