



Fatima Zemmouri.
Empreinte carbone 1. 2022.
Raw earth and pigments on
wooden panel. 130 x 98 cm
Image courtesy of the artist

DOWN AND DIRTY

ART MEETS LAND

When artists get to work, the starting point for many is what they encounter in the world around them. Landscape, topography and geology, composed of the raw elements that form our environment. Rock, soil and wood, variously carved, chipped, shaved, sculpted, manipulated and crafted into pieces of art or installations that express both an innate primeval quality and the imaginative insight of the creative into whose hands they have passed. In this special section we look at how artists have got down and dirty – often literally – to embrace all aspects of landscape, from microscopic particles of dust to the big picture of soaring mountains and desert horizons.



Nadim Choufi. *Race for the Surface*. 2021. Exhibition view. Photography by Christopher Baaklini. Image courtesy of Beirut Art Center



Nadim Choufi. *Full Body Stretch*. 2021. PVC, silicone, acrylic, waterpumps, water. Beirut Art Center 2021. Photography by Christopher Baaklini. Image courtesy of Beirut Art Center

BEWARE UTOPIA

Race for the Surface, the recent exhibition by **Nadim Choufi** at **Beirut Art Center**, dissects the reality of living on another planet and the false promise of perfect, sustainable systems. Through a film and sculptural installation, Choufi looks at human emotion in a future reduced to keeping people alive, but not necessarily living.

Words by Maghie Ghali

Walking through *Race for the Surface* at Beirut Art Center, it was hard not to feel slightly uncomfortable. About 60 metres of grey industrial piping connected to pink- and earth-coloured shapes reminiscent of human organs as liquid was being pumped through the imperfect looped system, leaking in places. Sensations of both curiosity and mild disgust surged forth – an entirely intentional aspect of Lebanese artist Nadim Choufi's first institutional showcase.

The exhibition examined the idea that technology can solve all of mankind's problems, deflecting our current situation of wasting resources and enduring politics driven by power and money towards the promise of a future with a miraculous fix that magically eradicates humanity's need to change.

The installation *Full Body Stretch* built on the themes explored in Choufi's 18-minute film *The Sky Oscillates Between Eternity and*

Its Immediate Consequences, which was the winner of the first edition of Art Jameel's digital commissions last year and served as a backdrop to the exhibition. "The premise of the film is about how we currently think of sustainability, which is through closed, looped systems and closed worlds," said Choufi. "These are really inspired by eco-spheres and how NASA thinks of closed systems. For example, back in the 1970s Biosphere Two in Arizona was an enclosed ecology." He explained how there are now new models emerging, like the one currently under construction in Dubai called Mars Science City and from which he has drawn much of his reference imagery.

"The key goal is actually for efficiency, not to sustain life itself," continued Choufi. "It's to keep certain production and financial rates going, or to keep environmental restitution on track. It's not

necessarily about the people, as it minimises the condition of life to something very reductionist. I wanted to imagine what it would really be like to live in a hyper-efficient city."

The film follows two narrators living in a fictional self-sustaining eco-sphere city after climate change has made Earth almost uninhabitable. It explores their desires and emotions, examining the human element of these futuristic plans, which are often forgotten in the presentation pitch for living on another planet. One protagonist tries to imagine her lover living under a sun which did not burn the Earth, so that they could feel gentle warmth on their skin or cast shadows at sunset. The colony's glass domes only let in a cold blue light that never dims. Only the plants and species necessary for efficient production and the colony's survival are allowed to exist. Nothing can ever change or the system will fall apart.

"I wanted to show the faultiness of these systems by looking at the politics of these projects, where the images are always super-slick, super-clean and problem-free," affirmed Choufi. "I kind of wanted to enter the nitty gritty details of it by looking at emotion. I also think these political or ideological systems still think of all land as infinite, which shows through the infinite cycle. They never actually want to deal with scarcity, just find solutions for it."

The sculptural installation built on the theme of reducing life to a series of pipelines, like infographics representing the life cycle with simple arrows in a circle. Choufi used PVC pipes and silicon-moulded organ-like shapes made from sanded resin, with cloudy

fluid running through the faltering system. The intestinal quality of the forms, which viewers may have found unsettling, was a deliberate comment on society not wanting to face the messy and unclean aspects of human existence, such as human waste, which would ideally be reused in eco-friendly systems.

While there is undoubtedly a political edge, Choufi has declared that his work is not environmental activism or even carrying a clear message. Rather, it is intended to provoke questions and stimulate a more conscious way of living – to not take perfect or oversimplified solutions as an absolution of the responsibility to protect the planet. "For me, it's more about being aware," he said, "and I'm really interested in what does this mean materially for me as a human being in a closed ecosystem?" He admits however that he tries to explore what are often complex issues through feelings, and that these can be extremely political. As an example he cites sustainability projects that don't really ask you to deal with your waste in a conscious and confrontational way.

"We've been trained to flush our waste away every single time and I'm not saying that we shouldn't, but that the disgust in this moment is because you're trained to be disgusted. This exhibition is kind of talking about us confronting our own filth and tearing down this feeling," he concluded. "I look for these entry points of feelings or emotions within an exhibition that might make someone uncomfortable or very comfortable, for them to then ask questions."