

Mona Saudi's Poetry in Stone exhibition is the sculptor's first solo show in the region since the 1980s



Mona Saudi's Poetry in Stone exhibition is the sculptor's first in the region since the 1980s/ She is probably the most well-known sculptor in the Arab world, but even so, Mona Saudi has not had a solo exhibition in the Gulf region since the 1980s when she showed her work in Kuwait.

Since then, the Jordanian artist's beautiful stone pieces have been acquired by some of the world's most prestigious institutes, including The British Museum and L'Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris.

Now, as a dramatic finale to a strong season of exhibitions, Lawrie Shabibi Gallery in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue is hosting *Poetry in Stone*, a solo show of Saudi's work that features many never-before-displayed pieces.

Saudi's work, a magnificent exploration of form, is instantly recognisable.

"I have been practising sculpture for 50 years, so over that time I have found my vocabulary. For me, sculpture is a kind of research in form and now a viewer can recognise the elements I use," she says.

Her work is largely geometric, with just a hint at the inspiration behind it.

Sunset in Pink, for example, shows a rounded rectangle of Jordanian limestone with a perfect disc carved from the centre. *The Seed* is a multilayered piece with a rounded sphere emerging from several planes beneath it. But describing the pieces as such takes away from their tactile appeal – as well as their poetic nature.

Saudi has dedicated many of her sculptures to poets.

“Sculpting for me is like writing poetry,” Saudi says, describing her process of beginning a sculpture as the same as writing a poem. “When you write poetry, the first sentence comes and then the rest just starts to flow. It is the same with my sculpture although it takes a little longer.

“But it is more than that. It is a way of seeing and a way of thinking with symbolic and abstract emotions. There is a kind of mystery in creativity, which is difficult to explain but when I think of forms, I contemplate possibilities and explore these more through my work.”

Such sensibilities take years to develop – and a lifetime to hone. It is perhaps for that reason that not many of the artists in the Arab world have dedicated themselves to sculpture.

Her new show includes a series of seven silkscreen prints of drawings made between 1976 and 1980, inspired by the writings of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, her close friend from the early 1970s until his death in 2008.

Phrases from several of his poems form part of her drawings, which she has also infused with the familiar lines that her sculptures take.

The material that Saudi chooses also plays an important role in the overall look and feel of her sculptures. Although most are made from stone sourced in the Middle East, she says she is not discriminatory.

“I fell in love with the medium of stone in 1965 when I was studying at Beaux Arts in Paris and ever since then I have been working with it. The Earth is very rich with all kinds of stone that you can find everywhere in the world so I don’t have a preference as to which stone I use. I take what I need from the Earth. It is our mother and whatever colour, age, race or creed we are, we all belong to this Earth.”

The first sculpture Saudi made was in Paris in 1965, and it was titled *Mother/Earth*. The themes of life, fertility and death have continued to be present throughout her practice.

***Poetry in Stone* runs until July 16 at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery. Visit www.lawrieshabibi.com**

aseaman@thenational.ae