



# Carving a niche: how Chaouki Choukini creates abstract sculptures



**Melissa Gronlund**  
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The Lebanese artist chisels intricate, sombre sculptures, pockmarked with hope. Melissa Gronlund untangles

them

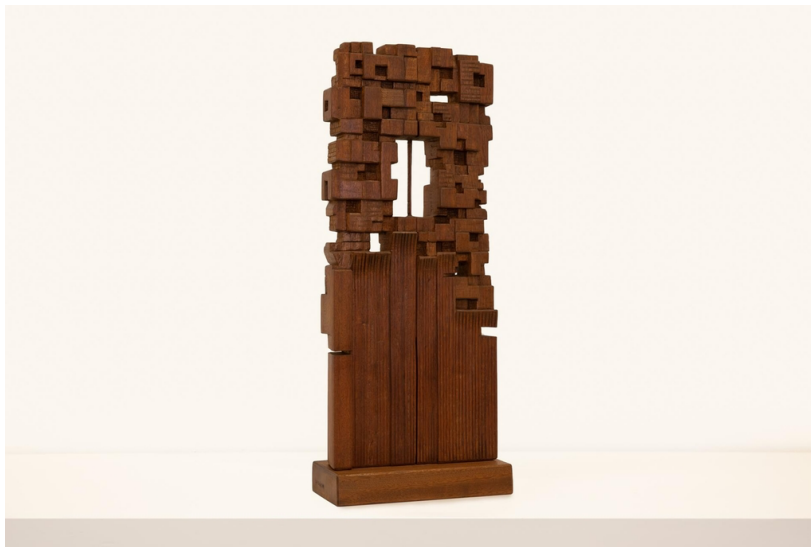


Chaouki Choukini at work in France, where he lives.  
Courtesy Green Art Gallery

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Green Art Gallery in Dubai has always had a historical bent – part of its broader interest in the Gulf over the past 10 years in researching and exhibiting Arab modernism. The gallery has recently shown the work of early and mid 20th-century Egyptian painters such as Samir Rafi, Inji Efflatoun and Effat Naghi, and currently it is turning its gaze to the finely carved, abstract sculptures made by Lebanese artist Chaouki Choukini. Shaped out of wood, marble and bronze, the works bear a proud verticality, rooted in the landscape but somehow musical and rhythmic. Choukini speaks of the “cord”, or a single line that passes through his sculptures, holding shapes together and forming new growths. This exhibition provides the chance to see the progression of these ideas over 40 years of work, bringing together sculptures from 1979 to the present.

Choukini was born in Choukine, Lebanon, in 1946 and, like many Arab artists of the era, moved to Paris. “I had just begun at university and was taking classes to prepare to study medicine in Egypt,” he recalls. “At the same time – almost like a hobby – I was making sculptures in clay and terracotta.” On the basis of those, he won a scholarship from the Lebanese government to study in Europe.



‘Improvisation’ (2019) is carved from an African wood considered closest to genuine mahogany. Photo Anna Shtraus

“I came from a modest family and the studies were free,” he says, explaining that his parents did not object. And off he went to Paris. It was 1967 – the year before radical unrest in the city – but Choukini was installed in an older school, Ecole des Beaux-Arts, where academics still reigned. It was there that he found the materials he would work with his whole life – wood, clay and stone.

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**Chaouki Choukini**

said. “I was taken by the idea of sculpting from live models, but quickly I was converted into working with my forms from my imagination. Always with elemental materials – like plaster – and then little by little I started to work on stone, and there I started to really have abstract tendencies in my work.”

He also met his wife, a Japanese artist named Ayako, at the Ecole, which proved significant both for his life and his artwork. She had an uncle, Fumio Otani, who was also a sculptor, making monumental works in wood and marble. Choukini became his informal apprentice and from him learnt Japanese techniques of working with the material, using specialised tools such as Japanese scissors, small adzes and saws that were different from the kind he'd come across in Lebanon or in Paris.

“It was academics, but I was interested in it because in Lebanon, we had not had the chance to see classical sculptures or modernist ones by Rodin or Maillol,” he

He also learnt what he terms a more spiritual technique – an esprit of working with the material. “It was a question of what does it mean to touch the material, and to make something with it,” he explains. “Above all, a spiritual question. I learnt those techniques from Monsieur Otani, but I also created my own vision of art and sculpture. I wanted to conserve something for myself.”



Chaouki Choukini's bronze sculpture calls to mind an unsteady stack of books by a bedside. Anna Shtraus

Choukini's work has remained relatively constant: the same belief in modernist forms wends its way through his early pieces as it does through his later. Sculptures made this year call to mind his early contemporaries, such as Saloua Raouda Choucair and Mona Saudi, Lebanese artists who also studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Like them, Choukini's insistence on the abstract throughout four decades feels like an act of holding his nerve, expressing emotions through acts alone, rather

than resorting to words. A 2009 sculpture, a thick rectangular block of blond wood, is scored with three deep cuts; in the centre, Choukini has carved a small aperture, where a slim morsel of wood stands precariously. The title is *Gaza Wounds*, made in response to the Gaza-Israel conflict of 2008-2009.

Choukini remained outside Lebanon during the civil war of 1975-1990, settling mostly in Jordan and France, but the conflict left a strong impression on him, imbuing his work with a sombre feel. "I was very affected," he says. "It was like my work could no longer aspire for joy, but had to find another aesthetic, another beauty, another way of signalling beauty. It became, instead, sober, tragic."

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to mind books by a bedside, in the kind of unsteady stack born of a lack of time and a

This sobriety is never quite allowed to go unchecked: flourishes of intimacy or hope pockmark the sculptures. An untitled work made in blackened bronze from this year calls

surfeit of ambition. A square window is set – improbably straight – into the centre of the sculpture, while a rounded stone seems to weigh the whole work down: the effect is both of permanence and contingency. *Improvisation*, made in wood this year, is topped by a mosaic-like arch of chiselled-out blocks of different sizes, evoking a musical riff that bends backwards on itself and digresses in fits and starts.

“You can see in this exhibition a sort of progression or pathway through time,” he says, sketching out an arc from the more monumental to the more minutely carved. “Now I’m 73 years old, and I work by myself. I have to be able to turn and carve the blocks of wood on my own. I now make sculptures that are not that big, not that heavy, but despite that, there is in each a monumentality – the capacity to take on another dimension and an openness towards expansion.

“I saw in this show all my work, and I felt like I was attached to all the pieces, without having to say this one is good, this one is the best,” he says, with a laugh. “I felt like they were all my babies.”

*Chaouki Choukini is at Green Art Gallery in Alserkal Avenue, Dubai, until January 11*

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