

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Marie Khouri: Sculpture That Works as Art and Furniture

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Something unusual is taking place at Equinox Gallery: it's showing a sculptural installation that manages to be beautiful, functional and conceptual – all at the same time.

The work is Let's Sit Down and Talk by Marie Khouri. It's a group of white sculptural forms that look curvy and sensuous. They're inviting and welcoming – just like the work's title.

What I found remarkable is that the individual sculptures are more than beautiful objects to look at. Depending on the piece, they can be used as chairs to sit on or recliners to relax on. They're works that made a muddle of boundaries between art and craft.

Plus, the shapes aren't randomly expressive. The forms are all based on the Arabic words for the title: Let's Sit Down and Talk. By sitting on the work, you're in a sense inhabiting the world of beautiful flowing Arabic calligraphy.

They're also political without being didactic. Given the artist's multicultural Middle Eastern background, the work could be seen as making a comment on what's needed to deal with the region's problems. As the work suggests, what better way to do that than by following an Arabic tradition of sitting down and talking.

Meant to be read as a phrase from a bird's eye view, the work would make a perfect public art installation – indoors or outside.

"It is my first piece of conceptual art where the idea came out before the sculpting," Khouri said in an interview in the gallery.

Born in Egypt, she was raised in Lebanon and came to Vancouver with her family in the early 1970s after the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War. After moving to Paris where she lived for more than 25 years, she returned to Vancouver eight years ago. She recognizes that living outside the Middle East has westernized her. Now, at 54, she's said was of the right age to start exploring her past.

"I think with age, we tend to go back to roots, to smells, to things we were disconnected with," she said.

"I left Lebanon when I was 15 years old – it was a traumatic situation. I had never paused and touched that area of my life. I think today as a mature artist it was time for me to dig a bit deeper than I usually do."

The work is composed of 15 letters which spell four words in one sentence. Coming up with the idea was one thing for Khouri. Making it happen was quite another. Like three-dimensional chess, she had to balance the forms as sculptures, as furniture and as letters.

Khouri is a hands-on artist involved in making the work. She and collaborator Kenneth Clark carved EPS – expanded polystyrene – for six months to create the forms. Then, the forms were sprayed with resin and fiberglass four times. After each coat, they were sanded – a process that took a team of 12 three months to complete.

The surface is made from the same indestructible material as The Drop, the bright blue public art work at the Vancouver Convention Centre, except that Khouri's has a matte finish.

Khouri said she always doodles in Arabic. But she isn't sure where Let's Sit Down and Talk originated.

"I think it was a part of me that had matured to the point in of saying where now I can embrace this," she said.

Khouri said she was conscious of being an artist trying to insert herself into a complex political situation.

"I wanted to do it in a way so that my message is a message of hope, of not resentment but of reaching out, saying let's sit and talk, two nations, two whatever it is."

Khouri's previous work includes sculptures made out of concrete and bronze. One of her works is a gorgeous bench called L5. It's composed of five separate seats in bronze based on the five bottom vertebrae of the human spine. Other works include white concrete and resin planters. One writer memorably described them as resembling "giant dollops of meringue."

In Vancouver, her work came to public attention in 2009 when skateboarders used Le Banc at the Olympic Village Canada Line station to perform stunts. (The incident was initially portrayed as an example of reckless skateboarders defacing public art. It later turned out that skateboarders greatly admired the work. Not only did they send her videos about performing tricks, some 'boarders even helped cleaning it.) In 2012, Le Banc was replaced with Khouri's drop-shaped Histoire d'Eau.

On the day I interviewed Khouri, she was in the gallery with French-speaking friends and effortlessly switched back and forth between English and French. In addition to Arabic, she said she spoke Spanish and Italian.

When I asked her what she considers her native language, she stopped and paused and thought about it before answering.

"In my house in Lebanon, my grandmother spoke Italian to me, my mother was Spanish, my father French, and Arabic was the language of the country so we'd speak it at school to friends and English when I grew up," she said.

Khouri said she's getting interest from around the world in Let's Sit Down and Talk.

"I'm having people writing back to me worldwide asking what's the size? What's happening? Where are you going with this?" she said.

Let's Sit Down and Talk continues to Saturday, July 5 at Equinox Gallery.

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*Photos, top: Marie Khouri sitting on work Let's Sit and Talk at Equinox Gallery. Bottom: installation view of Let's Sit and Talk. Photos: Kevin Griffin.

