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Silverman, Erica. "Kader Attia's LA Show Exposes the Hubris of Modernity at Regen Projects." [Whitewall Magazine](#) (June 3, 2025) [online]

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Kader Attia's LA Show Exposes the Hubris of Modernity at Regen Projects

Now on view at Regen Projects, Kader Attia's latest solo show explores the politics of repair, the echoes of empire, and the fragility of progress through a decolonial lens.

On May 22 in Los Angeles, acclaimed French-Algerian artist Kader Attia unveiled "The Hubris of Modernity" at Regen Projects, on view through June 21. In his tremendous, second solo show with the gallery, the Berlin and Paris-based creative explores entangled histories of colonialism, technology, and Western modernity through a powerful blend of installation, sculpture, and philosophical inquiry. Presented through a decolonial lens inspired by Mexican historian Rolando Vázquez, the exhibition challenges dominant narratives of progress, objectivity, and representation—especially the so-called "zero point" perspective of the Western gaze. Attia voyages through an ongoing critique of technological hubris, and the poetic, often invisible forms of healing embedded in cracks, rain, and ritual. From the haunting sway of mechanized rain sticks to fragmented mirror masks and wounded urban landscapes, "The Hubris of Modernity" offers a timely meditation on history, vulnerability, and the urgent need for reconnection.

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Over the course of his inspiring career, Attia has been honored with distinguished awards including the Joan Miró Prize (2017), the Yanghyun Prize (2017), and the Prix Marcel Duchamp (2016). This year, the artist was selected for the Hôte du Louvre, a singular residency at the Louvre Museum, where he also helms a series of public lectures through September. Whitewall had an opportunity to speak to the prolific Attia about rebuilding something together, and inviting the audience to ponder a harmonious merger with our ever-evolving, technological landscape.



Portrait of Kader Attia, courtesy of the artist and Regen Projects; photo by Nicole Tanzini di Bella.



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WHITEWALL: What does hubris mean to you in the context of modern history, and how is it explored in this exhibition?

KADER ATTIA: I was inspired by a text from Mexican historian Rolando Vázquez. He is a friend living in the Netherlands. His main book—one of the books that really impressed me—is called *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthesis*. Rolando has a very interesting, critical sense of colonialism and imperialism through a critique of modernity. I really like the way he uses metaphors to explain how much the West has been spreading its own—almost asserting its own—perception of the world, transcribing it into a form of representation such as perspective, which was invented by Brunelleschi in the Duomo of Florence during the Renaissance.

I was really struck by one quote by Rolando, who says that there is a hubris of the zero point in modernity—the fact that modernity claims that the representation of the world should work only with the zero-point perspective process, though there are other forms of representations. We know that non-Western, “primitive” societies—pre-modern societies—have transcribed the world differently. The pre-Hispanic societies were describing the world with bi-dimensional forms of representation. What’s important here is that the idea of the hubris of the zero point is not only about drawing. It’s a metaphor that means a lot politically.

In the same way that we take for granted that the world should be represented only through this rule of perspective, we also take for granted that the Western white world was civilized and the non-Western, non-civilized. Therefore, they had no choice but to be occupied. And this is very strong. I’ve lived most of my life in different places where this impact of the Western modern gaze has deeply and personally disturbed me. When I read that, I thought, this is very interesting. I found, with Rolando, a metaphor. He described colonialism as a vortex—disparate things that have two forces, actually: one which is concentric and therefore focuses in the center—here you have imperialism, science, progress, the certainty of the modern West—and outside it, in the same vortex, it pushes all the others into the peripheries.

I like this idea of the vortex because I think time has definitely changed. Of course, today, we are much more inclusive and we—even in contemporary art—have opened many more doors to other ways of thinking and other critical positions, etc. But I think this is very interesting because it shows how much the world is actually based on a system that still dictates our perception of the world. And that’s what I meant by “hubris of modernity”—that there is definitely a hubris of modernity, which has been used to colonize, to kill people—even here in the U.S. Most of the First Nations people have been erased. And for me, as long as we live in a society that denies that, that does not try to build room to meet, to exchange, to share, to rebuild something together, to create this togetherness—we won’t be happy.

There is a film at the entrance from photographs I’ve taken in the last five years—of landscape, skyline, and cities. That’s my other passion, which is modern architecture.

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But also close-ups of the cities, close-ups of the ground, of the tar, of the cracks on the street. It's a back and forth. Rolando Vázquez is reading a text during the whole film. It's a text excerpted from the book I mentioned. You have symbols of the convergence of two major technological developments of the late 19th century—between the mechanical engine and electricity—and related images, back and forth, very poetic, very simple. Without naming it, he said “the hubris of the zero point.” And then I used “the hubris of modernity.”

Art Installation as Compelling Proposal



Installation view of Kader Attia “The Hubris of Modernity” at Regen Projects, Los Angeles, May 22 — June 21, 2025, Photo: Evan Bedford, Courtesy Regen Projects.

WHITEWALL: The centerpiece installation features mechanized rain sticks that sway in unison and alone. What might these movements say about time, ritual, and our futile attempts to control nature?

KA: Indeed the rainstick installation is a proposal. I’ve always been very critical of technology, but of course I’m not a technophobic person. I really love technology—I code myself. What I find problematic with technology is how much we are unable to merge it with nature—how much we do not consider the impact on the natural environment of too much technology, and how much technology can help us work for the environment and solve problems.

For me, rain is very important because it’s what actually inscribes us as living systems into other systems. Symbolically, rain is very porous. Water is steamed, and then you have evaporation, and then rain. There’s an elevation of the rain that we could imagine as a metaphor—going back to this idea of rising to the sky and then falling again to

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fertilize the soil and create life that will grow again. There is a kind of verticality of life that rain produces. That's why my installation is called Pluvialité, which is a word that doesn't really exist, but refers to this idea of the back and forth between earth and the sky as a form of life, as a form of vertical life, and indeed, as a ritual.

The installation is composed of two materials. On the one hand, you have something very technological—very high-end: cables, motors, the whole electronic system. And on the other hand, you have bamboo sticks that have been filled with corn grains. Everything is actually organic here—it's like wood, it's nature. I wanted to have nature embrace culture. The idea is that putting them together was a way to invite the audience to think about the possibility of how we can also merge ourselves with technology, instead of separating technology as a commodity, as an arm for neoliberal capitalism to just create new profit and deepen the market—neglecting, of course, our environment.

The 28 iron sticks have, on top of them, a motor, on top of which is attached a bamboo stick full of grains. If you look carefully, they are moving, following, of course, a script that I have created as a choreography and coded. You have a brain—an electronic brain—that is actually recomposing from my script a whole choreography during 10 minutes of these sticks. And each time they turn, you hear the sound. For me, it's an invitation to meditate on how much we have to develop and think...a fair agenda for the future—preserving and taking care of the environment using technology, and of course using art. I really think that art can save humanity.



© Kader Attia, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

You and I meet here, and we are exchanging traces. In philosophy, you call this individuation. We are exchanging traces, mnemonic traces from memory. I think art—Biennales, museums, galleries, artworks, art exhibitions—are places where humans individuate themselves. They come as individuals. They can like or dislike the work. But

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they are exchanging traces, which are part of their story. Of course, not only their living story—the story of their ancestors. These are the traces that compose us.

I believe that in a time where technology—particularly with social media—is actually withdrawing human beings from this encounter of being together, it's crucial to preserve physical experience of individuation. I believe that for tangible artworks—particularly when they involve the viewers, the audiences, bodily—because we don't look at work or anything only with our eyes. Looking is not an ocular-only phenomenon. We also look with our bodies. That's why I most of the time speak about the body gaze instead of only the eye.

This is a much more accomplished version of the rainstick piece. The previous one I did was smaller. But one day I arrived at the exhibition, and there was no one in the museum. I was checking if everything was working—it was, I think, in Paris. There was a dancer, and she was alone, moving her body and dancing in front of the piece. I thought, this is so...wow. This is really what makes me happy to be an artist, because this is what I mean by individuation. She was individuating herself with the artwork, but also the work individuated itself.

There was a philosopher Gilbert Simondon, who was convinced that machines also individuate themselves—in the sense that we do impact them. Of course, if you use a musical instrument, someone else using your instrument will not feel comfortable because the instrument receives your own sort of energy and the way to be played. A violin has this. Someone else will play and say it doesn't sound the same. I'm not into mystic things—I'm very rational, too—it took me time, but I do believe that objects individuate themselves.

Evoking Urban and Personal Fragmentation

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WHITEWALL: Your sculpture *Urban Rivers* uses cracks and latticework to evoke urban fragmentation. How do you see the built environment as a wound, as a record of collective trauma?

KA: I think most of the time we take for granted that the environment around us moves, and particularly when you don't have that much distance with the environment. If you have a building site in front of your home, and every morning you leave and you pass through, you don't see any evolution. But one day you say, "Wow, they've gotten faster." I think in terms of cracks on the ground of cities, there's a form of denial of time passing. Modernity has forced us to become urban animals, where the priority is to eat, to meet friends, to move from one point A to B. But all these in-between spaces that I would call interstitial spaces of freedom, where you really want to be yourself as a self, alive, with a consciousness, have been shrunk completely by these priorities of society for 40–50 years now.

How about we just look at the ground in the street, at the cracks, and we start to scratch? In between the cracks, we start to clean them, we start to put sparkling, glittering powder in these cracks, or red powders. We just step aside from this stream of routine that the prosaism of life is forcing us into, because we have to work, we have to pay the rent. But how about being more poetic? Caring about poetry? I do believe that when I'm focusing on this—on the cracks on the ground—and trying to share with the audience this gaze, I'm trying to create space for these poetic moments in everyday life, in everyday things.

I've been interested in this for a long time, since 20 years ago when I got back from Africa, the Congo, where I lived for four years, looking at how pre-modern society used to fix their objects. Even before this series, I was working a lot on a documentary in

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2012, on a project called The Repair. For me, repair is this ambivalent, almost oxymoronic process between injury and repair. When we think of repair, there is always somewhere the injury—conceptually. When I look at the city, when I look at architecture, like in the film, I cannot stop thinking about the injuries of the cities. The injuries of the city for me are like the wrinkles of the body. But also more than the wrinkles—because I love wrinkles—I think the cracks are the invisible wrinkles. And inviting this invisibility into tangibility—something you can touch, something you can see—is definitely, for me, a form of repair. I know it sounds paradoxical, but I think the irreparable is also the repair, or the repair is also the irreparable.

That's the most difficult thing when we deal with invisible injury. Because they're here, and we don't want to accept them. But it's by accepting them that we start the repair process—psychoanalytically. That's why showing the cracks, showing the wounds of the urban environment, of the modern environment, is also, of course, a way to challenge these modern certainties that have been around for far too long, giving us the illusion that we are super powerful subjects, etc. No—we are vulnerable. And it's by admitting this that we start to be very happy, actually, and enjoy life.



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WHITEWALL: The Mirror Mask also reflects this fractured self.

KADER ATTIA: The Mirror Mask series is a project I've been doing since it was extremely difficult in Europe to acknowledge that African art—traditional African art—had a tremendous influence on modern art. Many Picasso exhibitions and Braque exhibitions from this generation of Cubists were displayed with African masks at that time. I say “at that time” because when I started to criticize this, even with texts initially, it was not like today. Today it has become again more inclusive. But it has become inclusive particularly in Europe because people like us—artists, curators—have been putting the light on this lack of presence of traditional African art in modern art exhibitions.

There was an exhibition called “Picasso and the Masters” in 2009 in Paris. An incredible exhibition with 102 paintings and works by El Greco and all the artists who have influenced Picasso. There was not one single African mask in this exhibition. I came back home and I started to think—I think it's very important to imagine an object that could provide the viewers a moment of artistic experience, like they would be in the skin of Pablo Picasso looking at this object.

I took a mask—which is a copy but very much reflects what the Songye people were doing from Congo—and it took me weeks, but I started to reproduce the object by reproducing all the angles that the object was actually made of. We're back now to the hubris of the zero point. Pre-modern art, particularly African art, was not based on one single perspective, the zero point. It was based on a multitude of zero points. Picasso really enjoyed that and developed his theory and works of Cubism based on that. After I copied all the angles of this mask—they were lying on my desk, and I thought, “This object is actually aesthetic. It is based on a sort of fragmentation of perspective.” I wanted to create an experience for the viewers, so obvious, so direct. One day I started

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to copy this piece with a type of mirror. I glued the mirrors on the mask. At the first exhibition, people were looking at their portrait reflected in the fragmented mirror mask, and they said, “I look like a Picasso painting.”

There’s this moment where the artist is not here, where the artwork is living by itself. I like this idea—with the Mirror Mask—that some people might experience this: the fragmentation of their reflection in the mirror. I discovered with time, people telling me, “It’s really the fragmentation of myself. It’s how much we are not one subject. I think we are several subjects. And when I see myself fragmented, I feel all these subjects that make me.” I love that.

I think there’s also a sort of unconscious relationship with this fragmentation, particularly today. We’re more aware of that. We are also everywhere at the same time. Our personality is actually fragmented.

In the exhibition, there is this wall inspired by one of the most iconic buildings of architect Le Corbusier, who is the pope of Modernism, called the Church of Ronchamp. The windows—the walls—are inspired by architecture from Algeria, where I come from. The people have invented, during the last ten centuries, an architecture that plays with so much rigorous aesthetic—with the relation to the environment. During the day, when you look inside the Chapel of Ronchamp, it’s really beautiful. Inside, you have the light, but also there are some parts where, looking through the windows, you see the forest or the landscape really as an art piece. It’s a technique for windows that creates an enjoyment of the environment.

If you go now to Ghardaïa, the city where Le Corbusier went in the 1930s, they actually have the same windows. Le Corbusier was influenced by this architecture. He took inspiration and built Ronchamp. For me, it’s important to not judge, but just continue the conversation. To say, “Okay, I’m showing just what Le Corbusier did because I think it’s nice. I really love this church.” But at the same time, it’s important—through different senses of individuation—to say that the origin of this aesthetic comes from the vernacular clay architecture of Algeria, of southern Algeria, and from the people of Ghardaïa.

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