



THE POETRY *of* WOOD

*The lyrical wooden sculptures of **Chaouki Choukini** encapsulate his beloved Lebanese landscape as well as memories from his childhood, writes Rebecca Anne Proctor*

Pavillon de lumière et d'obscurité. 2014, Iroko wood. 69 x 20 x 19.5 cm.

They stand proud and erect with a humble demeanour. Smooth slabs of wood that have been chiselled, etched and polished with the expert movements of the artist's hand are transformed into beings that offer a life-like presence to a given room. "Behind each sculpture there is an essence; a life that is present," says Lebanese, Paris-based sculptor Chaouki Choukini on the phone. While the abstract forms unfurl themselves like waves in the sea, gentling rising and falling through various depths, the forms Choukini creates often have physical traits. They harken back to the artist's memories of South Lebanon, his childhood and the beautiful natural landscape of his homeland.

An exhibition opening at Dubai's Green Art Gallery on 18 September entitled *Poetry in Wood* offers work that spans four decades of Choukini's career. The sculptures on view aim to provide an overview of the artist's ever-evolving craft, from his works with Cubist overtones to pieces that have a likeness to Kufi script. Then there are others that reveal silent abstract faces offering solemn references to times of war. "Through my work I try and record my memories—recollections of people, places and things that mean something to me."

Also on display will be several drawings, watercolours and sketches showcasing the artist's preparatory work and artistic musings of the world around him. Through these delicate works on paper depicting cityscapes, remote villages, memories of places and the empty desert landscapes, Choukini's sculptures find their equals. A sketch is usually what begins the process, with the sculpture coming to life on paper before it is given physical form. Choukini will often chisel away at a sculpture for years before a piece reaches near completion and he moves onto the next one.

Constant to the artist's work is the idea of presence and absence. "When one leaves his or her home there are still traces that they leave behind—memories that linger in the air," says the artist. Evident from the names that he bestows each work: *Claire de Lune*, *Chardon (thistle)*, *Tournesols (Sunflowers)*, *Colonnes (column)*, and *Pavilion de lumière (Pavilion of Light)*—Choukini's sculptures remember an experience, a thought or an idea. For example, *Chardon* refers to the Arab Spring. "It is one of the most important sculptures in the show," says the artist. "The prickly part of the thistle or Chardon has hurt the spring." Here he uses nature once again as a metaphor for other experiences. "It is difficult for an artist not to be touched by external events," says Choukini, still referencing the effects of the Arab Spring. "I am still optimistic that we can work things out. We must learn to live with one another and accept our differences. This is how peace will triumph."

Another work that will be on view is *Desert*. A befitting work for a Dubai exhibition, it reflects not only the desert landscape of the Arabian Peninsula but also the Arabic poetry of the Jahiliyyah or Pre-Islamic period. While Lebanon has no desert, Choukini remembers how growing up he would read the poetry of these early Arabs and how they described so eloquently the vast emptiness of the Arabian landscape. "I would constantly think of the desert far away and what life was like there," he says. Later on, he would train as a sculptor in Jordan for three years where he would be closer to such barren land of sand.

Light, space, abstract forms and the fleeting nature of physical presence—these are all elements that come to play

in each of Choukini's lustrous wooden sculptures. The artist's reference to nature becomes the medium for exploration. "When the landscape is empty it is almost metaphysical—man is still there," says the artist. Emptiness, nostalgia, the past and the future—all are encapsulated here within the smooth and graceful lines of Choukini's creations. Wiry in nature—seen through the chipped surfaces and often thin, vertical limbs—the artist's sculptures are yet resolute and strong. There's an integrity here within the wood—a bare honesty that pendulates between the artist's memory and a distant, peaceful dream. ■

Poetry in Wood runs from 18 September until 30 October 2016.
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Tournesols A, 2014. Bois wood. 76 x 38 x 141 cm.

