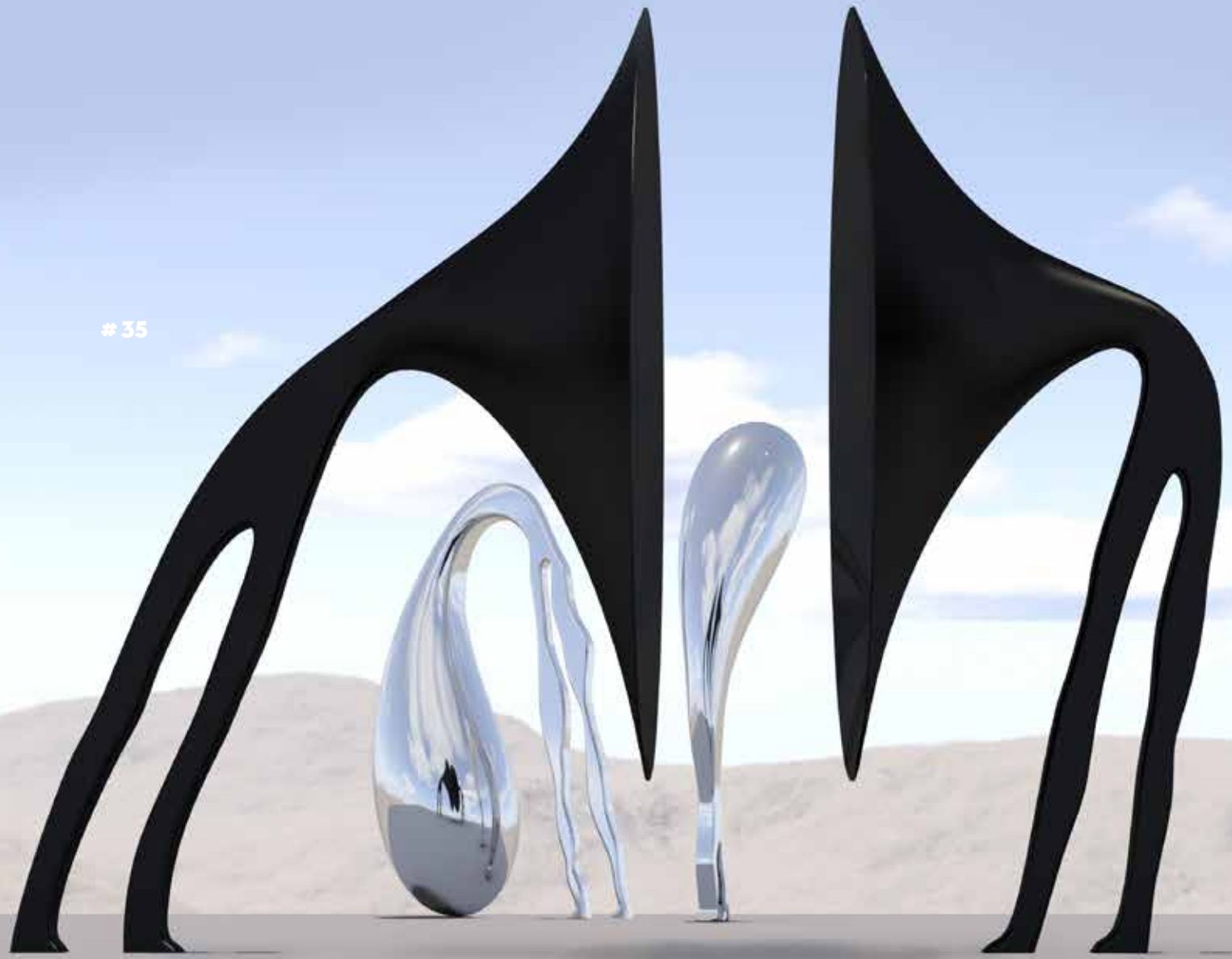


SELECTIONS

ARTS / STYLE / CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND

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THE ONE-ON-ONE ISSUE

• IN CONVERSATION WITH NADIM KARAM • SAFWAN DAHOUL ON THE ORIGINS OF DREAMS • ONE-ON-ONE WITH CATHERINE DE ZEGHER •
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ART IN THE CITY

Artist and architect **Nadim Karam** shares his thoughts on urban art, what he learned during a decade in Japan, and the story behind his new installation **Shout and Silence**, premiering at Art Dubai

by Pascal Odille

Pascal Odille: As an artist and an architect, you have considered at length the role that art can play in the city. You have created a large number of works accessible to the greater public; could you tell us about your experience?

Nadim Karam: Studying architecture for over a decade has led me to consider the city as an organic entity, an energy matrix powered by human activity and creativity, which interacts with its physical structures and spaces. In Paul Virilio's 2006 introduction to my book *Urban Toys*, he commented on my work; "We can't tell where the game begins — its toys — and where the drama ends — the metropolitan tragedy...Therein lies the paradox of urban art, the paradoxical aesthetic between the panic and the circus games... Just what will become of our cities, these concentrations of real estate inertia?"

Bearing in mind that he wrote this in 2006, it nevertheless echoes my feeling that even in the absence of terrorist attacks, we still need to find a way to provide areas of emancipation in our cities, saturated and submerged by the complexity of self-imposed rules and systems. Creating projects in cities is a way to bring fresh air and moments of dreams to urban contexts that remind people of their common humanity.



Nadim Karam,
Heavy Silence



PO: Between 1982 and 1992 you lived in Japan, and it was during this time that you began creating works that would develop into your *Archaic Procession* series. During this period, the sources of your inspiration were centred on an imaginary civilisation, a hybrid between the Middle East and the Far East. How did you move from this series towards large-scale urban art?

NK: My years in Japan had a very important formative influence on me; I learned much about Far Eastern and Indian thought and philosophy of space in parallel to architecture. These, compiled with the awareness of my own Middle Eastern origins and my strong ideas about the necessity for cultural diversity to be a positive force, rather than a divisive one, were somehow expressed in my artworks. After experimenting with performances, exhibitions and installations in Japan, I took three large urban projects directly to the Lebanese public at the Sursock Museum, the National Museum and in downtown Beirut, with the desire to create new ephemeral stories for a city in desolation. These days, I am creating public art works in Singapore, Shanghai and Yokohama. The important thing is to try to understand the city, its vibes, and its way of being, so that any new project should feel like it grew out of the context.

PO: You have created a large number of urban works, taking your pictorial universe into cities. How would you qualify your engagement in large-scale urban art?

NK: My engagement is always with the context, and my work is just the expression of that connection. Probably that is the reason why so many of my projects are self-initiated. For example, my project for Todaiji Temple in Nara, Japan, grew from living with the monks, understanding some of their philosophy and wanting to offer a project in commemoration of an important monk in their history, Jitchu. From the time I proposed it, it took twenty years to convince the monks, as, understandably, contemporary art and religion are an uneasy mix. When *The Three Flowers of Jitchu* was finally realised, for two weeks in 2004, various people told me that they had difficulty believing it was the work of a foreigner because it felt so Japanese. It was the most beautiful compliment I could have received.

PO: How did you arrive at *The Cloud*, a monumental, if not titanic, project?

NK: This project grew from my thoughts at a time when I was discovering Dubai, and being invited there often for workshops. I created it for Dubai, as I felt that this is what the city needed, or what I wanted to experience in that city. It remains a theoretically buildable project, but meanwhile it has been a huge source of inspiration for me, the genesis behind most of the art works that I have produced since then. Its ultimate manifestation, I think, has been in the development of the *Stretching Thoughts* series.

PO: For the first time, when presenting your exhibition *Stretching Thoughts* at Ayyam Gallery, you have integrated recycled material as a central aspect of your exhibition. Could you tell us about this?

NK: The *Stretching Thoughts* exhibition is a metaphor of the human mind, intended to be inspiring and disturbing at the same time. At the entrance is a contextual installation, *Neglected Thoughts* — an accumulation of scrap metal, suspended in a transparent box. It is what it says — abandoned and wasted potential. Of course, this work in Beirut now is very contextual, in contrast with the other *Stretching Thoughts* works, which are universal, evoking the positivist power and limitless possibilities that thoughts can generate.

PO: *Shout and Silence* is your latest creation. It will be presented for the first time at Art Dubai. It is a complex installation, composed of three works, and could be read in several different ways. What does the piece symbolise for you?

NK: With *Shout and Silence*, I am creating for the first time three-dimensional, organic shapes that are, for me, beings carrying emotions represented in abstract forms. *Shout and Silence* are intensive reactions, but also states of mind.

Silence is the accumulation of years and years of shouts lost to oblivion. In this installation, *Heavy Silence* and *Sublime Silence* accompany *Le Dialogue des Sourds* (The Dialogue of the Deaf). The latter speaks about how any two forces shouting at each other can only enter an abyss of eternal fighting, sometimes trapping an entire population between them. My feeling is that, at the moment, most of the Middle East is fluctuating like a yoyo between shouting and silence. ■

Nadim Karam,
Le dialogue des sourds
(the dialogue of the deaf)