



SCULPTURE

THE REVIVALISTS

A Dubai design studio preserves a traditional craft, reimagined through contemporary design.

BY NAIMA MORELLI

It takes a moment for those crossing the Mleiha desert in Sharjah to realise that a series of 12 polished, totem-like structures rising from this rocky, arid earth are man-made.

The Desert Relics, a land art installation by the Dubai-based design studio Karim+Elias, is in tune with the landscape. Indeed, the modular totems, which appear like stacked vessels or ancient stones soaring to monumental heights against this rugged mountain backdrop, are made of this earth. Each is unique in colour and form.

The desire to work in harmony with the landscape, a respect for the *genius loci*—the spirit of a place in Roman mythology—is a characteristic of the studio. “Our work never aims to leave a loud or ‘colourful’ impression,” says Elias El Hage. “We always try to intervene in subtle and context-appropriate ways, where even a bold art form can still feel complimentary to the natural surroundings.”

The Desert Relics debuted at the Tanweer Festival last November but is a permanent installation. Mleiha is home to some of the most important archaeological sites on the Arabian Peninsula, so choosing a site for the work that was fossil or archaeology-free was a priority. The presence of relics, however, remained an inspiration as they sought to visually express the unearthing of an artefact.

“Something we recognised immediately on approaching this work was that the desert site

demanded a piece to match its scale and poetic nature,” says Karim Tamerji. By using natural materials from the landscape, Karim+Elías replicated in the installation the nuances of the desert backdrop, the rocky mountains and the orange desert sands. “We wanted to stress the timeless aspect of the piece.”

Both Lebanese, Tamerji and El Hage met at university in Beirut and teamed up after having individually experienced different fields, from fine arts to interior and product design, and architecture to mural artworks.

Header: Elías El Hage, left, and Karim Tamerji in their Dubai studio. Above: *The Desert Relics* posed significant technical challenges, complicated by the harsh conditions of the desert. Each totem weighs over two tons, standing upright on very small surface contacts. Photo: Elías El Hage.

They talk of their collaboration as effortless, how it seamlessly evolved into a partnership that bridged their different skill sets. “We preserve the collaborative mindset by keeping our roles interchangeable,” El Hage explains. “With every new project, we approach it like it’s our first. Excitingly, our work requires us to wear and exchange many hats.”

Finding fertile ground for artistic inspiration in the vast desert landscapes of the Gulf, the duo developed site-specific projects in the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, specialising in one material which they all have in abundance: sand.

They see it from both a technical and a symbolical perspective: “Sand has a timeless quality, and it connects to the region’s history, culture, and identity,” says Tamerji. “It speaks to people on a primal and universal level.”

Their first work together was placed at the entrance to Downtown Design in Dubai in 2022. An installation called IOTA, it was composed of 150 modular spheres made of pink and orange sand, stacked on top of each other. While the installation was extremely heavy, the effect was of softness and lightness.

“From that first collaboration we kept exploring the geometry, textures, and structural challenges of composing with modular spheres,” El Hage says, “developing and reinventing our craft project after project.”

SEE ALSO



SCULPTURE

TRADITION AND TECHNOLOGY

From This Earth, unveiled early last year in Diriyah, Saudi Arabia, was composed of over 1,400 modular spheres, each hand-sculpted from locally sourced materials and stacked to compose a series of earthen “screens”. The modern take on mashrabiya was a nod to the city’s vernacular triangular wind perforations.

Top, utilising one of the most abundant natural materials in the UAE, sand, IOTA is an open-air installation comprising over 150 modular spheres. It welcomed guests to Dubai’s Downtown Design in 2022. Above, each sphere is unique in composition and naturally pigmented. Top photo: Michael Stancelewski; Sphere: Elias El Hage.

The Desert Relics in particular posed significant technical challenges, complicated by the harsh conditions of the desert. “Each totem weighs over two tons, standing upright on very small surface contacts,” Tamerji explains. “We designed these totems as stackable earthen modules, installed one atop the other along a structural pole. Like any sculpture composed of stacked geometries, these heavy pieces channel their weight downwards to a large hidden footer recessed into the ground.”

An exhibition at Sharjah’s 1971 Design Space—*Prototypes for Permanence: Tanweer Festival Art Commissions Off-Site*—on view until April 3, shows how this and other permanent installations commissioned for the Tanweer Festival were made.

Karim+Elias studied and refined a technique widely used in the Middle East and commonly known as rammed earth. It consists of hand-pressing sand, earth, clay, and water, ram-packed in sedimentary layers within formworks to build partitions or load-bearing walls. "The technique dates back thousands of years and has been used throughout history to build shelters which are thermal and fire-proof," El Hage says. "It is based on the idea of using material of and from the context in which it was built."

Preserving these techniques is as important, they say, as safeguarding other artistry like textile weaving or marble and wood carving. "We consider ourselves revivalists of traditional craft, but we reimagine through contemporary art and design." They define their practice as "design through contextual narrative."

When people label them artists, they don't flinch: "For us, art and design are synonymous," Tamerji says. "Every one of our works undergoes a rigorous design process, but ultimately the public tends to read them as bodies of art, be it an architectural wall, a functional product piece, or a sculptural object."

#ELIAS EL HAGE

#KARIM + ELIAS

#KARIM TAMERJI

TAGS

#PROTOTYPES FOR PERMANENCE: TANWEER FESTIVAL ART COMMISSIONS OFF-SITE

#THE DESERT RELICS

Share



RELATED



TRADITION AND TECHNOLOGY



MEMORIES, MONUMENTS AND MYTHS

0 comments

Sort by Oldest ▾



Add a comment...

Facebook Comments Plugin

ABOUT HADARA

Encompassing culture and the arts, design and architecture, business and entrepreneurship, travel and lifestyle, Hadara is a bi-annual journal that gives voice to a modern and contemporary Sharjah and the people who are shaping it. A dynamic mix of print and online media, Hadara has its roots proudly in Sharjah, but is a platform for ideas of regional importance.

Hadara is brought to you by Archimedia London and the Sharjah Government Media Bureau.

SEARCH

Search



HADARA

SHARJAH'S JOURNAL OF CULTURE AND IDEAS



TERMS CONTACT



