

Simone Fattal

Cities at the Bottom of a Lake

September 18, 2026 – January 24, 2027



In fall 2026, the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris is devoting a major exhibition to Simone Fattal, a Lebanese American artist born in Damas, Syria, in 1942 and based in Paris for many years.

Bringing together some one hundred works, the exhibition covers over fifty years of her artistic trajectory—from early landscape paintings to ceramics and collages. Organized into successive groupings rather than chronologically, the exhibition sequence invites visitors to explore the key themes of a constantly renewed diverse body of work.

Enthralled with literature and archeology, Simone Fattal initially studied philosophy at the School of Letters in Beirut, then at the Sorbonne, complementing her training with classes at the École du Louvre.

In the late 1960s, it was in Beirut that she took up painting, endlessly depicting trees, the seaside and mountains, and pushing the limits of figuration. In 1972, she met the Lebanese poet and painter Etel Adnan (1925-2021), with whom she shared nearly fifty years of life and creative complicity. Forced to leave Lebanon in 1980 because of the civil war, Simone Fattal moved to Sausalito, California, north of San Francisco Bay. She temporarily gave up painting to devote herself fully to founding The Post-Apollo Press publishing house (1982-2017), whose name was inspired by the Apollo space program that she perceived as the beginning of a new era in the history of humanity.

In 1988 she began a ceramics practice after taking classes at the College of Marin and the San Francisco Art Institute. Out of clay emerged archaic anthropomorphic or animal figures that drew inspiration from the mythological epics of the Mediterranean basin, especially Mesopotamia or Ancient Greece, from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

The 2010s were witness to the end of The Post-Apollo Press publishing venture and her definitive return to Paris. In tandem with sculptures and collages exploring personal and collective narratives, landscape painting made a comeback. Executed in swift strokes, colorful watercolors and black ink drawings of plant motifs expressed her vision of nature animated by a boundless vital force.

This exhibition, the first at a Parisian museum, pays tribute to a major artist who is internationally renowned yet has seldom been shown in France.

PRESS RELEASE

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Simone Fattal
Dionysos
1999

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Practical information

Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris
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Open Tuesday through Sunday 10am to 6pm

Late hours on Thursday until 9:30 p.m.

Cultural activities Information and bookings

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Ticketing

Regular admission : €14
Reduced admission : €12
Combined ticket including the *Kerry James Marshall* exhibition: €20 / €18

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Early Paintings

Following her studies in Paris, Simone Fattal returned to Beirut in 1967. At the age of 25, she methodically taught herself to paint. Her first canvases dating to 1969-1970 introduce the exhibition. Inspired by the landscapes of Lebanon, such as Mount Sannine and the cedar forests of the Chouf, the paintings feature organic forms on the verge of abstraction. The soft muted palette of predominantly red and blue hues is reminiscent of the color scheme in the rugs her father collected, which were her first artistic reference. The discovery of modern art at *Expo 58* in Brussels also left a deep impression on the young teenager. Her pictorial language therefore blends Middle Eastern and Western influences.

The Warrior Figure and the Standing Man

Appearing in the 1990s, at the outset of Simone Fattal's sculptural practice, the warrior figure emerged from the trauma of the war experience in Lebanon. Far from waning, this body of work continued and grew with every new conflict. For the artist, the warriors are fighters and protectors, embodying resistance. Their hieratic stylized silhouettes recall the productions of ancient civilisations in the Mediterranean basin. An iconic large-format group stands alongside wounded warriors and young standing men of smaller dimensions. All of them raise questions about representation and the human condition, a widespread theme in traditional and avant-garde sculpture that also belongs to the lineage of Western art history.

Ancient Mythologies

The protagonists of foundational texts inhabit Simone Fattal's sculptural work. They relate to the artist's fascination with mythological tales and ancient vestiges: "There was Gilgamesh, Ishtar, Dionysus, and Ulysses. They all appeared one after another. I feel close to them." The cohort is completed by *Humbaba* (2026), a figure for whom the artist has a particular fondness. This guardian of the cedar forest, whose story is told in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (the oldest epic tale to date from the third millennium BCE), joins, in the exhibition, a spectacular series of large format ink drawings titled *La forêt* [Forest], (2023). For the artist, the tragedy of Humbaba, killed by Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu, has special resonance with our contemporary period, marked by humanity's detrimental behavior toward the environment.

Individual and Collective Narratives

The collages that emerged in the late 1980s are contemporaneous with Simone Fattal's first ceramics. These narrative maps, layering personal histories and History, are rooted in images collected from magazines like *Aramco World* and the arrangement of stories: archeological elements are in dialogue with references to modernity, such as Franz Marc's painting, *Die grossen blauen Pferde* [The Large Blue Horses] (1911), which led Simone Fattal to painting. While her pictorial and sculptural bodies of work tend toward abstract forms, collage incorporates fragments of reality by including media imagery; the artist regularly reiterates her concerns about the geopolitical situation in the Middle East.

In counterpoint to the collages, a series of clay sculptures, with rudimentary decoration inspired by the monolithic block, evokes stelae and menhirs as well as domestic or sacred representations.

Texts

Simone Fattal's work draws primarily upon literature and poetry. At the turn of the 1990s, epic tales, ancient legends, essays, and classical poems are embodied in her sculptures and collages. Following the publishing venture (with The Post-Apollo Press), painting returns in full force in the guise of abstract watercolor paintings like *La Suite en jaune N.1* [Yellow Suite No.1] (2016). Resembling calligraphic traces, black marks cover the vividly colored surface. The gestural dynamic of ink drips, however, contrasts with the yellow paint applied meticulously afterwards to fill up the spaces between the black traces. Some sculptures, such as *Stele* (2008), also bear inscriptions, in this case a Sufi thought by Ibn'Arabi (1165-1240).

The Post-Apollo Press

The Post-Apollo Press publishing adventure developed over the course of some thirty years (1982-2017). A selection of about thirty books on display in the heart of the exhibition capture the creative vitality and identity of the publishing projet, which began when Simone Fattal, exiled in San Francisco, came up with the idea of publishing Etel Adnan's poem *From A to Z* (1982) that had just been rejected by a publishing house. She then immersed herself fully in the project, taking on all of the roles: choosing the editorial direction, graphic design, cover art, and sometimes translating texts. The Post-Apollo Press distinguished itself from other publishing houses for its distribution to universities, translators, and other publishers, helping to foster recognition for the work of American women writers like Leslie Scalapino or Lyn Hejinian, and Europeans like Marguerite Duras as well as writers from the Arab world such as Rûmî, the 13th-century mystical poet and Sufi theologian.

White Paintings

Since the beginning of her artistic practice, Simone Fattal's paintings have evinced a mastery of color. In the late 1970s, the artist experienced a period of fascination with light. From her Beirut studio, located on the eleventh floor, she observed and captured on her canvases the metamorphosis of the mountain under the effects of the sun, experimenting with a palette of whites and pinks in shifting hues. Having explored this subject at length, she drew a final line in red chalk, thereby closing a chapter with *Le Mont Sannine* [Mount Sannine] (1979).

The Living World

From her earliest paintings to sculptures, collages, and recent watercolors, Simone Fattal has given constant attention to the living world, as can be seen in the intense and almost meditative observation of landscapes or in the repetition of the tree motif with anthropomorphic traits. This concern for nature is also embodied in her connection with clay, a material she describes as living. In her dialogue with clay, the artist lets it participate in the process of giving shape to the material. She also entrusts fire with the task of revealing the essence of colors. Her entire oeuvre relates to the dynamics of the world, from the flow of waves (*La Baie de Beyrouth* [Bay of Beirut] (1973) and rivers (*Sitter I*, 2023) to atmospheric changes (*Clouds*, 2023) and *Rayon vert* [Green Ray], 1979). While the cycle of blossoming depicted in the most recent vividly colored watercolors symbolizes rebirth and the regeneration of life for the artist, powerless witnesses to the brutality of war, such as *Man in the Desert*, 2000, or *The Migrant Family, Refugees by the Hearth*, 2004, underscore the fragility of life.

Constructions

The constructions are another aspect of Simone Fattal's sculptural work. The first house appeared in the form of a small open box in 1989, when the artist was attending classes at the College of Marin, near San Francisco. This sculpture led to many stylized domestic and religious constructions drawing inspiration from Antiquity (Mesopotamian ziggurats and Greek temples). They are often pared down to simple unfinished cubes, in which ancient vestiges and the ruins of war merge, collapsing temporalities. Increasingly numerous with each new conflict, the constructions are both shelters from and witnesses to the violence of the world. Exile rekindled Simone Fattal's memories of traditional Syrian houses and her childhood homes, which gave rise to some works titled simply *House*.

This concluding section of the exhibition also features a series of abstract paintings. Black geometric patterns against a white background explore pure abstraction, echoing the early 20th-century avant-garde movements. In these paintings, the artist also evokes the movement of celestial bodies in the cosmos.

A catalogue created in close collaboration with Simone Fattal complements the exhibition.

Minimalist in its design, the monograph reproduces a large array of the works on view. Along with this abundant iconography, the catalogue features new texts, notably a contribution by Penelope Curtis, former director of the Tate Britain, as well as a text by the artist herself and a biography.

Blending critical rigor and an intimate viewpoint, this book highlights visual artist, author, and publisher Simone Fattal's multifaceted creativity.