

# Memories in wood

[By Jyoti Kalsi Special to Weekend Review](#) Published: October 19, 2016  
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Sculptor Chaouki Choukini's works draw inspiration from the landscape around his grandparents' home in the Lebanese countryside



Chaouki Choukini, *Dame de coeur*, 2007, Chêne & Bubinga wood Image Credit: Supplied

French-Lebanese sculptor Chaouki Choukini's first solo exhibition in the region, "Poetry in Wood", offers a retrospective of his work from the 1970s to the present. The show features a selection of the Paris-based artist's poetic wood sculptures as well as some drawings and watercolour paintings on paper.

Choukini's love affair with wood began in his childhood, when he started

volunteering during his school vacations at a carpenter's workshop near his home in Beirut. "I enjoyed it because I could make toys for myself. Later, at art school I worked mostly with clay and stone. I returned to wood after I met a Japanese maestro of wood sculpting in Paris and trained with him for five years," he says.

The beauty of Choukini's sculptures lies in the fine balance and palpable tension he creates between graceful curves and sharp edges, between smooth, highly polished planes and the ridges, nicks and cuts he carves into the surface, and between the positive and negative spaces.

He is inspired by philosophy, art history, architecture and contemporary life, but his biggest inspiration comes from his childhood memories of the landscape around his grandparents' home in the Lebanese countryside. His early works from the 1970s and 1980s are all horizontal, abstracted landscapes. "When you leave your home, you leave behind traces and memories that linger in the air. In these sculptures, I presented an aerial view of imaginary landscapes that bear traces of primitive human beings who once inhabited them. These are essentially metaphysical works that contemplate human existence and our relationship with the Earth," Choukini says.

His later works are mostly vertical, and have an organic living feel. He often whittles the wood down to thin lines like the strings of a bow drawn out in infinite music, and cuts windows through the wood adding a play of light and shadows to his sculptures. The delicate strings represent various things ranging from a link between the elements of the cosmos, to the connection between our outer and inner selves. In "Chardon", it represents the prickly thistle. "This work is about the Arab Spring. Unlike the spring which brings flowers, birds and butterflies, this one only brought us thistles," Choukini says.

Other works such as "Claire de Lune" and "Pavilion of Light" are visual expressions of the human quest for enlightenment and every individual's

inner struggle with the dualities of our existence.

The interplay of light and space is also seen in Choukini's delicate watercolours, which are inspired by the desert. "I was always fascinated by the description of the desert in Arabic poetry from the Jahiliyyah or pre-Islamic period. When I finally met the desert during a teaching stint in Jordan, I was deeply inspired, and created these paintings depicting the vast and serene landscape," he says.

Many of the paintings were done as studies for his sculptures, and offer insights into the artist's creative process as he transforms his concepts and hazy memories into profound three-dimensional artworks.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.

"Poetry in Wood" will run at the Green Art Gallery, Al Quoz, until October 30.

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