

# The fluidity of wood

## Chaouki Choukini's expressions in wood echo evolution of man and his surroundings

Jyoti Kalsi, Special to Weekend Review    Published: December 21, 2019  
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DUBAI: Chaouki Choukini fell in love with wood sculpture when he began spending his school vacations volunteering at a carpenter's workshop near his home in Beirut. "I enjoyed it because I could make my own toys," he says. Later at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, he worked mostly with clay and stone. After meeting and training with Japanese maestro of wood sculpting, Fumio Otani, Choukini was inspired to return to wood and developed his unique language of mystical abstraction. Green Art Gallery is celebrating the French-Lebanese artist's five-decade long practice with an exhibition surveying his work from the 1970s to the present and the release of his monograph, *Corpus*, published by Kaph Books.

Lebanese countryside

'Constant source of inspiration'

Choukini's inspirations range from Japanese minimalism, philosophy and art history to architecture, nature and contemporary life, but his most important influence is his memories of the landscape of the Lebanese countryside. His horizontal sculptures of the 1970s and 80s, titled *Lieux* (places) and *Paysages* (landscapes) feature mounds, depressions and furrows alluding to mountains, valleys, rivers and lakes.

"My memory of the view of Beirut from the air plane window as I took off for Paris in 1967 is a constant source of inspiration for me. When you leave

your home, you leave behind traces and memories that linger in the air. My horizontal sculptures represent aerial views of imaginary landscapes that bear traces of human beings who once inhabited them. These metaphysical works contemplate human existence and our relationship with the Earth,” Choukini says.

### Grains and knots

His later vertical sculptures are anthropomorphic totem-like forms. “These works echo the human body. They seem alive because as I work on the wood with my chisel, I can feel my own energy fusing with the energy of the wood,” Choukini says.

The beauty of these works is that they look different from every side. A piece may look like a solid polished block with the grains and knots of the wood forming a nice pattern on the smooth surface, but walk around it and carved on the other side are mysterious crevices, steps, nicks, cuts, spikes, and windows that play with the light, as well as enigmatic elements such as a pebble placed inside a cavity.

“I try to create a fine balance and a palpable tension between rough and smooth textures, positive and negative spaces, organic and mechanical elements, light and shade, the real and the imaginary; and I like to put in some surprises for the viewer such as the pebble, which signifies the desire to preserve something precious,” Choukini says.

### Silent vibrations of the universe

The artist’s signature motif is a cord created by whittling the wood down to a fine line.

He likens working on wood to playing a violin, so the delicate strings stretching across two ends of the sculptures allude to the silent vibrations of the universe. In some works, they symbolise the connection between our

inner and outer worlds and different elements of the cosmos, and in others such as Claire de Lune, a cord stretching from the base up to a square window at the top signifies the human quest for enlightenment.

The show also includes works in marble and bronze, and some multi-layered sculptures composed of different types of wood and brass. “I have experimented with various materials, but I prefer to work with wood because I can use simple tools and work on my own with total freedom,” Choukini says.

The exhibition will run at Green Art Gallery, Alserkal Avenue, until January 30.

Jyoti Kalsi is a Dubai-based arts enthusiast.



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A series of events will be held at Wadi Hatta Park from December 26 to January 11

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