

# NAJLA EL ZEIN

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Najla El Zein welcomed me to her studio in Amsterdam on a rainy day in February. I could barely drag my suitcase through the streets, so strong were the gusts of wind. These elements set the scene for our meeting, a meeting about challenging natural, elemental forces.

The former brutalist technical school that houses El Zein's studio was built in the '60s, and its façade features a huge concrete relief created at the time by artist Lex Horn. Today, it's host to various artist collectives. A few corridors and stairs lead to El Zein's workspace where a large window takes up the entire wall as you enter. Her work is immediately striking, very direct. Her relationship with the body and simple moves taken as seriously as symphonies fill the room with silent, choregraphical objects. As I observed El Zein engage physically with her sculptures, I saw how the importance of an object's expression is paramount.

El Zein is a Lebanese artist and designer born in Beirut in 1983. She was raised in Paris, where she moved at the age of two. She studied at the École Camondo, receiving a BA in product design and a MA in interior architecture and spatial design. Her work explores the relationship between form, use, space, and emotion and is derived from personal observation and experience, influenced by her own subconscious, sensuality, memory, femininity, and desire. She adopts an experimental approach between art and design, using 'mother materials' such as stone, ceramics, and glass. An enormous voluptuousness and presence emanate from her pieces; they're familiar in their uniqueness. We imagine ourselves caressing a skin's surface, almost expecting them to breathe or react to the touch of our bodies, our hands, and yet we are ultimately seized by the coldness of the materials. We discussed her recent research, her creative process, the projects that have marked her career, and her forthcoming exhibition in New York. We also talked about Lebanon, resilience, Michelangelo, sculptural installation, and symphony.

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You are currently developing a series of re-search projects based on glassblowing, an ancestral technique which requires perfect timing and harmony between the glassblowers to produce the ideal piece. How does glassblowing affect your relationship with materials?

The process is very fast, hypertensive. The workshop is a furnace. You're sweating, smoke swirling around; it is quite a particular context. But then, once the pieces finally cool down and crystallise into shape, you need time to understand the piece, to understand what it was meant to be, what it has become while you were giving it life when the glass was still lava. This is when the questions flood

to tell me or what it wanted to become. The same goes for stone, which I believe bears witness to time. Its geological formation takes a very long time to reach its final form. Each stone, even from the same quarry, has a different expression and is differently marked by the passage of time.

There is an anecdote your stonemason told you that I find very beautiful. It's about the mystical sides of a stone.

Indeed, he shared with me an anecdote about Michelangelo encapsulated in this phrase: 'I see the angel in the stone and carve it until I set him free'. From my point of view,



in: How do I handle this? How do I make it mine? In that moment, I am right there with the piece, dissecting its journey through the workshop. The coldwork process is very important to me, as this is the moment where I am able to take ownership and get in touch with its true essence.

There's something magical about your working process.

The process is organic, constantly evolving, right up to the end. Each of the materials I use has its own soul. When it came to working with glass, it took me a long time to understand its very essence and what it wanted

Michelangelo's interpretation carries deeper nuances. Only through intimate engagement with stone—a process which I am closely involved in—can one truly grasp the essence of this statement. Stone is an inherently inert and lifeless material. But in fact, within the process of working with it, a transformative elevation occurs. There exists a pivotal moment, unforeseen and sudden, where the stone comes to life, awakens, and shows its soul. Gradually, it begins to resonate, first in parts, then in its entirety. It is almost a revelation, not just for me, but for everyone working on the project. These moments are truly unique and beautiful.







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How did you learn to navigate spontaneity in your process? Are you often surprised by your work? Is this feeling reflected in other areas of your life, besides your art?

Spontaneity comes from the early sketches, when I make my models and my hands lead the way, almost thinking for themselves. The models are just intentions of what directions I want to take, and they accompany me till the end of the process. It is important for me to always come back to them and observe what and who they really are, especially with the large works that demand meticulous planning. Planning opposes spontaneity; it is within these models that the true essence

discoveries—not just about the works and their stories but also about myself.

You talk about each of your pieces as if they were characters.

Yes, I think so. They're living beings, and they've been shaped by human hands, by a whole team pouring their energy into them. So, everything leading up to and during their creation carries real emotions. There is this incredible power in handwork; it has the ability to convey feelings and emotions through the material itself, almost like an imprint.

How do you approach each new work?



lies, and my role is to honour their intentions in the final creation and make sure to keep on doing so during the whole process. And yes, this comes with lots of surprises. Particularly with glass, a stubborn material that seems to always want to assert its own will. But I learnt how to embrace these obstinacies as they allow me to uncover new narratives within the pieces, letting them evolve into their own identities. That is what I look for, truly, and I cherish these moments.

As for my personal life, I tend to control every bit of it, so in a way my work serves as a therapeutic outlet, allowing me to surrender against my own inclination and make new

I start my process with white logs of modelling clay. Piece by piece, I blend them together to form my initial structures. It's almost like composing a musical score; each small element placed side by side begins to resemble notes on a page. Now, as I work with glass, those models take on a new significance. They're like the sheet music for an orchestra. The notes, the rhythms, the composition, they're all there, waiting to be brought to life. The glassblowers become the musicians, playing their part in the symphony, and the glass itself is the beautiful result of that collaborative performance.

Do you listen to music while you create?

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Where does your mind go in these more visceral moments?

While working, I usually listen to the radio. I like the eclectic playlists of the French radio FIP or the online Palestinian radio Alhara. As I immerse myself in my work, my mind wanders freely. Since childhood, creating was a form of meditation. I feel very passionate about it.

Your relationship with glass, combined with the elements of your sketches, reminds me of choreographic scores or movement notation. Absolutely. It's quite similar to the research I've been conducting on glass. I've been immersed in the world of stone for several years

nudges you in directions you hadn't planned. I find this fascinating. Right now, I am also experimenting with ceramics, and it is like being a spectator in my own process. We've crafted the initial clay piece, so I don't know what's going to come out of it yet. I'm waiting, waiting to understand and digest the process. At the moment, it's drying, so it's taking the time it needs before we can put it in the kiln. Given its size, we'll have to cut it for firing, a decision that didn't come easy; it was painful, truth be told.

You work with stone, glass, and ceramics, amongst other materials. Each of these ul-



now. I've developed a deep bond with the material and with the craftsmen who help bring my visions to life. Glass is a completely new and different material for me. I've been looking forward to this moment: discovering another life force, another prosody, a new impetus. I realised that, just like with stone, I had this urge to control every aspect of what the glass would become. But over time, I've learnt you have to let it lead, to dance alongside it, to embrace its fluidity. Working with glass is a stark contrast to working with stone, and not only in comparing the time process of developing each material. Stone is a collaborator, even if it sometimes

timately come from the earth, as if you were in the womb.

Yes, that's the essence of ceramics—they're living materials, and that's what makes them so captivating. I'm very excited about my upcoming exhibition at Friedman Benda Gallery in New York at the end of June. The title *Opacity, Transparency, and Everything in Between* came to me early in the process of thinking about what I wanted to do for my next show, before even knowing what would come out of it or what pieces I would create. It represents my persistent quest for a deeper understanding of life's intricacies, and this exploration extends to my artistic expression. I seek, through

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my work, to methodically break down and interpret these observations.

This exhibition is all about exploring these intermediate spaces, those in-between realms. I am constantly drawn to these nuances, sensitive to the subtle expressions they offer—what's the underlying intention, what's the truth behind it all? With recent public installations I've created for Doha in Qatar, I felt the need to grasp the emotional journey and challenges that unfolded during the process. I wanted to understand how we navigated the experiences, surmounted obstacles, and ultimately brought the pieces to life. Given the context in which my team and I have created the pieces in Lebanon, amidst



unprecedented challenges—from the August 4th explosion to the Covid-19 pandemic, the October 17th revolution, and the economic and social turmoil in Lebanon—the project became a testament to resilience. In the face of fear, uncertainty, and instability, our collective endeavour sustained us, providing solace, laughter, tears, and respite from the chaos. I believe that this creative journey transcends mere artistic commission; it holds profound significance. And with my upcoming show, I aspire to discover and express the essence of what lies between perceptions and comprehension. My aim is not just to understand, but to attain a higher level of insight through the pieces I create.

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The space in between makes me think of Lebanon, where your parents come from. Lebanon is a country where you're always between two civilisations, between two histories, where notions of cyclical time and the destruction and reconstruction of civilisations are very strong. I'm often asked if my origins influenced me, what I retained from Lebanon or France. I can say that this has always escaped me, and I've always been far removed from this question. When I made the move from France to Lebanon at 28, I was stepping into the unknown. Lebanon was unfamiliar territory for me. Sure, my parents are Lebanese, but beyond family ties, I didn't have much attachment to the

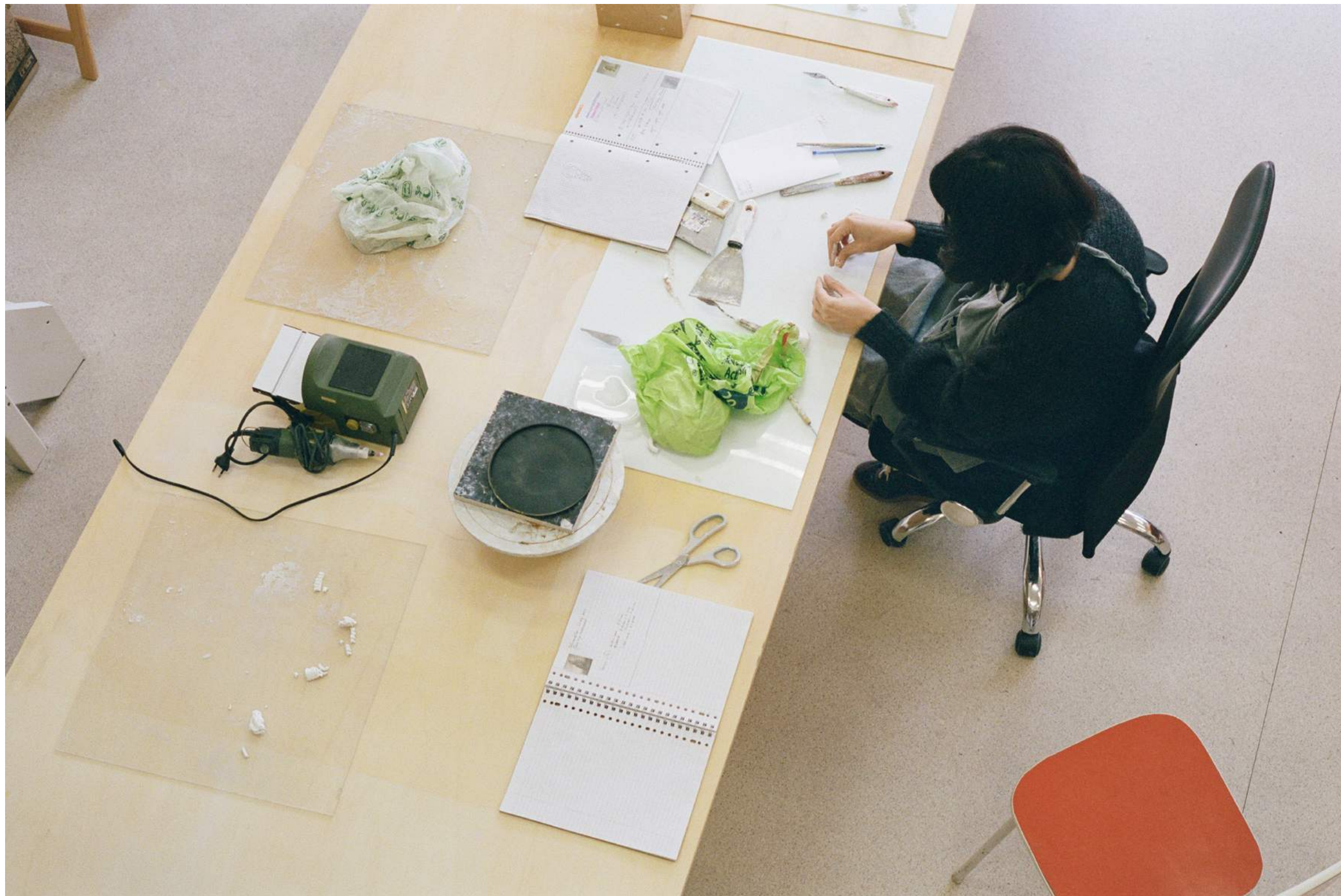


country, nor did I have plans of living there. But looking back, that experience brought me so much. There's this indescribable energy in Lebanon, a profound strength of adaptation and resilience that runs deep in its people. We sail by sight. It's like navigating through uncertainty, always on the edge, always in between. My sculptures, *Fragmented Pillars*, capture a glimpse of this experience—how to reconcile strength with fragility. In Lebanon, you often feel like everything's on the verge of collapse, yet somehow, it holds together. And through it all, I believe my journey in Lebanon helped me uncover aspects of myself I might not have discovered otherwise.



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I also wonder what you have come to learn about yourself through your creative process, which is so embodied and demanding. What have you realised through these moments of confrontation with your body?

I am still learning! At the moment, I don't have a definitive answer, and perhaps it is best to remain in this state of questioning. I think it is this sense of curiosity and exploration that propels me forward.

Your work *Sitt el Sitteit* rests on one of the chairs in your studio. It's a throw made of toothpicks, everyday objects which required a significantly different creative process from the one we mentioned but one which also came from transformation and chance. How did you develop it?

I dropped a box of toothpicks and thought the shape and sound were really beautiful when they fell. With that gesture, the humble toothpick was transformed into something entirely new; they're like fur.

As for the throw, I was initially uncertain how to incorporate it into my work. But as I reflected on this experience, I found myself drawn to the Middle Eastern expression 'Sitt el Sitteit': a woman of awe-inspiring presence, yet distant and enigmatic. This story resonated with me deeply—so much so that the shawl of my wedding dress was made of toothpicks.

You also worked on large-scale projects for the Qatar Museum where you designed pieces for two public spaces in Doha. *Us, Her, Him* at Flag Plaza is a monumental installation of sculptural benches with a total length of over 1,000 feet, and *Her, Him* is an installation for the museum's roundabout. Can you tell us about the importance and complexity of human interaction in these two pieces?

The project in Qatar became a significant part of both my professional and personal life. With *Us, Her, Him*, I wanted to create an immersive experience moving through Flag Plaza, the entrance of the Doha museum cultural district, aiming to evoke human connections. I sought to encourage visitors to slow down and engage with their surroundings. The sculptures are used almost like a sort of organic signage, influencing the visitor's journey and their attitudes.

The second project, *Her, Him*, is located across from the National Museum of Qatar designed by Jean Nouvel. I wanted to develop

a response to this very elaborate architecture in the shape of a desert rose by creating pieces that had an impulsive energy. Placed on a hill-shaped roundabout, they seem to be moving slowly uphill, almost trying to get a better view of the surrounding environment. The National Museum of Qatar is fascinating in terms of form and technology. I don't think it's easy to make a building with this kind of expression, and it's immensely poetic, too.

When I returned to Qatar with my family a few months after the installation of the pieces was completed, it was incredibly satisfying to witness people of all ages lounging around the pieces, even climbing atop my sculptures. It was a moment of profound validation. Seeing them so naturally integrated into the environment, used as gathering spots and playgrounds, filled me with joy. It felt symbolic, affirming that these creations indeed fulfil their purpose—they invite interaction, inspire connection, and foster a sense of unity. Seeing visitors hugging the sculptures in countless photos and hearing their stories of wanting to do so in person only reaffirms the impact of these works and the mission they embody.

Finally, I'm interested to know what comes next. Are there any materials you have never worked with that you would like to explore?

What comes next is what I am making now. My recent venture with glass was revelatory. I would really like to continue exploring more with this material, maybe on larger scales, too. While I continue to learn and grow from working with ceramic, I am also drawn to wood, bronze, and paper. Let's see where the journey will take me, but I am excited to watch the pieces unfold in the next months.