



HOLIDAY

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no.98 May/June/July '19
LL10,000

IN CONVERSATION WITH NAJLA EL ZEIN

One designer is transforming materials, emotions and sensory elements into works that are capturing the world's attention



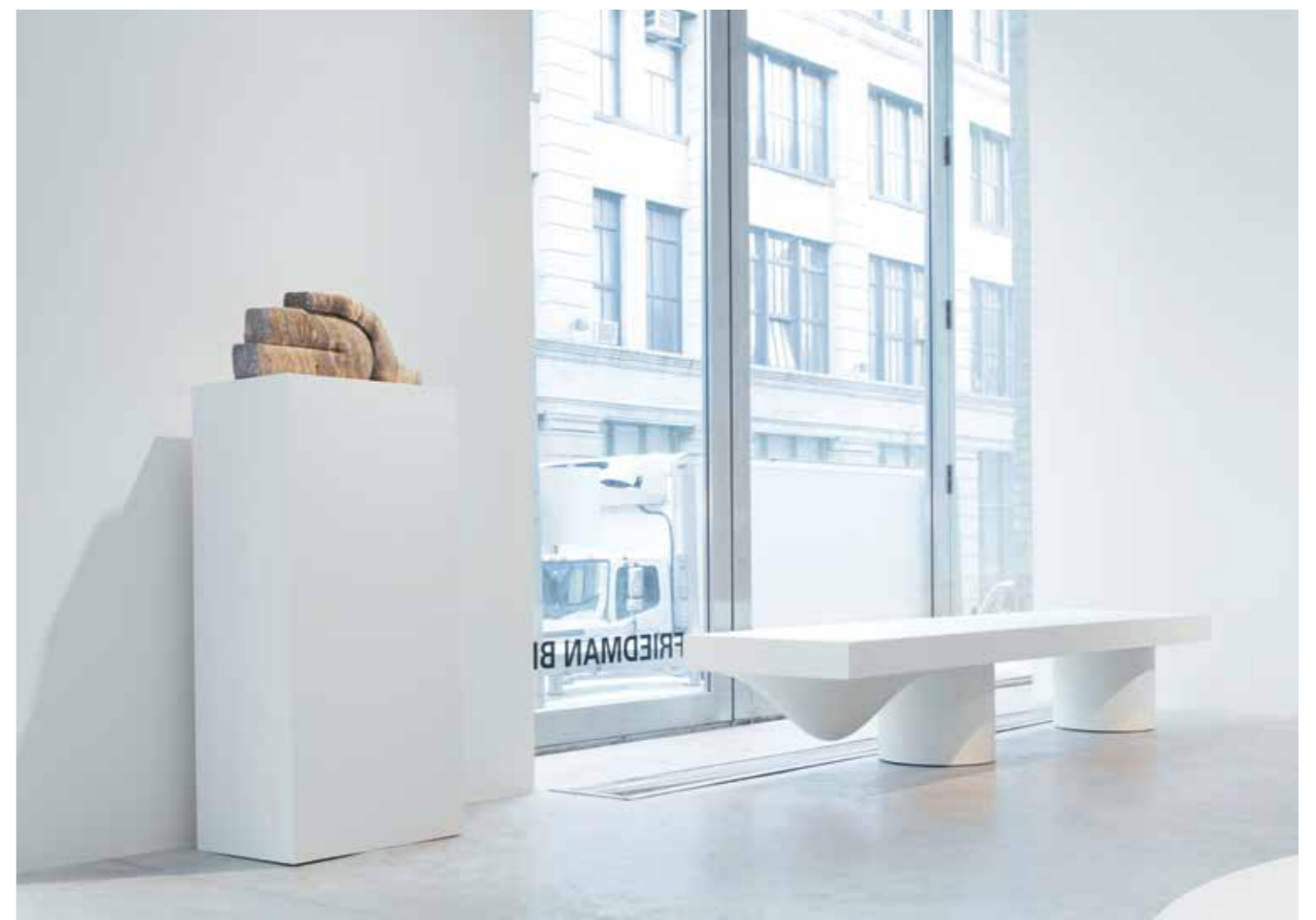
Najla El Zein is a Beirut designer capturing the fascinated attention of galleries, private collectors and world-renowned institutions. Her sculptural seating and pregnant-form benches having been acquired by the Dallas Museum of Art and the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum in London. The 36-year-old, who was born in Lebanon and raised and educated in Paris, recently exhibited a monumental solo show at leading New York gallery Friedman Benda, marking her significance on the world stage.

El Zein completed her studies in product design and interior architecture at France's famed École Camondo, whose conceptual approach to objects and space, and their connection to one another, have become leading reflections in her own work. However, it was two years spent in Rotterdam, post-graduation, that really founded the direction the artist has pursued ever since. First working in scenography and then in experimental cinema, she gained integral insights into the capacity for materials to change. "It was like a revelation to see their approach to material," she says of the cinema work where film was transformed into imagery. "The result was really fascinating to me."

The second fundamental influence on her work was opening her studio in Beirut in 2011, following her parents' relocation to Lebanon from Paris. "Things moved very quickly after that," she reflects. "It was extremely revelatory in terms of who I am and what I want to do."

In 2012 El Zein showed with the now-closed Lebanese gallery SMO at the inaugural Design Days Dubai, where her enchantment with unexpected materials was

Damien Arlettaz, Daniel Kulka, Courtesy of Najla El Zein and Friedman Benda



evident. Her wall-mounted lamp made of stainless-steel spoons was led by her fascination with their reflective nature, shape and curvature. "The material transformed itself on its own," she says of the resulting imagery of a drop of water. "You forgot about the spoons, and it became something else."

Such elements of mystery are what charge her work. "I have an interest in transforming things that are conventional, or using unconventional materials in a different way," she explains. This mysterious evocation is highlighted in "Breathing Wall," a three-dimensional installation she created for an apartment-residence lobby, where individual units making up the wall rotate at different times, revealing varied configurations of white and gold diamond-shaped facets, creating what El Zein describes as "a space in movement."

Equally enrapturing was "The Wind Portal," designed for the 2013 London Design Festival and consisting of an eight-meter-high passageway in the V&A, made up of 5,000 hand-folded windmills. "I wanted to tell a story through feelings," she says, pointing to childhood memories of blowing or running with hand-held windmills. It was also led by the context of this gateway situated between the old and new sections of the museum, highlighting the notion of entering or leaving. "We did this by designing wind," she says of the resulting sensory experience. "You could hear the wind, feel the wind and see the windmills turn."

The surprise discovery by the passerby and the subsequent engagement with the viewer are themes that recur in her work. "Creating discussion and interaction are very important to me," she says. "It's not about making beautiful things, it's about creating something that does something, revealing a hidden layer."

The Friedman Benda show, "Transition," did just that. An exhibition of three collections of work, all inspired by her own personal transformation as a wife, mother and lover, creates a unified dialogue that references human states such as desire, emotional disorder, femininity and introversion. "Distortion" benches show pregnancy in stages, as bumps protrude from the concrete seats at different heights and positions, while "Fragmented Pillars" reference the disruption and fragility that come with such life-changing moments. In the "Seduction" series of stone-sculpted benches lies a story about the varying degrees of human connection, illustrated by benches standing either on their own, or as two pieces of stone sensuously intertwined.

Although the materials in these new works aren't ostentatious enough to distract from the story, their careful consideration – from soft, cool concrete to sand and plaster, travertine and sandstone – is all part of the conversation, the mystery of which is left for the viewer to uncover.

