





# INSIDE THE ARTIST'S STUDIO

FEATURE: ELLE MURRELL. PHOTOGRAPHY: AMER SWEIDAN

## ANEES MAANI

The down-to-earth sculptor shares his ardor for creating organic, minimalist forms.

- **Place of birth** Amman in 1973
- **Studio location** Anees has been sculpting out of his Sahab studio for three years and, before that, borrowed space on rural properties close by. "That area is the stone-cutting area and the largest in Jordan. I have lots of stones around and nearby, plus I can make as much dust and noise as I like," jokes the artist. Anees also works from his smaller home studio in Jabal Weibdeh, Amman.
- **Artistic beginnings** While Anees has shown aptitude for and eagerly taken up creative pursuits since his youth, it was during his early days of studying architecture at university in Volgograd, Russia, that his passion for sculpture became obvious. "Sketching and moulding with clay, I discovered that sculpting was what I wanted to do," he explained, adding that he found it common, at least in Eastern Europe, for students to turn from architecture to sculpting during their first years.
- **Formal education** The burgeoning sculptor discontinued his degree in architecture in 1994 and returned to Amman. "I decided to follow my passion and was fortunate to take a two-year apprenticeship with talented Jordanian sculptor, Nazih Oweis. He taught me all the practical skills and introduced me to working with new materials."
- **Artistic influences** Anees finds inspiration in the vast diversity of ancient artefacts that remain scattered across the globe "from Jordan and the Middle East to Europe, Southeast Asia, South America and beyond". With respect to more modern productions, he praises Romanian sculptor Constantin Brâncusi as "the master of the masters". "I love how clear his clean pieces and simple abstract works are, from them you can really feel that he is a clear thinking person. Anees also names revered Frenchman Henri-Émile-Benoît Matisse's abstract sculptures as skilful and applauds the minimalist, inorganic works of Jordanian sculptor, Samar Tabbaa.
- **First works sold** "It was a figurative bronze piece, exhibited in Amman in 1998 and then purchased by one of my brothers, so it doesn't really count does it!" laughs Anees. The ninth of 11 children, creativity and artistic mastery runs throughout the Maani family where members are "all into art from painting to sculpture". Even still, Anees reflects that it was somewhat of a challenge to get his parents to support his career choice, although they understood his passion much more than the average family.



*The rock (2010), foam installation for Sunny Art Fair in Amman*



*One of three untitled pieces by Anees at the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts Park in Jabal Weibdeh*



*Untitled (2010) wood sculpture created during an art residency in Malaysia*



*Made in 1997, the first piece Anees ever sold was purchased by his brother*

- Type of art** Chiefly a sculptor of various minute to monstrous materials, Anees' home studio is also lined with his original textured oil-on-canvas abstracts and he also enjoys sketching. "My works are all research on the evolution of forms in nature and in human culture. I find it very interesting to see which elements appear in a place because of its climate and that specific time and then how it has evolved or continues to evolve – from human intervention or otherwise – into another form." Anees' organically-rich sculptures are evocative of the value he holds in simple beauty. "Sculpting stone is becoming increasingly rare, they even call it a traditional art form now! Artists are moving to installations, video art or other forms rather than carving; yet when using this method, simplicity and minimalism are becoming more popular.
- Artistic process** Carving takes Anees a very short time because of the minimalistic nature of his pieces, however building the concept behind each sculpture can take weeks or even months. His work as a hiking and canyoning guide as well as his research into indigenous flora, fauna and points of interest for "the family project": the Jordan Field Guide book, inspire Anees' sculptures. These influences come in parts, curves or textures like the "edge of an insect's wing" rather than natural world forms in full. "People say that when I sculpt you still see the character of the original material, as if the material itself is still there, but that I have merely interacted with it and added minimal touches to enhance the form," explains Anees, whose vision for each work remains flexible throughout the entire process.
- Interesting details** The down-to-earth sculptor began working with plaster (finding it most economical and malleable) before progressing onto stone, wood, bronze and any other material he could find. Foam and other synthetic fibres have also birthed incredible creations, including a four-metre rock-like work that miraculously, and somewhat ominously, hung from the Zara Centre skylight at the *Sunny Art Fair* in 2010. Wood remains his choice material for "the life in it, the interesting grains, the smell as well as its flexibility and the fact it is light weight and easy to manipulate". You may have also marvelled at his trio of sculptures in a Jabal Weibdeh park. "Kids love it, you see them climbing on them and making special games around them and I think that is just great. I hope when they get older and come back they will think 'wow... that was so big when I was young' and have fond memories of interacting with my works."

- **Career highlight** Three “adventures” (multi-month artistic residencies and exhibitions in 2006, 2010 and 2014) in Malaysia first introduced the sculptor to wood. “The Malaysian tropical environment has a huge variety of natural forms from insects and flowers to the lush forests. This diversity and quantity is unbelievable! It’s a very inspiring place to research,” explains Anees. He has also learned a great deal from the Malaysian sculptors and other woodworkers who have perfected their skills over centuries of living intertwined with nature. He has also exhibited in Asia, Europe and extensively in Jordan as well as attended workshops throughout the Middle East, United Kingdom and Asia.
- **Advice to young artists** “I have seen many young artists leave art because of full-time jobs; you go into that and you don’t have time for your art at all,” tells Anees. He sees a solution in searching for part-time or freelance work so artists still have energy to invest in their passions. He personally works in film set design and art direction (*The Stoning of Soraya M*, *The Hurt Locker* and *The Last Days on Mars* among others), and along with selling his works, creates *Bits of Petra* souvenirs sold at Mlabbas to support himself. “It’s still related to my art, but it’s not the art. I am working for people in a commercial way, but you have to find a way.”
- **The importance of art in the modern world** “There are so many elements that come into making one sculpture: the material, weight, size and your process. Each one is a part of wider research and all my work is researching aspects of life. This is how I am trying to understand life, how I am exploring it and enjoying it. If I knew another way that would give me the same results perhaps I would try it. For instance, if I had a 3D-printer I would create beautiful pieces, but I’m not going to stop learning my way.”
- **Art in Jordan** “It is suffering more than ever right now with the conflicts surrounding us and people as well as galleries suffering economically. It is very bad and it’s kind of dying,” grieves Anees although he is hopeful artists can continue to be respected locally. Personally, he will relocate to Southeast Asia later in the year to continue his artistic development.
- **Artist to spend a day creating with** Rather than selecting someone unattainable or unknown, Anees is adamant it would be his teacher and mentor, Samar Tabbaa. “I love his work; he is amazing. We are actually getting together in April along with a Japanese, a Malayaian and an Indonesian artist to work in my studio for three weeks!” The self-funded workshop is supported by Jordan’s National Gallery of Fine Arts, which will exhibit the products of the artists’ labour along with presentations.

“THIS IS HOW I AM TRYING TO UNDERSTAND LIFE, HOW I AM EXPLORING IT AND ENJOYING IT”



Self portrait, (1998) in plaster



Also in plaster, The shark (2001)



Untitled (2008) wooden sculpture from an art workshop in Scotland



2014 wooden works on display in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



1997 bronze cast exhibited in Holland



Untitled (1997), plaster on metal