

MONA SAUDI'S SCULPTURE GARDEN

Located in the heart of Hamra, Beirut, the studio of renowned sculptor **Mona Saudi** is an otherworldly space. **Rebecca Anne Proctor** pays a visit to the sculptress and speaks to her about the universal meaning behind her stone creations.



The streets in Hamra are bustling with traffic, street vendors, full cafés and restaurants. One can really feel Beirut in this area of the city — it's alive and colorful, boasting a mish mash of cultures, classes, beautiful buildings and ones that are old and worn from years of war. Mona Saudi, an artist I have greatly come to admire since living in the Middle East, stands by the side of the road beckoning the driver to come hither. Her tone is resolute and her manner determined — much like her sculpture. With an energy that so calmly seems to diffuse the aggressive and vibrant air around us, she guides me to her house. We walk down a little pathway until we reach a small garden. There, amidst trees, shrubs and flowers are her stone creations. They are interspersed with the natural plants in a way that makes them seem to have been born from the same earth — akin to living creatures themselves and in a place so idyllic and far removed from the street scene I just witnessed. They are found in an array of curvaceous and abstract shapes — one so different from the next in color and form, but all exuding a peace that is so hard to find elsewhere.

We go inside and sit down in a cozy area surrounded by her sculptures and not too far from the garden. She lights a cigarette and we speak. "Since I was a child I have always had this feeling that we belong to this earth and that everything is divine," she tells me. "I feel that there is spirituality in this earth. Even as a child I would refer to this world as 'Mother Earth' and this is why even the first sculpture that I made in stone in 1965 was entitled *Mother Earth*. Until now, from time to time, I have made new sculptures and given them the same title: *Mother Earth*." She points across the room as says, "In 1980, I did that one which is again called *Mother Earth*. So, I have many 'Mother Earths', but then I work in a material that comes from the earth. When you work in stone all of your life, and this stone comes from a beam in the warmth of the earth, you can feel the endless beauty and colors of this material. You feel it in colors and forms, in hardness and softness. This stone is my friend and it makes my belonging to this earth much deeper."

I take a sip of my Turkish coffee and Mona tells me how she believes that life and the universe are in perpetual movement. "The universe is a mystery and it is a mystery that will go on forever," she says. "And we are living in this mystery. I think this mystery of creation enters into art because there is always something mysterious when you behold an art piece. It is the mystery that makes good art. You can find this in ancient Egyptian art, in the smile of the Mona Lisa and also, a bit in my art. This mystery makes art continually a part of the world. An artwork has its own inner life. When I am here I live between my sculptures and I don't ever

get fed up of looking at them. They talk to me and I always find that there is something mysterious in them." There is indeed. It is as if her sculptures yearned to say something.

We take a pause and I can hear the honking of fast cars outside. The hot Beirut air makes everything a bit heavier — especially as there is limited air conditioning. It gives a drama and permanence to the surroundings. "This is a silly time we are living in," she says. "All human beings belong to the earth. It is one earth and we are one people so I hate the idea of factions and frontiers in colors and religions. All of these frontiers are fake. The condition of life for a human being since several thousand years has not changed: we are born, we live, we die, we have pain, we love, we have children and they grow up. What has changed after all of these years is just something superficial."

We hadn't meant to talk about the wars that are plaguing the region, but it seems inevitable. "I think it's so absurd!" she says. "And the greatest absurdity in it is that it goes through violence. And through this violence, innocent people, refugees and homes are destroyed. It's easy to make destruction but difficult to build things up again. I lived through the Lebanese Civil War. You can't compare it with the violence that is taking place today, but since that time I feel that war is like an epidemic. It started very small and it just goes all over. And now the epidemic that is going through our part of the world right now is horrible."

Our talk turns to peace and art. "My art is always peaceful," says Mona. "It brings people to a state of serenity. I never go to violence in my art. I think the role of the artist is to create something of serenity and beauty that adds to life. I think life is very valuable."

Mona's current project involves the creation of what will become her permanent museum. Located in Mishref, just south of Beirut on a hill, the two-story building looks out to the sea and is surrounded by lots of greenery. "It will be nice to finish this project this year," she says with a smile. "This is my 50th year doing sculpture and I will be 70 in October. But until now, I have this feeling that I haven't done anything yet. I think there a lot that I have to do and that I haven't done yet. There is a lot that I would like to do in my sculpture. This is my inner feeling."

It is time for me to leave. Mona takes me on a tour of her sculptures. The rooms of her house are filled with them. They resonate color, form, life and the beauty of Mother Earth. We walk back out into the garden. Her sculptures seem more familiar now — almost alive. It's as if they, too, want to say goodbye. ■

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(Facing page)
Mona Saudi
at work.
Photography
by Ghada El-
Hajj.

(This page)
Sunset in Pink,
2012. Amman
limestone. 25
x 22.5 x 22.5
cm. Courtesy
of Lawrie
Shabibi and
the artist.