TRAJECTORY OF A LINE, 1957–59, wood, 74 × 34 × 25 cm. Copyright Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation, Beirut. Courtesy Agial Art Gallery, Beirut.

TRAJECTORY OF THE ARC, 1972–74, brass, 34 × 14 × 12 cm. Copyright Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation, Beirut. Courtesy Agial Art Gallery, Beirut.

contextualizing Choucair's practice within this time of conflict. More artifact than artwork, *Two=one* pits the unwavering modernist's resolve at shaping her own artistic language of abstraction against the mayhem engulfing the city outside her very doorstep. Yet the scarred canvas is also emblematic of a certain fragility—a fragility of memory. Virtually unknown until the exhibition at Tate Modern, Choucair had fallen through the cracks of art history, even to the point of being overlooked in her native Lebanon for the last two decades.

The Lebanese Civil War, of course, was largely to blame. Persevering in silence, carving writhing DNA-strand-like sculptures, or hammering out interlocking brass "Duals," Choucair was out of sync with time and place. Already in her 60s, with decades of study and practice behind her, when conflict broke out in Lebanon, Choucair simply had no artistic language to admit the war into her practice: her work was entirely rational, scientific, engineered almost to the exclusion of the human and the social. The incursion of the war literally into the flesh of her practice with *Two=one* illustrates the potentially destructive force of forgetting: occluded memory, as much as the war itself, was Choucair's nemesis. Her entire life's work has recently been revived and reinstated to the international limelight, thanks not only to the Tate Modern exhibition but also to the work of gallerists in Beirut and New York. Yet this "rediscovery" is still only partial.

TWO=ONE, 1947–51, oil on canvas, 62 × 82 cm. Copyright Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation, Beirut. Courtesy Tate, London.

Born in 1916 in Beirut, Choucair's education began in a progressive school for girls, after which she was apprenticed with two of Lebanon's most famous artists of the 1940s, the nationalist landscape painters Moustafa Farroukh and Omar Onsi. She then went to Paris and studied under Fernand Léger before returning to Beirut in 1951, where she continues to live, although today she is frail and bedridden. Nonetheless, both her family and her gallerists are working strenuously to ensure that Choucair stands her ground in art historical memory—that her art is visible and accessible, studied, historicized and examined within the wider modernist movement, and, above all, that we encounter her as the progressive, enduring spirit she is.

"Saloua Choucair isn't just an artist. She is a thinker," remarks Carla Chammas, co-founder of New York's CRG Gallery, which represents the artist's estate in the United States. This is evident in the obsession with geometry that arcs through all her works, from early module paintings, through the compact yet dynamic "Trajectory of a Line" sculptures in the late 1950s to the sleekly playful "Trajectory of the Arc" brass pieces from the 1970s and, later, the stately, Brancusi-esque *Movement of the Angle* (1983–85) in stone. Her physics bent is evident in all the kinetic works in Plexiglas and stainless steel from the 1970s, her experiment in tension with *Static Dynamism* (1972–74), a coiled tower of stainless steel loops, not to mention the works intended as large-scale public projects, particularly those involving water, such as the curious "Water Project" series from 1973, which seems at once primitive and deeply modern.

Like a fervent scientist or a fixated inventor, she kept copious, specific notes on each of her works, a wealth of documentation through which her daughter and head of the Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation, Hala Schoukair, diligently sifts in an attempt

STRUCTURE WITH ONE THOUSAND PIECES, 1966–68, wood, 147 × 36 × 36 cm. Copyright Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation, Beirut. Courtesy Agial Art Gallery, Beirut.

to make sense of it all. Chammas recalls her first visit two summers ago to the old Beirut building where the works were being stored. "There must have been 500 little sculptural elements lying around, and vitrines filled with little modules. It felt like visiting an archaeological dig."

But this overabundance of varying works in no way detracts from the single-mindedness of Choucair's vision. The first defining moment in the articulation of that vision was perhaps her three-year stint in Paris beginning in 1948. Here, she came nose-to-nose with the abstract modernism being formulated at the time in Europe—a movement into which she had multiple inroads. Enrolled at the conservative École des Beaux Arts where she took courses on drawing and sculpture, she also attended the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, a more alternative space, whose other students included expatriates who would find their own form of abstraction, such as Isamu Noguchi, Zao Wou-ki and Alexander Calder, as well as Louise Bourgeois.

Ultimately, in 1948, she gravitated toward the atelier of Fernand Léger, freshly returned from New York and deemed one of the most "modernist" painters at the time. To complete this educational mélange, she also became active, as of 1950, in the newly opened Atelier d'Art Abstrait, down the street from the Grande Chaumière in Paris' 6th arrondissement, where she rubbed shoulders with the artists delving deepest into the nascent realm of abstract art, such as Richard Mortensen, Victor Vasarely and founders Jean Dewasne and Edgar Pillet. Unlike the other ateliers and écoles she had frequented, here there were no masters; collective exploration and freely exchanged ideas were the reigning methods in this experimental space.

PROJECT FOR PUBLIC HOUSING, 1973, terracotta, 14 × 19 × 3 cm. Copyright Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation, Beirut. Courtesy Agial Art Gallery, Beirut.

In counterpoint to her amplified foray into abstraction, Choucair was increasingly drawn to the linear rigor of modernist architecture. A series of snapshots from 1949 records her trip to Marseille to visit Le Corbusier's then still-incomplete Unité d'Habitation building, which later blossomed into his Cité Radieuse residential housing project. Detailed notes crowd the backs of her photos, hashing out issues of space, shape, form and movement—

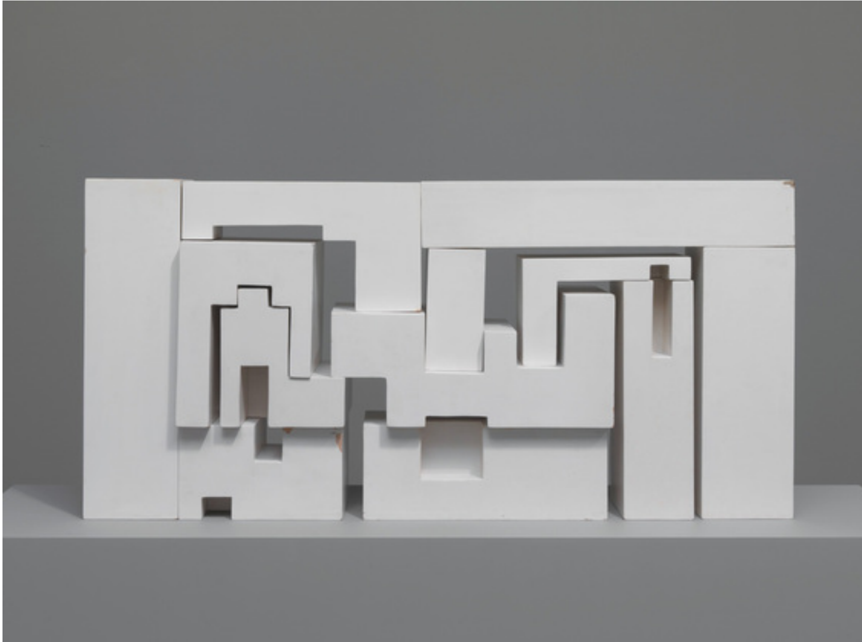
questions that consistently thread through her entire six decades of artistic output. Le Corbusier's modular unit clearly spoke to her, overlapping with her own modular paintings from this same period, or cropping up more obviously in later sculptural works such as *Infinite Structure* (1963–65), a Brutalist-style tower of rectangular stone blocks. The modular paintings that she was making at the time are perhaps the most pivotal junction between Choucair's quest for abstraction and the mathematical method underlying her own brand of modernism. In her accompanying essay to the Tate Modern show, art historian and anthropologist Kirsten Scheid unravels the "making of" *Composition in Blue Module* (1947–51), perhaps the simplest of Choucair's modular paintings, with its strict form and contrasting curves, revealing the precise, almost formulaic mathematical method that fueled its creation. A "visual ratio" is achieved through a multistep process of dividing quadrants, mirroring shapes and shifting squares by mere degrees in relation to their axes.

POEM CUBE, 1963–65, white wood, 16 × 16 × 16 cm. Copyright Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation, Beirut. Courtesy Agial Art Gallery, Beirut.

In much the same way that Choucair aestheticized and abstracted mathematical and geometric tenets, so too did she morph modernist architectural tropes into vastly individualized expressions. In *Infinite Structure*, for example, each stacked, interrelated block is distinguished by variations in size and by the shape of the holes bored into them, challenging the Corbusian notion of strictly repeating units. Similarly, *Sculpture with One Thousand Pieces* (1966–68) actually reads like a building, with irregularly placed blocks on each level suggesting a teeming life within the idiosyncratic, hive-like tower. Both *Project for Public Housing* (1973) and *The Tower* (1960–62) artfully foreground the dissimilarity among the component units of imagined residential structures. Toying further with the rectitude of modernist architecture, Choucair seems to delight in the unique pleasures of disassembly and reassembly.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in her staggering "Poem" series (1963–68; 1972–74). These are interlocking modular sculptures comprising components varying in number from three to eleven, made alternatively of wood, aluminum, brass, clay and even fiberglass. Originally called "Emboîtements" (roughly translated as "Nestings") when she began them in the mid-1960s, they were later renamed "Kasa'id," or "Poems," due to Choucair's interest in the curiously modular structure of Sufi poetry: a given stanza may stand alone, but it can also integrate the complete poem. *Poem in Nine Verses* (1966–68) exemplifies a certain fascination with puzzles. The aluminum blocks (she

made a similar work in wood during the same years) can be removed, restacked, reconfigured, then returned to their initial configuration. Here Choucair is at her most lively and inventive, nudging the viewer to experience the tactile pleasure of these highly sophisticated sculptures, suddenly turned to palpable playthings. But nothing is left to chance in Choucair's work: for all their spirited creativity, these stanzas are like mini-equations, each fitting into an elaborate and devilishly calculated formula. The mind-boggling *Poem Cube* and *Poem Wall* (both 1963–65), like mad, multidimensional brainteasers, testify to this heady rationalism.



POEM WALL, 1963–65, white wood, 70 × 160 × 2 cm. Copyright Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation, Beirut. Courtesy Tate, London.

Following her decade working on "Poems," Choucair turned to a more streamlined focus on movement. The kinetic sculptures from this period, plumbing the twists and turns of geometry in motion, run parallel to the more compact but equally dynamic "Duals" series. Dating mainly from the 1970s and '80s, the "Duals" consist of couples of small sculptures in brass, aluminum, fiberglass, terracotta and wood that hug, enwrap, mesh with or cling to each other. Although vastly less complex but more organic than some of the "Poems," the "Duals" nonetheless invite the viewer to twist, draw or slide them apart. Highly tactile and curvaceously poetic, these oddly endearing shapes function like intimate one-liners next to the epic eloquence of the "Poems." Challenging the heroic stance often found in modernist architecture, Choucair wrestled it, over the course of decades, into an organic, intimate, almost postmodern form.

At its most essential, Modernism expresses a vaguely utopian quest for universality—employing a common visual language, developing an allegedly inclusive way of seeing. Yet, all the while, Choucair was also adamant about crafting her own voice, her own language of abstraction, soldiering on—even as war raged around her—to pioneer a unique vocabulary. "My abstraction is my own," she boasted.

Choucair is widely quoted as saying that, given another life, she would be an architect. Sadly, her own endeavors in this field—a spiraling house that could be endlessly extended by adding units to its tail, a home made entirely of molded plastic to be hosed down for easy cleaning—never came to fruition. Modernist architecture,

with its modular repetition, deeply informed much of her work and somehow even predicated the individuality of her surprising abstraction. “Nobody ever expected me to go back to using engineering,” she once said in an interview. “Not even me.”

Back in her Paris days, in Léger’s studio, in an environment conducive to blandly replicating the master’s vision, Choucair seemingly resisted producing work *à la Léger*. In her early, almost mischievously ingenuous painting *Les Peintres Célèbres 1* (1948–49), a take on Léger’s rigorously stylized *Le Grand Déjeuner* (1921), she revisits the painter’s mechanical, syncopated bodies, at once restoring the integrity of the female form and flattening it to a chromatic swatch of gouache. Later, work she produced throughout the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s in Beirut ricocheted off similar artistic explorations elsewhere in Europe. “She was completely in sync with what was happening at the time in those decades in Europe,” explains Carla Chammas. “Her kinetic sculptures were like work being done by the artist group ZERO in Germany. It all fits together.” Yet Choucair was working in Hamra, Beirut.

Saloua Raouda Choucair in her Beirut studio in 1974. Copyright Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation, Beirut. Courtesy Agial Art Gallery, Beirut.

There is an arrogant assumption in some circles that artistic modernity came to the Middle East solely through a conscious mimicking of the West. Those who have studied Choucair’s practice staunchly contest this myopic belief. They point to the Islamic patterning purportedly at the source of her mathematical method, or her “Eastern” abstraction, as evoked by Jack Aswad in his

“Sensory Equations” essay on Choucair’s work. If one event debunked this notion regarding the lack of originality in Middle Eastern modernism, it was Choucair’s 2011 retrospective in the hangar-like expanses of the Beirut Exhibition Center (BEC), jointly organized by Hala Schoukair and dealer Saleh Barakat, founder of Beirut’s Agial Art Gallery. Self-consciously titled “A Project in the Making,” the exhibition bookended a long period of relative neglect of Choucair’s legacy, her previous major show being the Lebanese Ministry of Tourism’s 1974 installation of 100 works in Beirut’s Hamra neighborhood. The watershed exhibition at BEC, displaying many never-before-seen pieces, established that Choucair’s work was never just a bland derivative of Western trends or movements. In a video interview from the 1990s, an elderly but feisty Choucair is seen brushing off a critic’s suggestion of a European influence in her works. “No!” she barks. “It is a universal influence. What I experience, everyone experiences.”

Yet the 2011 retrospective also raised the uncomfortable question of why some artists’ practices become neglected and marginalized, even within such a highly fragmented and sectarian society as Lebanon. Much of the work shown had only recently been salvaged from dubious storage conditions, little scholarship was on display, and the anxiety over such a precarious legacy was tangible among critics at the time. Beirut-based writer Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, for example, referenced a huge documentary photograph of Choucair’s unruly studio, circa 2000, looming in the BEC foyer, into which she read both the “formidable, labor-intensive tactility of the artist’s practice, and a nagging sense of absence and neglect.” Much like the damaged *Two=one* at the Tate, the massive image captured the opposing forces of exuberance and dilapidation.

BENCH, 1998, stone, 170 × 570 × 70 cm, installed in Mir Amin Square, Beirut, 2006. Copyright Solidere, Beirut. Courtesy Agial Art Gallery, Beirut.

Yes, Saloua Raouda Choucair had dropped out of history. But her 2011 comeback only intensified the pangs of concern for history itself: how had this pioneering practice gone overlooked and underappreciated for so long? "All the timings were wrong with my mother," Hala Schoukair told the *New York Times* in an interview last year on the occasion of the Tate Modern exhibition. Circumstances seemed to work against Choucair. She was making abstract art when impressionism was still all the rage in Lebanon, then the war stifled her international potential. "In the early 1970s," recalled Saleh Barakat in a 2013 *Al Arabiya* interview, "there was almost a recognition [of Choucair], in Lebanon at least. But when she reached the point of proving she was a pioneering sculptor, the war started." Now, sadly, she is too infirm to fully relish her consecration by the international art community.

Unfortunate timing is only part of the story. Curators and critics tend to speculate that she was ignored due to issues of gender and creed (Choucair is a Druze, a branch of progressive Isma'ili Shi'ism that forms a small minority within Lebanon's multisectarian society). "My mother never defined herself as a woman artist," wrote Hala Schoukair in a 2012 text for the journal *Peeping Tom's Digest*. "She refused this label." Schoukair goes on to condemn the lack of critical understanding at the time—"She was only mentioned in the women's sections of newspapers"—and the misinterpretation of her mother's nonrepresentational sculptures as "nothing more than decorative elements."

Saleh Barakat, while jockeying between his stand at this year's Art Dubai Modern in the Mina al-Salam hotel and his booth in the contemporary section of the fair, told the story of how Tate curator Jessica Morgan came to Beirut looking for artists in 2009. "It was practically a coincidence. I told her there was only one person to see," he boasted, emphatically. "Only one." Like preceding visitors to the vast, packed space, Morgan saw something amid the myriad clusters of "Poems," "Duals," "Trajectories" and project prototypes. Acquisitions by the venerable museum ensued, celebrated by the now-famous 2013 show and crowned by Choucair's resounding international "rediscovery."

A spate of such comebacks, or rediscoveries, particularly of women artists living outside Europe and North America, invites questions of the pursuit of their inclusion in the Western canon. New York-based Indian artist Zarina Hashmi, born in 1937, became an overnight sensation —despite having a long-established career—once her work was shown by the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Guggenheim Museum in New York. A similar fate befell Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, whose 1970s practice was revived in the mid-2000s. Lebanese poet Etel Adnan—whose 1969 leporello (an accordion book), *Five Senses for One Death*, featured in this year's Whitney Biennial—

was belatedly "revealed" as a visual artist. "Etel was a poet," explains Carla Chammas. "No one was thinking of her as a painter. Her career was revived when Hans Ulrich Obrist saw something and she got into Documenta 13. Now there is a wonderful interest."

Anyone familiar with Choucair's practice will say her case is different. The task at hand is not simply to garner "validation" from the West, but to make her present again, abroad as well as in Lebanon, and to introduce her to generations who would have glossed over her. "I am adamant about her works being seen," asserts Barakat. The Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation is caught between conflicting desires to make Choucair's work accessible to the world, and also to respect the integrity of the works as the artist intended, which sometimes includes recasting many sculptures to the bigger, bolder dimensions that Choucair craved. Major cultural institutions clearly play a vital role in promoting such works. Barakat, unwilling to restrict Choucair's exposure solely to museums, believes that her true place is out in public. Chammas concurs: "We want to make a presence for her in Lebanon. We are working very hard to get the American University of Beirut to put some of Saloua's work on campus."

Choucair and public sculpture have a brief but turbulent history. In 1998, Solidere, a private real-estate company charged with the urban renewal of central Beirut, bought Choucair's *Bench* (1998), a 17-piece articulated bench in stone, which took its place as a novel piece of urban furniture in the city's Mir Amin Square. Configured in a half-moon curve consisting of irregularly fashioned components, the work looks like a huddle of jovial monoliths. At installation, Solidere split the bench into two uneven parts, interrupting the enfolding, semicircular sweep and foiling Choucair's geometric flourish. For years, the bench was covered in black graffiti, a forlorn eyesore in a nearly vacant square, a severed modern relic brooding below an ancient tree—it was finally cleaned in 2012.

Another ignominious episode that befell one of Choucair's sculptures was revived by Kirsten Scheid. In 2011, the year of Choucair's BEC retrospective, New York's New Museum held a mini-exhibition in its fifth-floor space entitled "Due to Unforeseen Events . . ." Organized by the nonprofit Beirut Art Center's co-founders Sandra Dagher and Lamia Joreige as a component of the New York institution's "Museum as Hub" initiative, the show featured a surprising contribution from Scheid: a mixed-media piece called *The Mysterious Sculpture and Its Missing Fixity*(2011), which comprised a two-meter-tall Styrofoam reconstruction of Choucair's public sculpture *Poem (Ramlet al-Baida)* (1983) and accompanying newspaper clippings and a grainy video documentary. The reworked sculpture catalyzed an old story around Choucair's original, which had been proudly unveiled in 1983 in Ramlet al-Baida, along the southern end of the Beirut Corniche, to celebrate the recent unification between two warring political factions, but which instead was subsequently vandalized before mysteriously disappearing. For her work, Scheid cunningly recast Choucair's modernist piece within the arena of contemporary discourse, precisely at a moment when contemporary art, in the throes of an identity crisis over its own history, seems to be

increasingly rummaging through the trove of previous generations' artistic production.

Similarly, as part of last year's "Nouvelles Vagues" show at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Indian curator Shanay Jhaveri included Choucair's painting *Paris, Beirut* (1948) in his "Companionable Silences" exhibit, alongside work by both other "forgotten," non-Western women artists and contemporary artists such as Camille Henrot. Interrogating the reasons for these women's marginalization, the show, like Scheid's installation, goes beyond the simple past/present confrontation to pinpoint a sensitive moment of rupture between artist and public, intent and reception, creation and recognition—a disjuncture that, until recently, had clouded Choucair's life. While the trajectory now seems complete—her legacy is finally fixed, our memory newly "corrected"—the true work of history is just beginning. Saloua Raouda Choucair may well have been rescued from being forgotten, but there is still much to do for her to be remembered.

Tools

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EXPERIMENT WITH CALLIGRAPHY, 1949, gouache, 48 × 31cm. Copyright Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation, Beirut. Courtesy Agial Art Gallery, Beirut.