

For immediate release

## ADEL ABDESSEMED

### RIO

April 3 – May 9, 2009



*Usine*, 2009 (video still). Video projection. 1:27 minute (loop), color, sound. Dimensions vary.

*The show is called Rio, meaning river. I observe the world with the same fascination that my daughter, Rio, contemplates the big animals in the zoo that are thirsty and hungry.*

–Adel Abdessemed

David Zwirner is pleased to present the first American gallery exhibition by Adel Abdessemed. Encompassing all three of the main gallery spaces at David Zwirner, *RIO* features sculptures, videos, photographs, and drawings made from 2008 to 2009.

The installation of the show envisages a maze of main rooms, corridors, and entrances that collectively create a complex yet harmonious environment. Visitors are given the possibility of several different journeys through the spaces, while individual works still remain autonomous.

The massive sculpture, *Telle mère tel fils* (2008), engulfs one of the galleries (519 West 19th Street). Over sixty-five feet long, the work is a braid of three airplanes, made of their original cockpits and tailfins, while the fuselages are reconstructed in soft felt filled with air.

The center gallery space (525 West 19th Street) hosts a number of works. In *Usine* (2009), Abdessemed films an encounter between mammals, reptiles, and insects. Revealed in a quick minute-and-a-half video loop is both nature and mankind's propensity toward survival and destruction. Also presented is *Music box* (2009), a sculpture made of a steel oil barrel, which functions as a real musical instrument. Stationary pins on a revolving cylinder strike the teeth of a metal comb, producing sounds that fill the room: music from Richard Wagner's *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*). *Prostitute* (2008) addresses the theme of religion. Three prostitutes each meticulously hand wrote, page by page, one of three religious texts: the Bible, the Torah, and the Koran. These leather-bound manuscripts are displayed as closed books in stacked shopping bags, the completed activity quietly offered for viewers' consumption. Another work, made with razor wire – like the previous work *Wall drawing* (2006) where Abdessemed used razor wire in the form of simple circles that hung on the wall – is *Soccer ball* (2009), placed on the gallery's floor.

Since moving to New York in 2008, the city has become part of Abdessemed's work, and seen in the same gallery space is *Lincoln* (2009). Captured on a busy street corner, this photograph depicts a statute of the president, holding up and supporting Abdessemed. *Lincoln* echoes an earlier work, *Nafissa* (2006), where Abdessemed is seen on a Paris street being held in his mother's arms.

Presented in the third main gallery space (533 West 19th Street) is the seminal work, *Practice zero tolerance (retournée)* (2008), a large-scale terra cotta sculpture molded on an impounded car from the insurrections in the banlieues of Paris in 2005. As if upended by protestors, the vehicle's charred chassis rests on its side, a symbol not only of the civil unrest in France, but of car bombings and suicide attacks around the globe.

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Many situations created by Abdessemed are based on singular and deliberate actions, or, as he calls them, acts, which are testified, more than documented, with videos and photographs, and are often later juxtaposed with a sculptural remainder from the action itself. The same gallery space is occupied by a group of works that represent this structure. In *Grand canyon* (2008), Abdessemed dangles from a precipice over the canyon's abyss and carves the single word "DEATH" into the underside of the boulder from which he is hanging. The two-part work consists of a photograph of the artist's action, along with the rock, relocated afterwards to the gallery. *Grand canyon* correlates to a recent work, *Also sprach Allah* (2008), shown in a group exhibition at David Zwirner last summer. In this work, Abdessemed is repeatedly catapulted by a manned blanket toss in order to reach a carpet mounted on the ceiling. With each toss in the air, he adds a single mark on the carpet, eventually spelling out "Also Sprach Allah," which translates to "Thus Spoke Allah" and refers directly to *Also Sprach Zarathustra* by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. This action – demonstrating how a group can propel an individual to take action in the name of God – is documented in a video that accompanies the finished, framed carpet.

Reminiscent of *Helikoptère* (2007), is *Enter the circle* (2009). In this new work, Abdessemed is suspended upside down from a helicopter hovering fifty feet above the ground. In a motion that is both jagged yet fluid, he draws a complete circle with oil pastel onto a large panel. For the two-part video, *Les ailes de dieu I* (2009) and *Les ailes de dieu II* (2009), a man without arms is suspended from a helicopter to make a drawing with his feet, while in the other video, a man without legs draws with his hands as he hangs down.

Elsewhere at David Zwirner is *The sea*, another video that captures similarly intense physical movements, where Abdessemed balances on a slab of wood on rough ebbing and flowing ocean waves. Other photographs include the family portrait *Saturday* (2008), where his young daughters and wife take dog skeletons for a walk down a New York City street, and *Jasmine* (2009), a street scene where a mother dog protects her multiple puppies.

Among new drawings made for the exhibition at David Zwirner are *Untitled (I take care of History)* (2009) and *The best, the most, the only* (2009), which consists of charcoal drawings (of hands and animals) inside notebooks, placed on music stands.

Born in 1971 in Constantine, Algeria, Adel Abdessemed attended the École des Beaux-Arts d'Alger and the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Lyon. He currently lives and works in New York. In 2008, MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts hosted a solo exhibition of his work, organized by Jane Farver and accompanied by a fully-illustrated catalogue with essays by Farver, Tom McDonough, and Pier Luigi Tazzi, and an interview with Noam Chomsky. Abdessemed recently has been the focus of solo exhibitions at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin, Italy (2009), Le Magasin - Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Grenoble, France (2008), and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York (2007). He recently was included in the 7th Gwangju Biennial, Gwangju, Korea (2008) and the 52nd Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy (2007). His work is in the collections of Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France; Fondation François Pinault, Venice, Italy; Fonds régional d'art contemporain Champagne-Ardenne, Reims, France; Fonds régional d'art contemporain des Pays de la Loire, Carquefou, France; Fundación Montenmedio Arte Contemporáneo, Vejer de la Frontera, Spain; The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel; Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, Geneva, Switzerland; Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France.

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## RIO

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### *Telle mère tel fils* (2008)

Over sixty-five feet long and partially suspended from the gallery's ceiling, the massive sculpture *Telle mère tel fils* is a braid of three airplanes, made of original cockpits and tailfins, with middle sections (fuselages) that have been reconstructed and elongated in soft felt and filled with air. Referring to the common phrases "like father, like son" and "like mother, like daughter," the title of this work mixes the genders, roughly translating to "like mother like son." In a series of linguistic, associative, and literal reversals, this work presents the interconnectedness of mother and child, while also addressing the inseparability of birth and destruction.



The artist's mother was one of the inspirations for an earlier, related work, *Bourek* (2005), a sculpture made from a passenger plane's fuselage that has been crushed, folded, and rolled.<sup>1</sup> The airplanes employed by the artist transmit ambiguous connotations: while they are used as carriers that facilitate the delivery and connection of goods and people across the world, they are also potentially deadly and have been utilized for ideological purposes to spectacularly violent ends. Such charged, psychological associations are made visually and viscerally present in Abdessemed's sculpture. Created from modest means and basic materials, *Telle mère tel fils* exemplifies the artist's technique of engaging simple actions and materials to produce work that resonates with complex meaning.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Recently presented at Abdessemed's 2007 P.S. 1 exhibition *Dead or Alive*, that work's title and form is derived from the bourek, a popular food in Northern Africa. Abdessemed's mother used to make this traditional meat-filled pastry roll, along with other types of simple breads for her family.

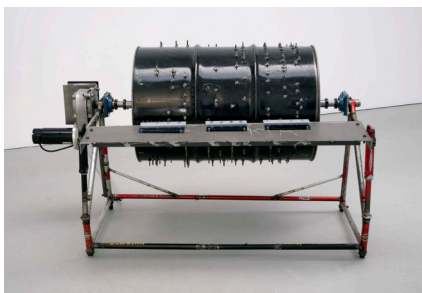
<sup>2</sup> This work also addresses the history of sculpture, referencing the complexity of 17th Century Baroque sculpture and the work of more recent artists such as Joseph Beuys, whose use of felt and other psychologically expressive materials radically changed art-making practices in the 20th Century.



### *The sea* (2009)

In a looped video segment, *The sea* shows the artist precariously balancing on a slab of wood on rough ebbing and flowing ocean waves, while writing out the words 'politically correct.' This work summons Théodore Géricault's well-known painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19), which was among the first works of art to depict (and ultimately spectacularize) a catastrophic event from recent history.<sup>1</sup> In an ambivalent eschewal of Géricault's romanticism, Abdessemed's work also addresses the theme of survival, staged in *The sea* as a vital state of being, looped over again in the present tense.

<sup>1</sup> Géricault's influential painting was appropriated by numerous artists, including Martin Kippenberger (in the 1990s), whom Abdessemed counts here as one of his inspirations.



### *Music box* (2009)

With *Music box*, Abdessemed has constructed a mechanized musical device from recycled materials, including a steel oil drum and bicycle frames welded together. Screws are affixed in a predetermined sequence to the revolving oil barrel and strike the teeth of a metal comb to produce sounds that fill the room. Becoming popular in Europe in the 19th Century, musical boxes later became common children's toys. Abdessemed's sculpture plays a musical sequence from Richard Wagner's *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*), the well-known 19th Century opera drawn from Norse war mythology, in which female figures choose those who die in battle. Here, Abdessemed questions notions of femininity, domesticity, and the innocence of childhood, combining these themes with the recurring brutality of war.



### *Prostitute* (2008)

For this work, three prostitutes were paid to meticulously transcribe by hand one of three major religious texts: the New Testament of the Bible, the Torah, and the Koran. These leather-bound manuscripts are displayed as closed books in stacked shopping bags that have been mounted to the wall, offered to the viewer for contemplation. In this work, Abdessemed combines notions of the sacred and the profane, raising numerous questions while leaving them open to interpretation and debate. The work calls to mind the processes of capitalist consumption and exchange, while proposing how religious texts might function as “instruments of war.” Here, the artist suggests complex ideas about religious dogma as an ambiguous form of domination and control, questioning, for instance, the contradictory ways in which prostitution—and, on a broader level, the role of women in society—has been viewed and shaped by Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.



### *Soccer ball* (2009)

Made with razor wire—like the previous work *Wall drawing* (2006), where Abdessemed used razor wire in the form of simple circles hung on a wall—is *Soccer ball*. Placed on the gallery's floor, these sculptures imitate regulation-sized soccer balls. The artist is interested in how the sport of soccer might also be understood in association with the idea of war, both in the way that it infiltrates across cultures and in its relationship to the construction of national (and perhaps nationalistic) identity.



### *Lincoln* (2009)

Abdessemed often makes his art in city streets, using the immediate environs of his place of residence as a staging ground for the situations he enacts, employing the street on which he lives as a kind of “studio.”<sup>1</sup> Here, the artist is shown on a busy intersection near his home in New York. Lying across the lap of a replica of the well-known statue of Abraham Lincoln, the artist appears to be supported by the historic U.S. President. *Lincoln* echoes an earlier work, *Nafissa* (2006), which shows Abdessemed being held in his mother's arms on a Paris street.

<sup>1</sup> The artist has used the street in front of his home in Paris in a similar way, in a series begun in 2005 titled *L'Atelier*.



### *Usine* (2008)

*Usine* (which translates in English as *Factory*) presents a group of dogs, snakes, cocks, lizards, scorpions, spiders, and other fighting, predatory creatures. Here, a raw sequence of footage, repeated over and over again in a 1 1/2 minute loop, raises questions about the nature of violence, destruction, and survival, while also addressing how these issues are culturally disseminated and received in society.

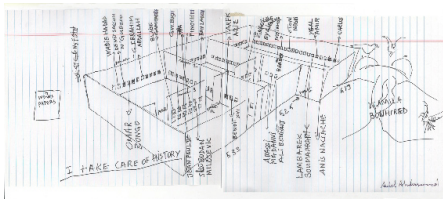
As Massimiliano Gioni has written, “After years of [the] highly produced and post-produced, after decades of speculations about societies of the spectacle, [... Abdessemed is among] a new generation of artists turning to an immediacy that seems unbearable, because it is unfiltered, brutal and sincere, ... it is asymmetrical realism.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Massimiliano Gioni, “In the name of the father: The ecstasy of Adel Abdessemed,” in *Adel Abdessemed. Les ailes de dieu / Le ali di dio*. Exh. cat. (Turin: Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, 2009), p. 61.



### *Saturday* (2008)

The family portrait, *Saturday*, is a photograph that presents the artist's wife and children on a street near their home in New York. While at first glance the image appears to depict an image of family leisure and comfort, the leashes held by the two small girls in the photograph are attached to the ghost-like skeletons of two dogs. The work is thus reminiscent of an earlier photograph by the artist, *Mes amis* (*My friends*) (2005), in which his wife is shown walking arm and arm down a Parisian street with a man's skeleton.



### *Untitled (I take care of History) (2009)*

Taking Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* as inspiration, *Untitled (I take care of History)* presents a kind of mental index of the names of all the political terrorists and war criminals the artist could spontaneously remember. They are presented in the form of an imagined, conceptual exhibition, sketched out on a drawing of the blank walls and floor plan of the gallery spaces at David Zwirner. Varied in terms of their political ideologies, the status of these individuals as criminals or heroes is often ambiguous, depending on the perspective of the viewer. Among others, the artist has listed Augusto Pinochet, Osama Bin Laden, Tariq Aziz, and George W. Bush. Also listed is Ludwig Wittgenstein (who, for the artist, might easily be grouped in this context for the philosophical development of the concept of language as a weapon of war) and the Algerian National Liberation Front member and female revolutionary hero Djamilia Bonhired (who is represented here by a sketch of Gustave Courbet's controversial painting *L'Origine du monde* [*The Origin of the World*; 1866]).



### *Practice zero tolerance (retournée) (2008)*

Addressing themes of power and violent rebellion, *Practice zero tolerance (retournée)*, presents the blackened body of car, as if upended by a riot or bombing. However, Abdessemed does not simply present a found object; the car is in fact a clay replica.

Cast from the remains of an automobile that was vandalized during the 2005 riots that took place in Perpignan, on one level, the sculpture functions as a memorial to the civil and ethnic unrest in France. Moreover, the title of the work refers to the governmental policy of "zero tolerance," which has increasingly been imposed upon citizens around the world despite being criticized by many for producing as much violence as it aims to repress.

By using black terracotta, the artist brings the car back to the earth in a kind of symbolic transformation. In his words: "The car had been burned, that is to say physically, stained by gas. I find fascinating the alchemy that takes place between metal, plastic, petroleum, and gasoline, all these materials that come from the earth, of which the piece is the crystallization in clay."<sup>1</sup> In this sense, *Practice zero tolerance (retournée)* addresses the transformative and generative potential of rebellion without negating its destructive and violent nature.

<sup>1</sup>The artist, cited in Tom McDonough, "The Mole," in *Adel Abdessemed: Situation and Practice*. Exh. cat. (Cambridge [Mass.]: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2008), p. 82.



### *Jasmine (2009)*

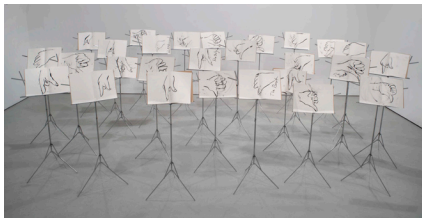
Since moving to New York in 2008, the city has become part of Abdessemed's practice. *Jasmine* refers to a number of works by the artist that show animals in the urban environment, often in jarringly incongruent situations that can be read as "allegories of the status of the unwelcome guests or immigrant the artist identifies himself with. But they also partake of a tradition within the history of contemporary art, which visualizes the city as a place of magical encounters and sudden revelations, a tradition that starts from surrealism, continues with situationism, and [finds its expression in more recent artistic practices]."<sup>1</sup> Here, a large female dog is shown nursing her puppies on a New York street near the artist's home.

<sup>1</sup> Massimiliano Gioni, "In the name of the father: The ecstasy of Adel Abdessemed," in *Adel Abdessemed. Les ailes de dieu/Le ali di dio*. Exh. cat. (Turin: Fondazione Sandretto di Rebaudengo, 2009), p. 60.



### *Enter the circle (2009)*

*Enter the circle* shows the artist making a drawing under extreme conditions. In this video, Abdessemed is suspended from a helicopter while he draws the even circumference of a circle on a panel in oil pastel. This work is accompanied by eight finished drawings executed by the artist in these precarious circumstances. The orchestrated execution of what appear to be 'minimal' works of art is complicated here with the introduction of intense physical effort and danger.



### *Les ailes de dieu* (2009)

This work, whose title translates in English to *The Wings of God*, is comprised of two videos, each showing a man suspended from a helicopter in an extreme situation while drawing on a panel with silver paint: on one screen, a man without arms draws with his feet; on the other, a man without legs draws with his hands. While this work perhaps recalls Yves Klein's performative *Anthropometry* paintings of the early 1960s (in which the artist employed the paint-smear bodies of women as "living brushes"), *Les ailes de dieu* also refers to philosopher Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "destabilized" body as a site for potential.<sup>1</sup> These works show the activation of two men's bodies in a situation of intense physicality and risk; they are in fluid control, despite their missing limbs.

<sup>1</sup> For Deleuze, the term "body without organs" stands for the "virtual" rather than the "actual" dimension of the body, or the reservoir of potential affects and connections that can be activated. This concept is introduced in his *The Logic of Sense* (1969) and further developed in collaboration with Felix Guattari in books including *A Thousand Plateaux* (1980).

### *Grand canyon* (2008)

Many situations created by Abdessemed in his artistic practice are based on singular and deliberate orchestrated actions, or "acts," as he calls them, which are in turn documented with videos and photographs, and are often juxtaposed with a sculptural remainder from the act itself. In this instance, Abdessemed presents a large-scale photograph, shot from above, of the artist as a miniature figure in the barren rocky terrain of the Grand Canyon. Here, the artist is shown suspended from a rock in the canyon, appearing, in a sense, at one with nature, subsumed by the landscape in a situation of risk. However, a large boulder is installed nearby in the gallery—in a kind of reversal of "Land Art," presented as a (presumably) stolen trace of Abdessemed's presence there. The viewer is left to wonder how the rock may have been extricated from one of America's last unpopulated natural landscapes, while the work raises bigger questions concerning, among others, the relationship of man to nature; how land is fought over, bought, or stolen; and how national identity is constructed in light of these issues.

### *The best, the most, the only* (2009)

*The best, the most, the only* consists of charcoal drawings inside notebooks, placed on music stands. The thumbs down gesture refers to the Roman custom of spectators voting on the fate of wounded gladiators, as well as contemporary culture's common sign of a general expression of disapproval.