

CULTURE

Tarek Elkassouf: The Future is Near



Nayla Tamraz | 23 Jun 2023 At 10:40

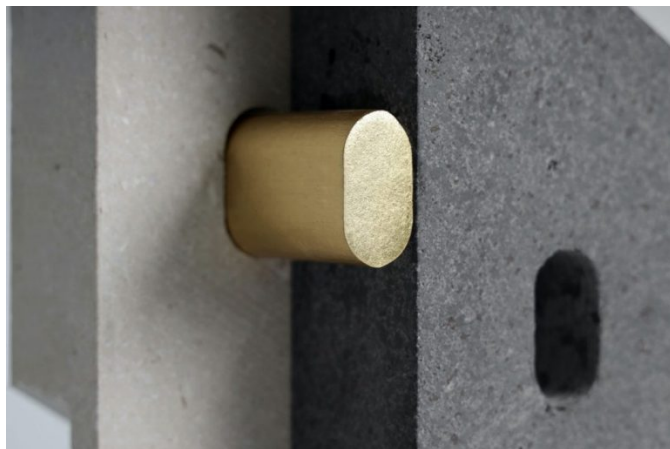
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In his inaugural solo exhibition in Beirut, Tarek Elkassouf invites us to an introspective journey into the heart of forms and matter, a voyage through minimalist territory.



Tarek Elkassouf presents a deeply personal narrative at the Saleh Barakat Gallery, albeit in a form that may initially appear minimalist and austere. This seemingly paradoxical approach is the foundation of his meticulous process of maturation and distillation that bears a resemblance to alchemy.

We are transported back to the minimalism and the progeny of “less is more” artists such as Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Frank Stella, Richard Serra, or Sol Le Witt, who shared the common ethos of emphasizing formal simplicity and neutrality. By utilizing rudimentary structures and pared-down shapes, crafted from uncomplicated materials, these artists endeavored to convey the sense that the adopted composition is the ultimate one before its dissolution. In its essential definition, the content of a minimalist form is none

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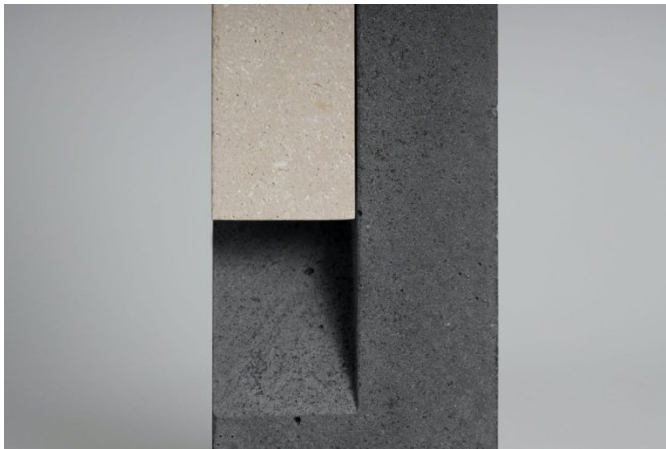


other than the form itself; hence, the created object does not aim to convey an emotional narrative.

However, this is not how Tarek Elkassouf interprets it. Through forms and materials, he encourages introspection, which, according to him, is the genesis of the creative process. Despite aligning with a particular strand of sculptural minimalism, the artist lays claim to a deeply introspective and personal language. Perceived as a universal language by the artist, who has a background in architecture, this pure geometric vernacular can facilitate a communion with others. Specifically, in this case, it culminates in a form where plastic and "spiritual" content (emanating from the life of the spirit) find themselves in a dialogue between the visible and the invisible.

"This is an invitation to experience mourning," he tells us at the outset of the visit, "a process I had to go through to produce these works (...) I started by wanting to mourn my city, Beirut, and I wanted to reconcile with it. But it became apparent that I had to reconcile with myself before restoring my relationship with the city."

Therefore, *The Future is Near* is posited as a human, intimate, yet complex response to the phenomenon of loss. Indeed, the exhibition is structured around the five stages of the grieving process: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, culminating in an epilogue: "Who are you now?" Thus, we quickly realize that this journey primarily provides the observer with an opportunity to contemplate objects with an incredibly studied finish, to the extent that one wonders if these objects could not equally assert themselves outside of their reference to the narrative that informs them.



Indeed, Elkassouf is an artist with a distinct plastic language, one comprised of four materials that make up his grammar. The first material is basalt, a volcanic rock that also happens to be abundant worldwide. This explosive yet unifying stone connects us as humans while also tethering us to the energy of the earth. The second material, Carrara marble, links the artist to 2000 years of sculpting tradition, and thus to his practice. The third element, a local limestone, crystallizes his connection to his homeland. Lastly, the gold leaf, evocative of religious art, enables him to create a sacred space.





Hence, it is at the crossroads of multiple and profound connections that these objects are conceived. They also maintain formal relationships with each other and with the space they inhabit. Through them, Elkassouf explores the relations between solids and voids. Rendered visible as spaces within spaces or between them, these voids also generate other shapes. The void, he says, is like "the space between words, or silence in music, which is as important as the notes themselves. It is a space between two worlds."

His work on forms and the voids they leave behind is also an exploration of the relationships between light and shadow, treated as a material in its positive value: "I try to understand the materials, how much light they hold, and how much shadow. And I find inspiration in the search for balance in the energies of the materials extracted from the heart of the earth."

For the essential question indeed pertains to the pursuit of balance: balance of energies, of materials, of shadows and lights, of voids and solids. These are the various plastic paths the artist employs to explore the equally essential concept of the conquest of balance after loss.

This quest for balance is conceived in parallel with a dynamic of unity and multiplicity, which involves an atomization of the object that, when dispersed or multiplied, acquires another energy: the object is what it is, but it also becomes what it evolves into, and its evolution in space and time is constitutive of its essence. But it also gathers and finds itself in a reverse dynamic, in dialogue with the grand totality, represented here by the gallery space and its cubic, or more broadly geometric, architecture. This echoes what architect Walter Gropius referred to as "gestalt," borrowing from the vocabulary of psychology, denoting the sensation of the whole rather than the juxtaposition of parts. Seen in this light, each element is autonomous and unique while also being an integral part of the whole.

After studying architecture and urban planning, Tarek Elkassouf ventured into design, subsequently transitioning into sculpture. In 2018, he was selected for a residency at the Swatch Art Gallery in Shanghai. Additionally, he has collaborated with international brands such as Cartier and FIFA. His works are included in significant collections and have been showcased in several exhibitions across the Middle East, Asia, the United States, and Europe. He currently divides his time between Beirut and Sydney.



The Future is Near is a title that instills a desire to forge ahead. The exhibition is on display at the Saleh Barakat Gallery until August 12, 2023.



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Nayla Tamraz

Nayla Tamraz est professeure de littérature et d'histoire de l'art à l'Université Saint-Joseph à Beyrouth où elle a dirigé le département de



lettres françaises et lancé le programme de master et de doctorat en critique d'art et curatoriat qu'elle dirige actuellement. Sa pratique parallèle de critique d'art et de curatrice l'a menée à organiser des expositions d'art contemporain, à Paris et en Argentine notamment. Ses publications portent sur les théories et esthétiques comparées de l'image et du texte, ainsi que sur leur mise en contexte historique, ce qui l'a conduit à s'intéresser aux questions de l'histoire, de la mémoire et du récit, au topos de la ruine, aux représentations du territoire et, plus généralement, aux liens entre poétique et politique, dans la littérature et l'art du Liban de l'après-guerre. Ses recherches actuelles s'intéressent aux modernités dites « plurielles » et leurs liens avec les discours postcoloniaux et les études de genre.

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