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MONA SAUDI, "Homage to Mahmoud Darwish" (detail), 1976–80, installation view in "Poetry in Stone" at Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.

POETRY IN STONE MONA SAUDI

WEB REVIEW BY KATHERINE VOLK
LAWRIE SHABIBI GALLERY

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

For its most recent exhibition, Dubai-based Lawrie Shabibi gallery is presenting "Poetry in Stone," the first solo show of Mona Saudi to take place in the United Arab Emirates. Illustrating a small portion of the Beirut-based artist's extensive career, the title of the show relates to her love of poetry and its connections to sculpture and drawing, as well as to elements of nature.

Born in Amman, Jordan, to a strict religious household, Saudi's desire to become a sculptor was cultivated at a young age and eventually led her to leave her home, without permission from her family, to pursue a career as an artist. Amman's ancient ruins has long been an inspiration for Saudi, with Arab heritage being a key theme throughout her practice. She is known for using stones, her material of choice, that originate from all over the world. The majority of the stones that Saudi uses come from the Middle East—including Lebanese and Jordanian marble, as well as limestone—referencing her bond to her roots and emphasizing how the Arab world is united by a common cultural language and history.

This role of language is seen in her drawing series entitled "Homage to Mahmoud Darwish" (1976–80). As referenced in the title, this work is a tribute to Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008), who had been Saudi's friend since the 1970s and whose works had influenced the artist and her own poetry. Hung across three walls of the gallery are silkscreen prints that are individually colored with watercolor paint. Arabic script is handwritten in free hand on the prints, reflecting Saudi's response and emotional ties to Darwish's poems.

The images depicted on the prints appear sculptural in form, mimicking her three-dimensional work in its use of strong, geometric and organic lines.



MONA SAUDI, *Sunset in Pink*, 2012, Amman limestone, 25 × 22.5 × 22.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai.

Saudi's own poem, "An Ocean of Dreams" (1992), is featured on a blank wall in the gallery, setting the tone for the seven sculptural pieces that dominate the room, and exemplifying her connection with the Earth. Made in response to the Arabic notion of *takween*, which loosely translates to "creation" or "formation," Saudi's sculptures seem organic in nature. Each piece is formed from basic shapes, which take on new life as pieces are chipped away to reveal the final, smooth work. With each work taking immense amounts of patience to shape, and each stone requiring different tools, the works are sculpted until Saudi feels nothing more is needed to be done to them. They are then washed with water, which is where the stones' true colors are revealed.

Each stone that Saudi uses is unique, and each region of the world that they are from offers diverse colors and textures, as seen in two pieces from her home country of Jordan. *Sunset in Pink* (2012) is a thin, rectangular form with rounded edges, where a precise, circular hole has been cut out near the middle of a pink-tinted Amman limestone. Meanwhile, *Growth* (2012) was created from Jordanian jade and has a green tint to its dark brown structure. Here, layered squares standing upright are contrasted with engraved circular indentations.

Another piece that is distinctive due to its unique shape and color is *The Seed* (2007). The yellow shade of its Lebanese marble is intricately carved into rounded layers. The hard, rigid material appears soft and is a simple yet graceful representation of the beginning of life.

With the majority of works made between 2003 and 2012, one piece stands out for being an earlier work by Saudi. *Mother and Child* (1981) is a marble sculpture, in which smooth shapes wrap around each other, embodying the theme of Mother Nature and life, which have been crucial throughout Saudi's five-decade career.

The gallery effectively exhibits Mona Saudi's work with a variety of pieces from her illustrious career. The various sculptures and drawings in the exhibition joins together successfully, linking the artist's love of poetry, nature, heritage and life.



MONA SAUDI, *The Seed*, 2007, Lebanese marble, 25 × 22.5 × 22.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai.



MONA SAUDI, *Mother and Child*, 1981, Carrara marble, 43 × 24.5 × 20.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Lawrie Shabibi, Dubai.

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