

UNTITLED

TELLING PEOPLE WHAT THEY'RE GOING TO READ BEFORE THEY READ IT MAKES AS LITTLE SENSE AS TELLING THEM WHAT THEY'RE GOING TO SEE BEFORE THEY SEE IT. SO—NO TITLE.

Words by Serene Al-Ahmad. Photography by Joseph Zakarian.

"PLEASE TOUCH!" THAT'S HOW Anees Maani greeted visitors to his first solo exhibition in ten years of sculpting. Touch is certainly one way to enjoy his work. His two sculptures in the National Gallery of Fine Arts Park in Jabal Al Webdeh are a hit with children, who are almost always sitting on—or in—the pieces.

"I made those two pieces for children," Anees explains. "When my art is in a public space, I like it to be on the floor, not on a pedestal. I like for people to be close to it, play with it, whatever."

Most of Anees' pieces of work are untitled, and it's not because he can't be bothered to name them. If a work is titled "dragonfly," he says, people will only see a dragonfly in it. But if it's untitled, people may see a dragonfly, or a dragon, or any other thing. Anees is most amused by people's random suggestions and interpretations of what his work is about.

"That's the thing about three dimensions. Human beings must find a familiar form in them, otherwise they would develop a problem," he says, bursting out in laughter. "This is why people always see faces or sheep in stones or clouds. There's more room for interpretation in the three dimensional world."

In 2006, Anees contributed one piece to a group exhibition in the Royal Cultural Center. Most people who saw it blushed or coyly laughed at the sight: it looked like a perfect male organ. In fact, he later explained, it was a small reproduction of a Nabatean monument in Petra, the ancient city which has had a huge influence on the artist's work.

"Like many other artists, nature is my source of inspiration. I love minimalist intrusion in nature, like the Nabateans have done in Petra. It taught me a lot," he says. He explains his admiration for the Nabatean god Kaabo, who was represented in art by the simple, basic form of a cube.

Anees's latest works, which he exhibited, are all minimal in composition in that they



have one basic form, and one element that moves it. This is the influence of Nabatean architecture and sculpture on his artistic philosophy. "Nabatean art was the last refuge of the ancient Middle Eastern art before it was influenced by the logic of the Greeks," he explains.

Nature also has a huge influence on the sculptor's work. The current exhibition, showcases 23 pieces, most made of natural materials, including stone and wood. As

artist and art critic Ghassan Mafadleh explains, all the pieces are organic and abstract sculptures.

Mafadleh says that Anees is one of the few Arab sculptors whose work is contemporary. "Maani does not imitate nature. He abstracts his material from nature, and gives them a new form and shape that did not exist before, while keeping the natural essence of the material." To those critics who say that Maani's work is too abstract to be under-



stood, Mafadleh retorts that unlike language and text, sculpture and art, are not always about messages, but rather about aesthetic values and visual relations.

"It could be like a stone in a stream, or part of a tree," Anees says of his work. "It is like it has been exposed to nature's elements, such as erosion. It feels like it grows from the inside out."

It's been a good year for Anees. He participated in a workshop in Scotland, and he was accepted into the Fourth International Sculpture Symposium held in Amman in June. He now has two pieces in a public space, a long time dream of his—and not just any public space. Being in the National Gallery park, he says, is like securing official recognition as a Jordanian sculptor. And though this is an accomplishment, considering Anees is only 34, he still thinks it came late.

"I've had the design concept for one of those two pieces for over ten years now, but I couldn't have executed such works without the help of institutions," he says. Anees feels that he has missed on a lot of opportunities because of the absence of local institution that will choose artists based on quality of work rather than fame. "The institutions, which should be supporting local artists, such as the Greater Amman Municipality, the Ministry of Culture, or the private sector, don't have the responsibility nor the artistic background to give the right opportunities to the right artists," he says.

But the young artist has found his own way to stay true to himself while putting bread on the table. He worked on the recently published *Field Guide to Jordan*, along with his wife and brothers. The guide documents the geology, archaeology, and the flora and

fauna of Jordan, and also sheds light on the environmental threats facing the Kingdom. Anees also contributed photographs to the book *Megalithic Jordan*, published this month by the American Center for Oriental Research.

He has a line of jewelry, "Bits of Petra," which are necklaces and paperweights inspired by the city, and he keeps the website which he created five years ago, www.go2petra.com, updated with the latest information on how to enjoy the ancient city which he loves. ■

See more of Anees at:
www.aneesmaani.com
fieldguidetojordan.com
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