

NADIM CHOUIFI

Deeply questioning whether technology is the panacea some claim it to be, Nadim Choufi explores narratives that gloss over both our past and our potential future

Words by Maghie Ghali



PROFILE

Nadim Choufi. *Physics Does Not Crash in Soft Time*. 2017. Image courtesy of the artist



By traversing both real and imagined worlds seamlessly, Lebanese artist Nadim Choufi's work is often multi-dimensional and time-complex. The 2020 Art Jameel special commission winner deals primarily in film and sculptural installations to carry his ideas, becoming ever more critical of what technology claims to offer our way of living and constantly pondering where everyday human emotion might fit in a coldly efficient and scientific future. "I explore innovation," he says, "but in the sense of living with it, rather than just the idea of technological or scientific progress. I'm interested not only in how that change materialises in our bodies, feelings and desires, but also in how the social and political driving forces of this progress purport to be objective or neutral."

Claims that technology can help solve the ills of society are a special focus for Choufi. "I also talk about future planning and world building in that sense," he explains. "I'm really drawn to what are thought of as trouble-free futures and to organisations that lay claim to solving social problems. In fact, they may even add to these, or avoid dealing with the core issue," he adds. "I try to build these worlds to show the context and emergence

of certain desires that we have – or if our current desires can even take place in the next world, or how they might change and become new desires." Choufi's most recent exhibition *Race for the Surface*, which was staged at the Beirut Art Center earlier this year, exemplified his approach as he delved into reducing life to a series of leaking pipelines and faltering systems. The show featured PVC pipes and silicon-moulded organ-like shapes made from sanded resin, with cloudy fluid running through the system – materials the artist is exploring more and more – alongside animation and digital film.

Choufi's background as an engineer has lent a methodical and technological approach to his works, especially in his earlier works. The 2017 project *Physics Does Not Crash in Soft Time*, takes a deeply personal issue and uses technology to dissect it. "The first time when I confronted technology in a concrete sense was in one of my earlier works, which dealt with my older brother passing away," he shares. "I realised that I was going to become older than he had been when he died and so I made the work that combines all of my data and all of his data, on the day when I became older than him. I was looking at



Nadim Choufi. Still from *The Sky Oscillates Between Eternity and Its Immediate Consequences*. 2021.
Film. 18 minutes, 10 seconds. Art Jameel Commissions: Digital. Image courtesy of the artist





how technology can preserve a certain world – one in which I’m younger than my older brother – but also at what is needed to care for that preserved world.” Choufi goes on to explain how various stages of constant digital manipulation were required, whether transferring material to another hard drive, maintaining the files or seeing if the programmes still worked on those files (if not, he had to source outdated programmes through which to run them).

The project looked at how progressing technology can be both a blessing and a hindrance in terms of preserving cherished memories, as new software and hardware is sometimes incompatible with previous models – film reel replaced by VHS tapes, in turn replaced by DVDs and later by digital files with no physical presence. As our technology advances, so too does the impermanence of our recorded memories or keepsakes.

In the same year, Choufi started an ongoing project called *Excerpts from All of My Mistakes*, where he noted down every instance when a technological device tried to autocorrect him. He looked at how Google and autocorrect on phones try to help people express themselves. “I think that was a pivotal point for me, because that’s when I really started focusing on material

effects and innovation on language,” the artist explains. “It drew me into my latest work, where I looked at how innovation also affects physical beings – it’s kind of shifted my practice from just looking at technology to considering how it materialises in the way we live.”

Over the years, Choufi’s practice has changed in subtle ways and he has become more nuanced in his critique of the technologies or worlds that he explores in his work. He said recently that he has found himself reverting to more traditional forms of commentary, methods and use of material. As technology progresses, so does his scepticism of it – an irony he easily admits to, given that so much of his work is based on technology. “What I use to make the work has expanded and doesn’t rely solely on what I’m researching,” he explains. “I don’t believe necessarily in the newness of this material, so my work can be based on the more formal aspects of making sculpture through the use of plaster, moulding and resin.”

Some aspects of modern technology are regarded in terms of what their capacity might be, rather than their intrinsic value as a contemporary tool. “If I were to do something with 3D printing it might be to test its limitations, rather than using it just because



Opposite and above: Nadim Choufi. Still from *The Sky Oscillates Between Eternity and Its Immediate Consequences*. 2021. Film. 18 minutes, 10 seconds. Art Jameel Commissions: Digital. Image courtesy of the artist

it’s the new technology that people are exploring,” Choufi says. “It would be through the lens of a technological dogma that says it can solve everything, and I would then try to see what limits it reaches. I would compare it with older materials.”

Choufi’s next project – untitled and still in its research phase – reflects this interest in comparing parallels between then and now. He will take his viewers into the past to better plan for the future, intending to explore the environmental issues facing the MENA region and in particular the greening programmes promoted in post-colonial countries over the last century. The idea that the Middle East is always at risk of desertification has led to questionable greening schemes in the past, he says, which have actually done more harm to the environment than good. Through film and sculpture pieces, he will look at the mechanisms that allowed these ideas to disseminate after the Second World War, especially when many post-colonial MENA countries were introduced to bodies like UNESCO or the UN, aiming to unpack the complexities behind these decisions and the impact they have left on the region.

“Greening is seen typically as this hyper-productive creation of fertile land,” Choufi points out. “For me, instead of actually

looking at technologies, I want to look into how ‘lushness’ can erode certain cultures and traditions or even make them disappear completely. I’m researching how fertility or fertile lands in the context of the Middle East – and colonial notions of “the land of milk and honey” – have actually led to this area being constantly greened. Technology has made a massive contribution to this process, whether it’s through building green walls [a line of vegetation planted at the edge of deserts to stop their advance] or constructing massive dams, which have ended up harming the environment more than helping it.”

Choufi is particularly concerned about how dam projects can destroy carbon sinks in wetlands and deprive ecosystems of nutrients that would have otherwise reached them via rivers. The limited diversity of vegetation used in greening schemes also worries him. “Most only use two or three different types of plant to green major areas, which might actually deplete the natural ecosystem and bring about desertification that otherwise wouldn’t be there.” It’s an analytical thread that runs throughout Choufi’s work as he questions realities that are so often taken at face value, challenging all of us to think again about the notion that technological progress is a panacea for both now and the future. ■