Negotiating: *an interview with Nadim Choufi*

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Nadim Choufi is a Lebanese artist and editor based in the Netherlands. His work has a maintained interest in the idea of progress and futurity, and the means by which national and international organizations impose themselves on bodies. Moving from the perceived immaterial to the corporeal, his works remind us of instances of monstrous fusions. If synthesis is sometimes seen as synonymous with negotiation, how do conferences of international orders orchestrate their subjects? Furthermore, what might we learn from the entities which not only escape but resist these processes?

In a conversation I had with Nadim on video-call on the 2nd of February 2026, we discussed the thematic trajectory of his practice. With a focus on works such as *Diplomatic Bestiary* (2025), *Skinned Chair of the UN Security Council Chamber* (2024), and *In the Face of the Dragon* (2025). Nadim's work frequently conjures up images of monsters, a term that has pejorative implications of deformity, otherness, and ugliness in the popular imagination. Nadim's work subverts this, proposing the monster and the irregular body as a weapon.

Lucia Billing: In a lot of your work you take the body as a starting point, often looking between the organic and inorganic. How did you start to work with these ideas?

Nadim Choufi: The body has always been important for my work. We "carry" abstract ideas like progress, futurity, or efficiency in our bodies and movements, and I am interested in that verb: how we carry and shed concepts. I think through materials, and the body here becomes both a material and a site. My work is not figurative but starts from the body, and extends beyond it, and I am interested in figures that are not abstracted, but carry abstract concepts. Regarding organicness, my use of silicone or metal plays with the materials' quality. I try to test it, to see how infrastructure can feel like a body or how a body can feel like infrastructure. The understanding of the body as a space that gets scarred, pushed, and healed by visions of progress is a central theme in my work. Through these pressure points we can understand desire better: one of the biggest proponents of progress, whether it be desire for power or desire for love.

LB: There are two definitions of diplomacy — state relations, and interpersonal relationships. How do these definitions embed themselves in your practice?

NC: I work with the friction of diplomacy, when state relations become interpersonal ones. By friction, I mean how diplomacy and its power enters our bodies, our images, and our desires. Diplomacy is deemed effective when it successfully leaves the negotiation table to be implemented on bodies of land and people. My work starts at the moment when these processes become enacted and material, when the language leaves the page and becomes something more.

LB: Could you speak more broadly about the formal and conceptual processes behind *Diplomatic Bestiary* and how it has shaped your framework for subsequent works?

NC: I had become interested in UNESCO's 'Arid Zone Programme' in which they proposed to end world hunger by greening the Middle East. I wrote a lecture *The View from Above Takes My Breath Away – Fully*, comparing Disney and UNESCO's aesthetic choices in how they build world citizens. That led me to *Diplomatic Bestiary*, which was the first time I considered what I call "diplomatic time" as a material. The time diplomacy requires to solve a problem warps its subject into something entirely different, into a beast of sorts. A fault needs to be identified in the subjects to enact a diplomatic solution. This process mutates them. The meeting halls never touch their subjects, and this project aimed at fusing the spaces. From then on, diplomatic time became a material that opened up a lot of my practice, negotiating with its materials, its objects.

LB: Speaking a bit more about these sculptures, I am curious about the materials: silicone, synthetic leather, and the Damascus goat hair. What was the role of material history and association in your selection process?

NC: The synthetic leather, silicone, and metal are all linked to ideas of the body, how they sit, rest, work, and warp each other in diplomatic time. Then came a

moment in my research on the Arid Zone Programme, and seeing how it was leaking into Israel's control of Palestine. They had banned the Damascus goat from roaming as an excuse to ban the Palestinians from herding and making a living. The director of the British Forestry Department in Palestine said the goat was a 'symbol of all that is devilish and futile' and the 'main agent in the execution of the curses' by causing desertification. I found it really attractive that these animals had accidentally become emblems of resisting colonial borders, and that's why this material came into my project.

Although material history is important to me, I am wary of the fetishisation of material uniqueness in contemporary art. One reaction to my "skinned chair" work was astonishment that I had acquired these chairs from the UN. That reaction indicates that contemporary art as a mechanism is less interested in dismantling power and desires to simply transport it into the gallery. By fetishising the material uniqueness, you actually reinstate the power dynamics you aim to fight against. So, though I am faithful to material history, I actually try to work against material specificity that does not subvert power.

LB: In the "skinned chair" sculptures you directly refer to the halls, or chambers in which they are supposed to sit. What are your thoughts on their displacement? How do you understand the transition from the conference hall to the gallery?

NC: In exhibitions, I refuse to disclose how much of these chairs are original or not, because of that transition. I am interested in these skinned, hanging chairs to function as voodoo dolls of diplomacy. My objective is to create a moment to hold these structures accountable, regardless of how original they are, through a material test of pinning the chairs to the wall. By allowing the viewer to face it for however long they want, they might understand the consequences of this chair, what it allows whoever sits on it to do. The move from the diplomatic space to the gallery creates the ability for someone not allowed in the first space to judge its objects, to hopefully think about what they would do to such a chair.

LB: You play into ideas of comfort and discomfort using furniture, and materials for furniture in your sculptures which through transformation acquire both desiring and hostile qualities. How do you understand comfort and its disruptions?

NC: An important definition of comfort is that things work without being overly present, that systems or things are working for you. Yet the same system that gives some comfort gives others massive discomfort. For instance, the comfort of the state in bureaucratic procedures creates the exact discomfort for those seeking asylum or refugee status. In my work, showing the infrastructure of comfort can also be deeply uncomfortable. One of my exhibitions, *Race for the Surface*, was an installation of "pipelines of efficiency", where any complex part that refused to assimilate into the pipeline caused a leak. It was a simple visualisation of the mechanisms of control and efficiency. There can also be pleasure in the disruption of comfort. As a queer person who disagrees with the normalisation of certain desires and lifestyles into a capital-friendly heteronormatively accepted identity, who annoyingly interrogates the mechanisms of life, these disruptions are necessary. They can reveal differences and similarities in people, seeing how comfort can hurt, which is why it is important to disrupt, to shout.



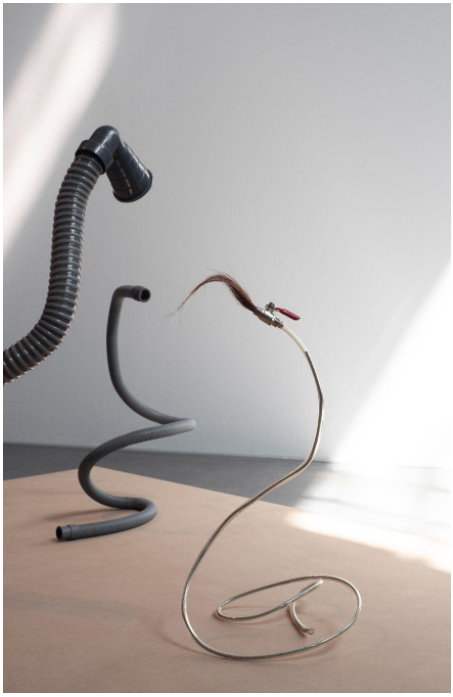
Nadim Choufi, Skinned Chair of the UNESCO Security Council Chamber, 2024. Photo: Shivadas De Schrijver.

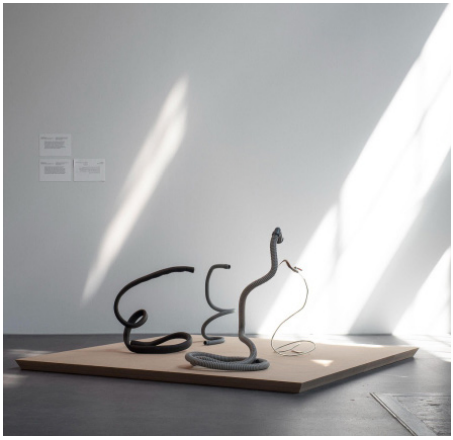


Nadim Choufi, Skinned Chair of the UNESCO Conference Hall, 2024. Photo: Shivadas De Schrijver.



Nadim Choufi, Blooming Flowers (Diplomatic Bestiary Series), 2025. Photo: Shivadas De Schrijver





Nadim Choufi, Detail, On the Ground Negotiations (left) and On the Ground Negotiations (above), 2023

LB: These pieces embody a very specific aesthetic: they have smooth curves, sleek design, and a polished finish. How does deliberate and "good" design interact with the bodily, zoomorphic, and monstrous elements of your work?

NC: The act of skinning these chairs reveals how tightly they could wrap around a body. Their sleekness are learned markers of their comfort and status, subverted by their misplacing. Hanging them on a wall reminds you of their ruthlessness. One reaction they got which was interesting was that they were almost seen as hunting trophies. Only when skinned did they acquire this beastly quality, which was concealed before. Their sleekness becomes part of the beastliness.

LB: You test the autonomy, or agency of bodies; I am curious about how you view this aspect in relation to scale? Monstrosity has such specific connotations here, so I was wondering how you negotiate that.

NC: In sculpture, scale is the first thing a viewer notices, acting as the initial choreography between body and sculpture. Do you squint at a small object or look up at a large one or walk around an installation? That choreography explodes into the feelings I want my viewers to have when faced with my work. The sculptures of the chairs are faithful to the scale of the chairs themselves, yet the way the leather or fabric is cut increases their width. That makes the viewer aware of how, despite their size, they can be captured. They are also nailed to the wall by me. If you get close, you will see that there are around 200 nails hammered into the wall for each chair. There is then an inversion of scale by focusing on the texture of nailed fabric; how it is pinched, pushed, and held. Hopefully, this experience gives the viewer a sense of hope that they can invert power systems, even if it is simply by display.

They are skinned but also hung, giving them an almost holy value. There may be discomfort as you cannot sit on them, but their pristine hanging makes them respected, complicating the viewer's relationship with it. Another thing I would mention when it comes to scale is that the scale of power is often invisible. Power structures only become visible after hard work, and it is by visualising them that we might feel their scale.

LB: In *In the Face of the Dragon* translation plays a very special role, perhaps relating quite interestingly to synthesis. What role has language and translation – conceptually and practically – played in your practice?

NC: Language is fundamental in my work. When looking at diplomacy you end up reading a lot of diplomatic language, understanding how it is translated into material. So I've always been thinking of the translation of language into its material effects, and how the power of language materialises. At the point of making this work I had lost a lot of hope in making critiques of such systems. But I was getting a lot of hope from Arab poets who would willingly dehumanise themselves through metaphors of becoming beasts in the realisation that as humans they are not respected.

They grew fangs and new skins to be able to attack the regimes they were confronting. It gave me hope in the ability to shapeshift into the monster willingly. If you are not respected as a human, maybe the best thing is to embrace what protects you. With this project, I wanted to give back to the sources that give me hope.

The book is a translation practice of collaging these writers that I respect into making a new story about two queer protesters who fall for each other in the middle of a protest. You spend 24 hours with them as they become monsters throughout the night and empower each other.

LB: *In the Face of the Dragon* comes back to the idea of the animal, like some of the pieces previously discussed, yet is formally very different from them. How do you explain the productivity of this thematic in animating such a broad range of work? Do you think that it will continue to do so?

NC: It has only recently been pronounced that I was working with beasts and monsters, but I have always been working with the concept of otherness and beasts are a part of that. The first moment of being othered is when someone creates an evil image of you. It usually takes the metaphor of an evil, non-human connotation.

Whether they call you a monster or a dog or a fag, in their eyes, it's always an inferior body. But these bodies have power, agility, and forces that are empowering, and their skins can protect us and be loved. I'm interested in the formal capacities this brings to sculpture and also in leading a life through these notions.I don't think I would stop working with this theme - this is how I see the world. I see my work as humble exercises in world building, in creating the world I want. I want people to understand that there is beauty in non-conforming desires, within sensations, feelings, and discomfort. Beauty is not only in aesthetics but also in politics. It has to be beautiful to stand your ground in what you believe in. It isn't only about what is right but also in finding the beauty in it.

Otherness, now functioning through the framework of the monster, will continue to give me endless inspiration. It is the space from which I work and live. I have no desire to normalise, whether it be politically, or in sexual identities. I'm much more comfortable and empowered being a fag than a rainbow gay sponsored by evil corporations, or being a dog barking at pigs than an abiding citizen. That's the line today; if you raise your voice against authority, your shouts are deemed disobedient barks, making you less than human and suddenly, human rights do not apply to you. I find it important to make work, not only to critique systems, but to give back to the sources, communities, and identities that give you hope. I have zero desire to normalise with governing structures, and I think working with the monster is very beautiful. Making monsters beautiful is important.

Endnotes

[1] Gilbert Noel Sale, 'Afforestation and Soil Conservation' (lecture at the Palestine Economic Society, December 28, 1942), *Israel State Archives*, Mem-3, 4188, 5.



Nadim Choufi, Installation view, In Practice: Nadim Choufi, Sculpture Center, New York, 2025



Nadim Choufi, The View from Above Takes my Breath Away – Fully, 2023, Courtesy of the Artist