

Chaouki Choukini's healing spaces

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*My poems don't distribute only images and metaphors. But landscapes, villages, fields...
In fact, my poems distribute places.* – Mahmoud Darwish

At the very least, one can say that Chaouki Choukini's sculptures are complex objects, often described as sets of hybrid organic/mechanic, abstract/figurative, linear/non-linear shapes and volumes. They grab the attention of the viewer by making manifest multiple scales of surface in a kind of endless convergence of polarities—an open-ended experience, without a clear start or finish. Since the 1970s, rather than simply erecting a sculpture, Choukini has been mastering this way of displaying his *plateau*—a visual and conceptual horizon of accurately studied shapes and symbols—with a vibrant visual language that never feels outdated, expressing visual expansion, agility, and unrest.

One of the numerous innovations of this approach is the revival of a range of traditional techniques and skills (such as tile making, engraving, pottery, and weaving). The eye that follows the irregular veins of Choukini's sculptures will be struck by the subtle visual metaphors of the various plateaus, rough zones, and soft zones. His works are conceptually founded on texture and density, bringing the sculptor's task into the realm of the writer or poet; as they weave one word into another, so he weaves space.

The effectiveness of Choukini's sculptures could be conceptualized as a textural maze through which our gaze walks, lost but for a few clues to guide it. In this way, Choukini's work differs from the praxis of modernist or minimalist sculpture, as he is resistant to its supposedly self-reflective, self-explanatory, and monumentalist tendencies. Choukini's style has evolved in a distinctly anti-formalist tradition, in the vein of artists as diverse as Fausto Melotti, Naum Gabo, and Isamu Noguchi, who despite their differences all envisioned sculpture as an organic, open-ended process. Furthermore, these artists—Choukini included—have a certain relationship with the kinetics of the hands and eyes, exploring biological principles of perception and motion above those that might be affected by a computer.

In these examples, one can divine a sculpture-making process that is not subject to a standardized order or approach. On the contrary, this work strives for a sense of controlled disorder; as a true engineer of wood, Choukini manipulates his material into sensuality and circularity, bridging the gap between order (softness) and disorder (roughness). As a result, his sculptures express very indirect but nonetheless vivid symbolic force that can only be deciphered from clues such as the titles of his works. They often allude to a certain physical action or function without explicitly depicting it with common codes or images; rather, they invite us to a new realm of communication.

The sense of dynamic topology in Choukini's work is mesmerizing: looking at the sculpture, one can detect the places where he seemed to be working with a certain pattern and technique, before leaving it to work on a completely different plateau or level in a vastly different way. Yet, by some illusion of space, the two components are perceived as belonging to the same "whole." Umberto Eco's concept of "open works of art"—"the artist's decision to leave arrangements of some constituents of a work to the public or to chance"—emphasizes the elements of multiplicity and plurality in art, its nature as an interactive process between reader and text... or viewer and sculpture. Not to mention Chaouki Choukini's personal interest in Michelangelo's art history and theory, including his notion of "non-finito," which elicit a similar sense of sublimation through unachieved shapes and open-ended visions.

In the fourteenth chapter of the book *A Thousand Plateaus* (incidentally, the title is not unrelated to Chaouki Choukini's work), French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari set out a dichotomy between two kinds of space: the *smooth space* and the *striated space*. This framework coincides with distinctions they draw between the *nomadic* and the *sedentary*, and between the *space of the war machine* and the *space of the state apparatus*. Such psycho-formal patterns befit a sculptor of Lebanese descent, who was torn from his homeland and arrived in Paris, France in 1967 where he decided to stay and work; Choukini has always imbued his sculptures with some sense of belonging and displacement. In fact, when approached from the perspective of dispossession of the land, more-or-less forced exile and traumatic war memories, the very journey of the sculptor becomes a pure fragmentation of vision and experience.

In this respect, let us turn to one of Deleuze and Guattari's key examples of organic kinetics—felt making—which can guide us toward a deeper understanding of Choukini's works: "in principle infinite, open, and unlimited in every direction; it has neither top nor bottom nor center; it does not assign fixed and mobile elements but rather distributes a continuous variation." Through Choukini's refined wood experiments, one could add that his works also transcend the border between the interior and the exterior; very often, the interior becomes the exterior and vice-versa, clearly identifying the sculptor's place of refuge beyond the existentialist/expressionist fields and opening the viewer up to more objective and kinetic experiences.

The mode of organization adopted by this model of striated space involves demarcating a space, a border or edging system, almost a center/periphery logic. These are numerous even in microscopic details of Choukini's sculptures, looking like maps made of fragments of landscapes—or memories. There is no landscape without striated space: as *landscaping* originally referring to putting human hands or leaving human traces on nature through wandering, chasing, plowing, digging... even bombing. The paradox of the striated space is that the human impact of landscaping eventually makes human presence impossible, or at least unbearable. It signals an even more vital need for smooth zones: spaces where nomadic and collective forces and energies can converge simultaneously.

All Choukini's art therefore lies in a precarious balance between these smooth/nomadic and rough/sedentary zones. According to Deleuze and Guattari, smooth space is occupied by intensities and events. It is haptic rather than optic, a vectorial space rather than a metrical one. Smooth spaces, as they gracefully unfurl in Choukini's shapes, are characteristic of sea, steppe, ice, and desert. They evoke constantly shifting movements and entertaining tactile relations at the same time, while striated spaces represent land saturation, desertification and eventually destruction, disrupting and striking the eye.

Choukini's art questions our vision—and the tactile, haptic sense—in a dialectic between sculptural, landscape, and architectural spaces. Where the sculpture ends, begins a fragment of landscape... where the landscape ends, begins a fragment of architecture... wherein lies a fragment of sculpture... over and over again in an open-ended and serendipitous organic process of *mise en abîme* and inverted/distorted shapes and scales. Hence the eloquent title for this exhibition: *Citadelles of Today*, in remembrance of West Asian landscapes and traditional architecture between Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. These are what one could metaphorically call "cities of sand," often made of ancient bricks and tiles, with an entropic root system in the earth. Both fragile, as they are subject to seismic frequencies, and anti-fragile, as everything comes from dust and to dust returns. Far from proposing closed and definitive patterns inspired from modernist architecture or any kind of bold symbolism, Chaouki Choukini's artworks seem to follow an almost hidden program or secret battle plan, that of revealing from a buried blueprint, layer by layer, plateau after plateau, in search of spaces to heal.