

Roswitha Haftmann Stiftung

Press Release

Zurich, 24 March 2004

The British artist Mona Hatoum is to receive the most valuable European art prize, awarded by the Roswitha Haftmann Foundation.

The Board of the Roswitha Haftmann Foundation in Zurich is pleased to announce that in 2004 the Roswitha Haftmann Prize (worth CHF 120,000) will go to Mona Hatoum. Born in 1952, Hatoum has lived in London since 1975 and is regarded as one of the most important artists of our time. Her work revolves around the theme of the vulnerability of the individual. The award will be made at a public ceremony in autumn 2004 in Zurich.

In Mona Hatoum's large-scale three-dimensional pieces and installations, everyday items – a bed, a chair, cooking utensils – turn from innocuous objects into threatening, often razor-sharp weapons which induce in the viewer an acute sense of being under threat, both physically and mentally. The dangers of life are all around us – as she demonstrates – and useful, perfectly harmless every-day objects can be turned into threatening instruments or even into weapons.

Alienation is a central issue in Hatoum's work, and evident above all in the substitution of one material by another: rubber, for instance, replaces metal in a child's bed that is consequently unable to fulfil its function and collapses. Typically, Hatoum combines latent danger with formal beauty – as in the over-sized vegetable slicers that look more like instruments of torture. And in a video in one installation, an exploration of her own body becomes a metaphor for human vulnerability.

The singular appeal of her works derives not least from the extreme precision of every detail and from their finely calculated placement. Her objects have a powerful sensual presence and it is this quality – together with their uncompromising nature and distinctive character – that has established Hatoum as one of the leading artists today.

Mona Hatoum was born to Palestinian parents and brought up in Beirut and is a British subject. Her work alludes to social/political concerns without being didactic or engaging in political activism.

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Following Walter de Maria, Maria Lassnig and Jeff Wall, Mona Hatoum is the fourth recipient of the Roswitha Haftmann Prize. The public award ceremony will take place on 18 November 2004 in the Kunsthaus Zürich.

The Roswitha Haftmann Foundation awards this prize every one to three years to a living artist whose work is of outstanding importance. Valued at CHF 120,000, this is the most generous art prize in Europe. The Board of the Foundation, which selects the prizewinner, consists of the Directors (or a representative) of the Kunstmuseum Bern, the Kunstmuseum Basel, the Museum Ludwig in Cologne and the Kunsthaus Zürich, and other members named in the Constitution of the Foundation or co-opted by the Board itself.

Roswitha Haftmann (1927-1998) – a language teacher who subsequently modelled for American photographic agencies – was married to the art historian Werner Haftmann. She ran her own art gallery in Zurich until her death in 1998. Born in St. Gallen, she relished social occasions and used her not inconsiderable fortune to set up a Foundation which now funds this award – the Roswitha Haftmann Prize.

The author Ludmila Vachtova has written a monograph, Roswitha Haftmann, remembering and celebrating the life of patron of the arts – renowned for her beauty and sophisticated appreciation of art. Published by Scheidegger und Spiess, it is available for CHF 38.– in the Museum Shop in the Kunsthaus Zürich.

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