

Sharjah art exhibition showcases lifelong journey of Mona Saudi

Many of Saudi's works were inspired by Arab poets Mahmoud Darwish and Adonis.

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Unique experience. Ruler of Sharjah Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed al-Qasimi (L) listens to artist Mona Saudi at the official opening of her exhibition. (Sharjah Art Foundation)

SHARJAH - "Mona Saudi: Poetry and Form," a comprehensive exhibition of stone sculptures, drawing and paintings presented by Sharjah Art Foundation in collaboration with Sharjah Art Museum, sheds light on the renowned Jordanian artist's decades-long career, which began in the 1960s.

Many of the works by Saudi, who at the age of 12 had already decided to become an artist, were inspired by Arab poets Mahmoud Darwish and Adonis.

"It's been a long journey for me and my inspiration has been (as well) the ancient civilisations, notably Nabataean, Sumerian and Egyptian," said Saudi, 72.

This inspiration, she said, must have come at an early age, when she grew up in her Amman home next to the ancient Roman site of Sabeem Al Horyat (Nymphaeum). Saudi took up drawing, painting and poetry-writing while at school. Her drawings tended to be sculptural, she said. Ultimately, she opted for the permanence of stone and directly carving on stone, which she studied at the Ecole nationale superieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

Saudi had her first exhibition in Beirut when she was only 17. The year she spent in Beirut at a boarding school before she went to Paris proved highly influential and helped her to break into the vibrant artistic life of the city, resulting in close friendships and interactions with Adonis and Darwish.

At the Sharjah show, Saudi's finely realised sculptures made of a variety of stones from all over the world, but mainly from the Middle East, are complemented by her drawings, paintings and silkscreens based on the poems of Darwish. Her collection in ink, titled "The Hand of Stone Draws the Place," (produced 1993-98) was inspired by Adonis's poetry.

In Paris, Saudi was part of the student revolution of 1968, which inspired her to return to Amman. There she worked with children in a Palestinian refugee camp, which resulted in a path-breaking publication titled "In Time of War: Children Testify: Drawings by Palestinian Children."

The exhibition curator and President of Sharjah Art Foundation Hoor al-Qasimi, said: "Hers has almost been a solitary endeavour. She trained in Paris and you will see a lot of the influences from there but the stones she has worked on are from near her hometown."

"For us at the Sharjah Art Foundation, it is important to showcase artists from the region who have made an impact and to give them a platform to exhibit their work," Qasimi added.

Noora al-Mualla, co-curator of the exhibition, said in a news release: "The exhibition 'Mona Saudi: Poetry and Form' is an important opportunity to get to know Saudi's rich and unique experience in its various stylistic and expressive components, especially in the sculptural works, which juxtapose the solidity of the material with the flow of poetic shapes and compositions. We hope that this exhibition will be an enjoyable and thought-provoking experience for the local art audience."

Saudi has championed the Palestinian cause from her early years, working with many painters from the Palestinian territories on exhibitions and publications about Palestine.

Critics have noted the serene nature of her works despite the political turmoil that often surrounds her: from the Palestinian territories to the Lebanese civil war and the later wars.

Her work explores themes of permanence, growth, fertility and the natural phenomena of sun and moon and meditative moods. She creates movement in basic shapes by repeating their forms, varying their dimensions or cutting them across one another. These she explored by using different types and colour of stone — white marble, pink limestone, green marble and black diorite — sourced mainly from the Middle East. The abstract forms of her sculptures achieve the perfection of poetry with their smooth flow, while her drawings and paintings complement her sculptural work with the very same abstract forms being adorned with poetic writing.

Saudi said she did not believe in artificial borders and expressed admiration for the highly cosmopolitan nature of life in the United Arab Emirates, with the intermingling of so many nationalities. She shrugs of her achievements and truly stays humble, preferring to work and persevere, although she expressed a desire to create more public sculptures, including in Sharjah.

The exhibition runs through June 7.



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