

CHEDLI MAHDAOUI: THE PHYSICIAN SCULPTOR

By: Danna Lorch



Chedli Mahdaoui is a physician specializing in emergency medicine, and on a daily basis he is made acutely aware of the gauze-thin boundary between life and death. His skeletal sculptures resurrect dead blocks of wood much in the way that a still-warm heart is transplanted moments after a spirit has departed from a body.

Mahdaoui is entirely self-taught and opted to attend medical school over pursuing formal training in the arts. However, as the son of the legendary calligrapher Nja Mahdaoui, he grew up in Tunisia in a home steeped in artistic practice, tradition, and community. This environment guided him to instinctively listen for nature's wordless chanting, in only the way that an artist is able. The sculptor, who has never been formally profiled before this interview, is a long-term resident of French Guiana, where he works from a home studio that borders on the Amazonian rainforests.

Recent sculptures, including the Cohu and Moutouchi series', echo the human struggle to achieve balance within the four elements (earth, air, water, fire), contrasting unrefined surfaces with perfectly smoothed curves, and spiritual purpose, with primal attachments.

Although we never met in person, our interview-conducted entirely by correspondence-began tentatively, progressed with warmth, and concluded with the feeling that we had passed an entire day beneath a frangipani tree in French Guiana, in conversation as the sculptor leaned into a block of wood with mallet and chisel:

DL: What pulled you to the medium of sculpture in the first place, and how do ideas for your work enter your mind?

CM: I've only realized it now, but probably the four dimensional aspect of sculpture is what resonates with me the most-the concept of expanding time, and the space that permits the sculptor to circle a work as he conceives it. I'm attracted to the notion of a hidden shape emerging from the solid block at which the sculptor chips away.

As far as my ideas are concerned, they come as spontaneously as a dream chooses each of us at the moment we fall asleep. My ideas are born from emotions and awareness and have spanned world events, armed conflicts, or simply the shared experience of joy. These transcriptions work in an unspoken language that take the sculptures from thought to shape.

DL: I understand that you are completely self-taught. Are you glad you didn't choose to attend art school?

CM: I have always admired the transmission of knowledge from master to pupil that transpired in the past, as between the stonecutters who built Europe's Medieval cathedrals or the architects of the ancient Egyptian pyramids.

Each school teaches a system and therefore imposes limitations. Although academic institutions are undoubtedly important, to gain one's freedom, I believe an artist should free himself from the system. Fortunately, books, museums, and the Internet make information accessible to everyone these days.

DL: How did you begin to learn?

CM: On a trip back in 1998 I was fortunate to be able to observe traditional sculptors in Saint Laurent du Maroni (French Guiana), and to sit with them and watch them working on wood. Magical wood! One day I picked up a scrap of wood and took part. I polished the chip with a knife. The result was fascinating.

Initially, I worked without a mallet, until I encountered a sculptor living in Javouhey, French Guiana, named Patrick Chapot. He observed me and suggested, "Why don't you use a mallet. It would be much easier." This marked my real beginning.

DL: As a physician, do you believe there is any relationship between your medical practice and your artistic practice?

CM: Specializing in the field of Emergency Medicine places me on the frontier of death. I began to sculpt towards the end of my medical education. After having studied the body inside and out, I started creating shapes organically. The interaction between these two dimensions forms the equation of life. Sculpting from an old tree, I take the dead pieces and give them new life-that is the on going conversation taking place between sculptor and sculpture.

DL: What was it like to grow up as the son of a master calligrapher, and how do you imagine your childhood home environment impacted your imagination?

CM: To be the son of Nja Mahdaoui is to set out on an immense journey. I grew up in dialogue with cultures from around the world, surrounded by art from the start of my childhood. I watched as my father constantly pushed boundaries as a visual artist, and his influence on my practice has been so profound that, in order to pursue my own creations, I have needed to distance myself from that force of gravity.

DL: Which series of sculptures has tried or enthralled you most deeply and how did you know when that series was complete?

CM: This is a hard question. After ten years of working with wood, I feel that all my sculptures are a part of the same series, like the stages of one's life from infant to child, then youth to adult. Each stage is distinct, and each development contains the whole of the previous.

Of course, that process takes time because it is manufactured. Perhaps a series is complete when the artist's spiritual process reaches a certain level, and perhaps I haven't yet the tools to point to these levels. Would you please ask me this question again in ten years?

DL: What led you to leave Tunisia and settle in South America, and in what ways has your adopted home filtered into your practice?

CM: At the end of my secondary studies, I left Tunisia to pursue my medical education in Lyon, France, which is my mother's city of origin. I stayed there for six years and after that I felt the need to travel.

After meeting a colleague from French Guiana, I decided to go there. The country was unknown to me back then and I spent 18 months there following my graduation from medical school. I was struck by this land's rich, multicultural environment. It was here that I discovered the medium of wood and began to sculpt. This is where the spark caught. This is also where I met my wife. This land nourishes my practice.

DL: Since it is thousands of kilometres away and we can't plan a physical studio visit, describe the space you use as a studio and how it functions.

CM: It would take 8 hours to fly from Dubai in time for a five o'clock cup of Earl Grey at my studio in French Guiana, and you are welcome. I do not keep a regular studio schedule or any particular rituals. Each visit is an encounter between myself and the material with whatever time is possible between my medical practice, family commitments, and the pulls of everyday life. My studio is in the garden, lit by the sun, with a frangipani tree, birds singing, a simple table made from a board supporting a piece of wood, and Dhafer Yusef playing his Sufi melodies.

DL: Where do you source the wood that you use in your work?

CM: I literally live within the Amazon Forest, which is an incredibly fertile place. It is important for me to find a piece of wood with which I can share a harmonious dialogue. I don't get the wood directly from the forest; that requires experience and logistical assistance. I buy it from a lumberyard or discover it spontaneously. I am working on small to medium sized pieces of wood, the latest being around 1.3 metres in length.

DL: Do you typically engage with a series of sculptures or immerse yourself in one work at a time?

CM: I usually sculpt one piece at a time. Sometimes one work calls for another, requiring a temporary interruption, like a story interlinked to another story. It is as if the sculptures function as parenthesis, one requiring the next in an evolution in order to be complete.

About the Writer

Danna Lorch is based in Dubai, where she writes and blogs about contemporary Middle Eastern art and culture. She holds a graduate degree in Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University and has recently had work published in Canvas, The National, VOGUE (India), and elsewhere. Danna is also a Contributor to Artslant. <http://dannawrites.com>



1. Chedli_Mahdaoui_Moutouchi_1
 2. Chedli_Mahdaoui_Homs_2

1. Chedli_Mahdaoui_Cohu_II_1
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