



Urban Toys and Dreams

WHERE THEY'RE FOR REAL

Elspeth Moncrieff met Nadim Karam, the artist behind *The Travellers* – Melbourne's landmark sculpture located on the Sandridge Bridge – and found his Beirut studio, Atelier Hapsitus, buzzing with ambitious ideas for urban projects worldwide.

Although merely a stone's throw from the National Museum of Beirut and having major works installed in Beirut, London, Tokyo and Prague, Atelier Hapsitus is located in a small unimposing building. The name is a combination of the words 'happening' and 'situations' which together, Karam observed,

often produce an unpredictable outcome. This not only defines Karam's philosophy, but also describes the group of architects and designers who collaborate on his urban projects — how they are engaged in what he views is an experimental field of work, blurring the edges between art, architecture and urbanism.



Top and above: *Clouds and Smoke* project, computer generated images of *The merry-go-round* and *The Windmill of Chance* for Art Dubai 2013

Right: *Father Elephant*, 2009, glass and resin beads on wood sculpture, 150 x 200 x 24 cm

Top: *Lollipop Boy*, 2011, lacquered coloured buttons, wood, metal, base, 90 x 83 x 11 cm

Bottom: *The Fisherman Fishing High Rise Buildings*, 2008, mixed media on canvas, 200 x 120 cm

Although currently best known in the Middle East and South East Asia, Karam's work is becoming increasingly recognised in the west. Over the course of the next year he is exhibiting at the Institute du Monde Arab, Paris; he will be permanently represented in London when his dealers Ayyam Gallery open on Bond Street in October; and he is creating a major installation for Art Dubai in March 2013.

Karam's work transcends traditional political boundaries; he was born in West Africa of Lebanese parents and lived in Japan from 1982 to 1992 where he trained as an architect. Since 1993 he has lived since in Lebanon where he runs his flourishing architectural practice. His understanding of the urban landscape and the forces and cultures that shape it, inform his work and give a tangible form to his extraordinary imagination and creativity. Despite the seriousness that underlies many of his projects, his work is invested with immense humour, and a strong narrative content. Karam believes that cities must dream and his sculptures are 'Urban Toys', that is, they hold the memories of a city's past while creating its future.

This same blend of humour and seriousness is present in the artist himself: Karam punctuates his sentences with an infectious chuckle. He delights in facts like the necessity for a button factory to produce 3,000 kilos of multi-coloured buttons for his iconic elephant sculptures. When asked why the elephant motif is so strong in his work he explains in a down-to-earth manner: 'Because it provides me with such a large surface to decorate.' He laughs at the absurdity of creating 500 sculptures for an exhibition on Kagami Lake in Japan that lasted for only ten days.

His studio is a cross between a child's toy shelf and a magician's cave. In the entrance hall, a ten foot high tree of multi-coloured flowers greets you. On a shelf sits a marvellous purple elephant surrounded by its 'aura' — an enveloping cloud of little figures and ideas which represent memories the animal will forever carry. Amongst the desks where team Hapsitus sit at computers





Above: *Boy Carrying a Cloud*, 2011, mother-of-pearl buttons on wooden structure, 60 x 8 cm

Above right: *The War and Dream Closets*, computer generated images. To be exhibited at the Institute du Monde Arabe, Paris in October 2012

developing Karam's grandiose dreams into realisable architectural projects, the shelves are crammed with figures and models, miniature Ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds — tangible representations of his imagination. Another side to his creativity is revealed in the bold expressionistic paintings hanging on the walls which are a major part of his creative expression and are also exhibited and sought after as well as his smaller sculptures.

In the inner studio is a model of his installation *Clouds and Smoke* to be realised for Art Dubai. The tiny model resembles a child's doll's house filled with intriguing objects. An assistant shows me ideas for the detailed digital images of the merry-go-round, the fabrication of which will probably be done in China. This ambitious project incorporates the *Dream and War Closets* which will be shown in Paris in October. The title refers to the precarious nature of life in Lebanon



balanced between dreams and war.

Motives common to his work run through this dream sequence, the imagery drawing on many levels of memory and association. They will be fabricated from frosted material, the inner figurative elements created from 'super shiny' stainless steel. Besides the dream closets, he is placing an imaginary field of giant flowers which sprout from ten-foot trees and encircle the broken bridge where two figures with outstretched hands can never meet. Prototypes for the flower trees are being experimented with in the hallway. Karam has used genuine toys for these, the brightly coloured plastic flowers that turn in the wind bought at every beach shop in Lebanon. The installation also includes a merry-go-round with 400 different figures made from coloured glass and a revolving windmill cheek-by-jowl with a military tank. The installation conjures up the recent events of the Arab Spring and the troubled history of the Middle East, but the piece is presented in an enticing way — showing another side to his extraordinary creativity, the flowers and revolving sculpture are as brightly coloured and delicious as a packet of Smarties.



While Karam was invited to exhibit at Art Dubai, on other projects he displays enormous patience and tenacity, prepared to wait for years for a decision on a project. ‘So much depends on politics,’ he explains, ‘which faction is in power at the time. It is not just finance.’ The Sandridge Bridge in Melbourne was six years in coming to fruition, the entire team at Hapsitus spent months working on the project and the scale models. It took more than a year for the City of Melbourne to contact him after his presentation and then, like so many major projects, chance and politics intervened: the commission could go ahead provided it was ready for the Commonwealth Games in 2006 — in just over a year — and all the construction work was done in Australia.

The logistics of constructing these massive sculptures was hugely complicated. ARUP Melbourne Engineers requested the sculptures to be cut outs with less than 30 per cent of solid body surface so the wind would pass through them. Karam worked closely with the City of Melbourne on the ten, approximately 7.5 metre high sculptures, representing the migration periods of people to Australia — nine of which move across the bridge and back each day, and with Aboriginal



Above: Gayip, 2006, stainless steel, Melbourne, city centre
Left: The Travellers, 2006, stainless steel, Sandridge Bridge, Melbourne, Australia



artists on the fixed sculpture *Gayip*, placed on the side of the bridge. Interestingly, Aboriginal influences continue to appear in his work, particularly in his dream sequences.

Work in progress includes a long-term scheme for a massive urban project for the City of Amman in Jordan, a concept which came about on a recent visit. Built on seven hills, the city is socially segregated by rich and poor areas.

Karam's project aims to use areas of wasteland to create seven monumental moving sculptures

which will inhabit the hills and reach out to each other across the social and political barriers of the city.

For Chicago, Karam is hoping to secure a commission for a series of giant stainless steel Ferris wheels which will revolve in the spaces around the Navy Pier, shortly celebrating its centenary with a large regeneration budget for the area. With each wheel representing a different aspect of Chicago's history, the Ferris itself is a symbol of Chicago's industrial past. Turning together they would present an extraordinary spectacle, a revolving kinetic sculpture merging past, present and future.

Perhaps his most ambitious and absurd project to date is *The Cloud Project* for Dubai — a dreamscape suspended on shiny pillars higher than the tallest skyscrapers: a public cloud for the people of the city excluded from the elitist tower blocks of the recent building boom. It is a place of parks and lakes — a place of dreams where figures skydive off platforms or fish for dreams

The Dialogue of the Hills, 2010, Amman, computer generated images





in the air. Karam insists it is not just a dream but a realisable project currently being investigated by structural engineers. The shiny pillars supporting the cloud will incorporate elevators to whisk visitors skyward. Nothing is impossible, it seems, if you have the space to dream and the will to see it through.

Wheels of Chicago, 2012, computer generated images

The Cloud Project, Dubai, computer generated images

