

whitewall

Checking in: Najla El Zein is Planting Seeds, Cooking, and Finding Bursts of Energy

By Katy Donoghue
May 8, 2020



Najla El Zein, "Seduction, Pair 06," 2019, Iranian red travertine, 27.5 x 62.5 x 18.75 inches, photo by Damien Arlettaz, courtesy of Friedman Benda and Najla El Zein.

Beirut-based designer **Najla El Zein** creates objects and furniture that stimulate the senses and evoke a singular experience. Her solo show "Transition" last year at Friedman Benda in New York was inspired by her journey into motherhood—exploring the strength, weight, and limits of material and form.

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Recently, *Whitewall* checked in with El Zein to see how she is doing during the current pandemic. She shared that while she doesn't have time for much, she's finding herself surprisingly inspired and intentionally hopeful.

WHITEWALL: How are you doing?

NAJLA EL ZEIN: I'm OK! Some days are better than others. Nevertheless, the weather is beautiful, we're taking advantage of our little garden, enjoying spring, planting seeds, hoping to end up with many vegetables to eat this summer, and we're spending plenty of quality time with the kids. I have two little ones.



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WW: What are you listening to, reading, watching?

NEZ: We're listening to **Radio Al Hara**, an online radio station project which began in Palestine not long ago. It is an online collective radio from which anyone can participate through a dropbox folder by sharing music, talks, interviews, discussions, and readings. The curation is great and the music selection is fabulous, spanning from MENA music to funk, jazz and more—highly recommended.

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I have no time to read and no time to watch anything! Although I do peek from time to time on the **Hayao Miyazaki's** animations I put for my daughter. Many of his animations are on Netflix now, which she really enjoys watching.



Photo by Damien Arlettaz, courtesy of Friedman Benda and Najla El Zein.

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WW: What are you cooking?

NEZ: Cooking is still a precious moment of the day to embrace. It is actually the only thing left allowing us to “break the routine.” I cook something new everyday, and that also entertains my four-year-old daughter, so we do spend some time on this. We cook many different things, from Levantine to Persian, to Eastern and Western cooking, sandwiches, cookies, cakes—anything and everything that’s good, really!

WW: How are you staying connected?

NEZ: I am barely connected! I only connect via phone with who is essential at this point in time: my family, my closest friends, my gallery, my manufacturers (who are at home but I do still bother them), and my colleague Maria who is also working from home. Well, that actually makes quite a bunch of people, so my connection to the outside world is really through them!

WW: Are you able to find the time to create/work in your studio?

NEZ: My studio is now my dining table. It’s impossible to be as efficient as before—there’s too much distraction—but I do work at night too, so that gives me some time to focus and get things done.

WW: How are you staying inspired or hopeful?

NEZ: In some strange way, I do feel inspired. There’s a huge amount of contradictions one may feel or experience, from happiness to frustration to creativity to doubts to positivity, negativity, fatigue, full blast energy. I’m not sure where it will go but there is something here surely. Hopeful? That’s the only way out I guess, otherwise one’s soul would die.

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