



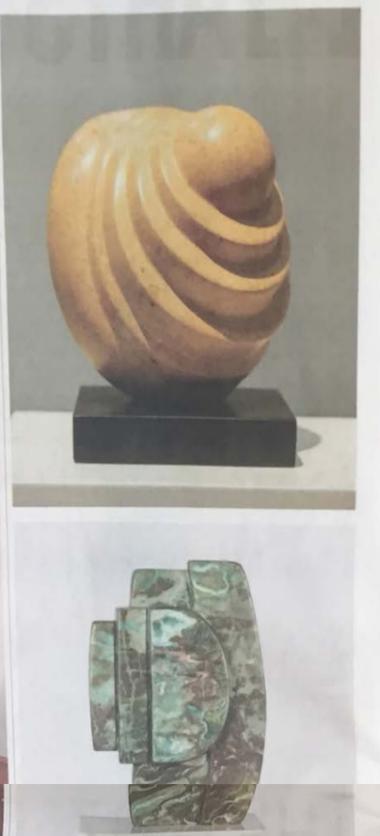
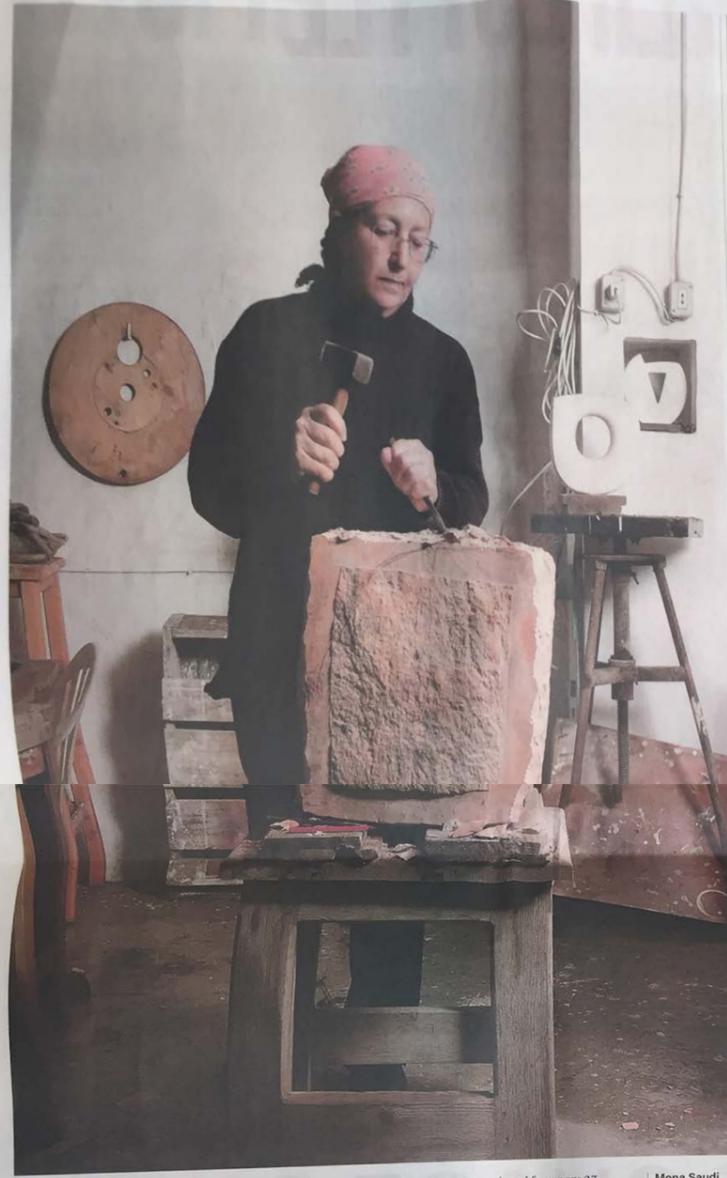
A 1965 work by Mona Saudi, titled 'Mother/Earth', crafted four years after her first sculpture, which had the same name. Sharjah Art Foundation.

When Mona Saudi was a 17-year-old growing up in Amman, she was already sure of what she would do: move to Beirut and become an artist. So, with a year left at school, she ran away from home, taking a taxi to Beirut, the centre of Arab artistic and intellectual life. By the time she turned 18, she had already held an exhibition, at Cafe de la Presse in the old *An-Nahar* newspaper building, and was off to the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. "This was how I planned my life," she says, dismissing the idea that this was remarkable for a young woman in 1963. "I wanted to do an exhibition and then go to Paris. Nobody supported me. I just decided to make my life by myself, so I abolished all kinds of obstacles - family, society, etcetera." The artist's style hasn't changed since then. "From my first sculpture, called *Mother/Earth* [1965], I found my own way in my art," she says. "There's no time to waste."

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## THE SHAPE OF A SCULPTOR

Jordanian artist Mona Saudi's life work is currently subject of a retrospective exhibition in Sharjah. **Melissa Gronlund** examines her remarkable career



City (2011), a sculpture inspired by Italo Calvino. Saudi's work traffics in the embers of myth - and has acquired its own creation myth itself. As a young child in Amman, her house was metres away from the Nymphaeum, the ancient Roman public baths, and she used to play among its ruins. What might seem unimaginably abstract to most of us - the presence, through carved stone, of ancient cultures among us - constituted the building blocks of her imagination. It also allowed her to develop a connection to Arab history that is different - and older - than that of her contemporaries: her reference points are the Ammonites, Edomites and Nabateans, whose stone carvings are found in Jordan. Her influence later included statuary from farther-flung, but equally antique, civilisations such as Etruscan, Greek and Aztec.

These ancient forms have provided a stable source of ideas throughout her four decades of work. Saudi has said that her first sculpture, *Mother/Earth* of 1965, made while she was in Paris, responded to the burgeoning presence of Palestinian refugee camps in Amman. She participated in the May 1968 protests while living in Jordan, and, on her return to Amman and move in 1970 to Beirut, she was active in the Palestinian cause, producing the film *Testimony of Palestinian Children in Wartime* (1972), in collaboration with Iraqi director Kais Al-Zubaidi. As a remnant of this time, the Sharjah exhibition includes the ink and watercolour work *The Land Gives Birth to Its Children* (1979), produced in support of Palestine. But the Lebanese Civil War, which she lived through in Beirut, seems to have sparked a desire to transcend everyday matters. "I don't reflect political, temporary events," she says. "I don't like direct, expressive art."

It is interesting to compare her work, arranged across one of the ground floor galleries of the Sharjah Art Museum, with its new neighbour, Century of Flux, the semi-permanent installation of the Barjeel Art Foundation's collection of works of Arab modernism. (Her work is represented in that show, too: her painting *Lovers*, from 1963, which was part of that first Cafe de la Presse exhibition.) Century of Flux features topical questions similar to the ones she first wrestled with - the political potential of art, the possibility for a unified Arab culture - as well as a trove of promising formal connections: the idea of her work as a fattening, feminising of Egyptian sculptor Adam Henein, or a comparison between her solid, curved sculptures and late Lebanese painter and sculptor Saloua Raouf Choucair's stacked, geometric forms. Where Saudi moves to boil forms down to an essence, Choucair complicates, layering different systems of meaning: two divergent trajectories that, when seen in person, appear less opposing than two different sides of the same conversation. Saudi's retrospective is also a reminder of the strong role that women have played in Arab modernism - a theme that Salwa Mikdadi, the lead curator of the Barjeel Art Foundation show, investigated 20 years ago in her *Forces of Change* touring exhibition, which looked at 70 female Arab artists, among them Saudi and Choucair. Today, it's worth noting that a quarter of the artists in the Barjeel show are women. Indeed, against images of passive Arab women, picture this: Mona Saudi at 17, whizzing in a taxi towards Beirut, with a resolve that has not subsided since.

Mona Saudi: *Poetry and Form* is at the Sharjah Art Museum until June 7.

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The works in Saudi's retrospective at the Sharjah Art Museum, curated by Hour Al Qasbi and Noora Al Mualla of the Sharjah Art Foundation, are smooth, modernist sculptures of solidly built curves. Thick forms give way to small apertures that look like they have been bored by centuries of dripping water; her subject is life, rooted in the earth. One sculpture, in yellow marble, of a stepped series of circles is called *The Seed* (2007). "Everything begins as a seed," she says. "An idea or a child." The 2006 *Mother/Earth* is a vertical slab in which an egg-like protuberance nestles. *Moods of Earth and Humans* (2014), a thick circle whose face is left unpolished, suggests change as much as stability. Saudi carves the sculptures herself, chiselling away, then sanding them down, and her forms give voice to the striations and grains of the different stones she uses: the brown-and-green veins of Jordanian jade in the stacks of *Growth* (2002) or the star-like white flecks of black marble in

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Mona Saudi, above, works with a variety of materials, including, from top, marble for 'The Seed' from 2007 and Jordanian jade for 2002's 'Growth'. Sharjah Art Foundation: Mona Saudi / Lawrence Shabazi