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SANCTUARIES | MONA SAUDI

by Anastasia Nysten for Selections Magazine
Courtesy of Selections Magazine.

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In an attempt to delve into the private universe of artists and art collectors, Selections is exploring the sanctuaries of various men and women, some living and others who have passed away, and shedding light on places that remain out of bounds for the majority of people. We examine how these artists and art collectors live, what surrounds them and how they go about thinking, dreaming and creating. In order to get as personal as possible, we came up with customised questions that we then presented to each of these men and women (and in the case of those who passed away to their children), tailoring our queries to the way each of them lives and goes about creating his or her work. In parallel, we shot a short film, which you can view on our website, that navigates each artist and art collector's sanctuary. The film allows viewers to get up close and personal with artists and art collectors who seldom open their personal space up to the world. A fascinating artistic journey into the hearts and minds of some of the region's most intriguing people.

Jordanian artist Mona Saudi's career path is something of an epic journey. The 73-year-old artist was born in Amman, Jordan, in a conservative family in which women were prevented from pursuing higher education. She ran away from home at age 17 and took a cab to Beirut, which then was a cosmopolitan capital city and the centre of the Arab World's artistic scene, and in Beirut she had her first exhibit at Café de la Presse. From Beirut, she moved to Paris and the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. It was in Paris that she first started using stone for her sculptures – a medium that she would end up utilizing for the ensuing decades. She is also well known for her drawings inspired by poetry.

Since childhood you've always been occupied by questions of existence and creation, to what extent is that fascination portrayed in your sculptures?

These questions still occupy me since childhood. One of my early sculptures is entitled "Mystery of Creation."

Do you visualize your sculptures beforehand?

At the beginning I used to make samples in clay or plaster, then I started to compose my sculptures directly in stone, step by step.

Do you see your own reflection in your work?

I work with all my heart. I give my total knowledge and my total self to a piece. For me sculpture is a research in form so I just think of how to form a three-dimensional sculpture in stone. It is form and not feelings or ideas.

Describe your working process.

I work for two to three months at least on the same piece, and the polishing might take one or more months. I do the polishing with papers and water. Stones are my friends, and while working, I take care to bring out the richness of the materials. Some stones have colours, I love this element of colour to be kept and to be part of the whole sculpture because these are not added colours, and they are colours that come from the original stone. Sometimes I leave some parts of the stone chiselled to show its maximum beauty. I would polish just a small piece. And the contrast between the rough and the soft sides gives a kind of richness for the form. I polish some sculptures to the end.

What was the first piece of art that really shook you up?

Picasso's Blue Period.

As a student in Paris, you made sculptures in a tiny room. How can you compare your studio today and your work in it to that tiny room?

In the École des Beaux-Arts, I worked in the large studio and in my tiny room just on the weekends.

Your studio is set aside from your house in a garden that is alive with shrubs and flowers. Is your studio the centre of your inspiration? How much time do you spend there?

My inspiration has multiple sources. For me the sound of chiselling is a music that I love. Sometimes I spend two hours or 18 hours a day, and I never get fed up in my life because I need more time than what's given to me.

You said that you used to be absorbed by your surroundings at the Museum of Modern Art and in the exhibition halls of Paris and that has marked the beginning of your artistic life. Tell us more about that.

It is in Paris that I discovered past and present civilizations, the richness of human creativity.

When an artist shifts cultural locations, does that affect their work?

Every situation has a kind of impact, big or small.

Does the history of a place have an impact on the production of your ideas?

It is more the important events, like the announcement of Palestinian Land Day.

You've said "the West is not an example for us, we should have confidence in our values." Tell us more how you integrate those values in your art.

We should not be imitators, but creators. We are people of abstract, symbolic, poetic cultures.

What are your ambitions for your art?

Just to continue creating more sculptures, my way of life.

How do you think creativity is sustained with years?

It has been my dream since childhood to create forms, and I just work to fulfill that dream.

Start the following sentence:

... Mother/Earth... and... glorifying life... are the constituents of Mona Saudi's sculptural world.

Where do you consider yourself to be at this stage in your career?

I have done hundreds of sculptures but until now I feel that I'm at the very beginning, and I have done nothing at all from what I could have been able to do, so let's see what might come in the future.

