

On Simone Fattal

by Negar Azimi

## BABYLON BABYLON

I announce your resurrections  
and your death.

— from *The Beirut-Hell Express*

Let's begin with the legs. They are thick, bowed, cumbersome things—like the crusty paw of an elephant or the trunk of a vast tree ringed and ringed again by time. Their heads are attenuated, leprous and shriveled, as if battered on a battlefield, or simply pinched between someone's fingers for too long. Sometimes, there's no head at all; the familiar ball that once balanced atop a thin line atop a torso seems to have rolled right off. Bodies: they slump and sag and bend and bob.

Time is the great conceit of the sculptures of Simone Fattal. Kneaded clay suggests the repeated touch of a human hand, but also summons up the ravages of time. Figures look as old as the earth and yet they breathe. "The dead are coming back in order to fight again" reads a line from *The Beirut-Hell Express*, a poem from 1983 by Etel Adnan. The dead speak to us, too: I once was a warrior. I once was a father. I once was master of this land. I once was I once was echoes again and again. Their grandiloquence is shabby.

But then, they never really did die, did they? Fattal's history is a temporal mishmash, a reckless continuum in which time and place are leveled and the ancients mingle with the moderns. In her collage works, too, the mishmash is evident. Day after day, she cuts up little pieces of magazines, newspapers or advertisements that catch her eye and squirrels them away. They come back—yes, as if from the dead—when it makes sense for them to. Their destination is the picture plane, a place that evokes Andre Malraux's wistful, unrealized *Museum Without Walls*. Here is Merce Cunningham and Pina Bausch. Or the faces of Saddam Hussein's son in laws, creepily frozen in death. In between are ancient Sumerian and Babylonian forms posing as rotted statuary, an ad for a shiny BMW, a Brancusi sculpture, or a photograph of the earth. The artist's own face often figures in, as well, for she too is a party to this psychic mingling. She, too, is a party to this history.

Hers is a vision of a world in which there is no "pure" and there is no original, either. In real life, after all, we borrow from here and there. The traces of other people's wars, loves, and lies are inscribed on our bodies and in our minds. As the products of everything that came before us—Walt Whitman said as much when he said "we contain multitudes"—we are the tea stain on a book, the scar that won't heal, the fabricated memory born of a photo we once saw in a magazine. Our constitutions are a mysterious thing.

It is fitting, then, that Fattal's works—which span painting, sculpture, collage, and books—bleed one into the other. They shape-shift as one burns bright and another dims. Each form seems to be inflected by a specific moment in a life lived. There were the childhood visits to Palmyra, in Syria, where she once walked among soaring Seleucid and Roman ruins. There was the publishing house she launched upon being displaced by the Lebanese Civil War to seaside California. She called it *Post-Apollo*, after the moon landing, and with it she made words dance. And there was the fateful encounter with clay that led her to formulate a man with two overlong, elephantine legs. She called him Adam and he was familiar. He was the first man. But he was every man, too.