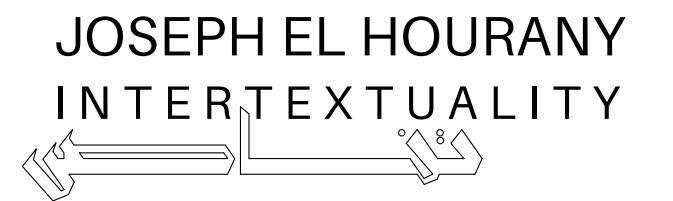




JOSEPH EL HOURANY  
INTERTEXTUALITY





## A Contradictory Present

Lebanese architect and sculptor Joseph El Hourany is an artist playing with constraint, fascinated by limit, in awe of the accident.

The wooden sculptures of Hourany sit in clear relation to modernism, specifically to the deconstructive energies of cubism and geometric abstraction, the dissolution of subject to shape and form. Equally, there is a relationship to Arab histories and aesthetics within his work, and these two touchstones are perhaps at the crux of the tension in his sculptural world. But beyond these significant influences, there is another important relation, that of intellect and its connection to the poetic.

Indeed, the aim of Hourany lies not in abstraction, nor in a particular aesthetic. In Hourany's words, the aim of his work is to 'float in the voids', 'to colour with forms'. Put another way, it is to describe the gap between one way and another. As we examine each of Hourany's sculptures, each individual piece of wood, the relation to such gaps is clear.

Each of the sculptures in this exhibition are made from wood, a material of central importance to Hourany. He talks about wood as a particular material, connected uniquely to the land. Often, he has used olive, common to the landscape of his origin, the Beqaa. Since the Beirut Port explosion in 2020, such wood has become harder to find and now he uses walnut, oak and beech. As Hourany describes the character of each piece of wood his features become animated, and he brings several out to examine. Each piece of wood is important, individual and their various tonalities and differences begin to emerge through his delighted eyes.

Joseph El Hourany's obsession with sculpting began in 1994. Attending his first life drawing classes at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (Alba) opened his eyes to the possibilities of line in a way that was quite different to his architectural studies, taken in tandem, and to his previous life outside of the city. The depth that underpins Hourany's sculptural works emerges slowly, found in terms of his relationship with subject and material, and his identity as a Lebanese man from the Beqaa, a developing relationship with the city of Beirut.

For Hourany, sculpting is liberation, a freedom from the technical restrictions of architecture. It is clear that liberation is important to his ideas of art. And yet, of equal importance is his commitment to technique, to the artisanal. He comments, when I ask him about this, that he aims to elevate the artisanal to a high art.

His is a mind that wants to be challenged.

To facilitate this aim Hourany courts the experience of not exactly knowing what will happen, the feeling of liberation that this unknowing brings. But he enters this state of unknowing through his commitment to technique, both in his preparatory drawings, and then in his hand tooling of wood. He prepares with precise technique, then releases poetry through his respect for the wood itself.

It is clear on looking at his oeuvre that Hourany's is an art of digging in to a pre-existing form, working with his chosen subject, to create an artwork that is part design, part accident. Hourany describes this way of working as rhythm. There is first a drawing, then a selection of wood to be used, then a perforating of the wood. At this point the wood takes over, and he begins to follow its internal structure, its colours and grain. Sometimes there is failure, he concedes.

The intellectual ideas for his works are as profound as his feeling for the wood and he strives for balance in intellect and poetry that he finds through human contact with material. For Hourany, the wood creates a space that intellect cannot intrude too far inside.

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There is a preoccupation with proportion in this work.

Hourany's father's nose preoccupies many of his early sculptures, and it is impossible to ignore the space that it takes in his world. He says, 'there was a long pole with a bell on the end, like a nose, used by the priests in church to tamp out candles high up in the walls.' Later, he was taught that the head is proportionally five times that of the nose.

Five times the size of a head. In its repetition and insistent reappearance, the nose that Hourany describes appears much larger than the proportions of a face allow. Similarly, his calligraphic sculptures ensure that the proportion of the letters corresponds comfortably with the size and shape and tone of the wood.

He began his sculptural work with portraiture, the figure. It was perhaps his transcendental experience in the life room that made this his subject. This and the sheer size of his father, his father's nose, as it relates to his artistic life.

Art saved my life, he says, mentioning the destruction of his architecture studio after the Beirut port explosion. Proportion.

What is something that is completely out of proportion.

His father's nose. His experience in the life room, calligraphy made sculpture.

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Hourany's sculptures are never overtaken by poetry, always tied to his intellect. Seeking the moment intellect becomes poetry, at the same time he cannot allow the former to surpass him completely.

He is from the Beqaa, a place he describes as a vast plain and horizon with protrusions emerging cleanly from the land. He senses that this flat land with its protrusions is the root of his sculpture.

The Beqaa is a place where he feels no physical constraints, but conversely many emotional limits. Here, he can take his wood and work it anywhere he likes, but still he cannot talk openly about aspects of his life, his experience. In Beirut there is more freedom in his mind, and yet he is constrained by the physical space of the city. Environment affects everything. Hourany is an architect after all.

Hourany's thoughts on his relationship with Lebanon, the different worlds of which he is a part, are made without judgement, rather with a studied analysis. He sees but he does not seek to change. He is, he states, afraid to be misunderstood. There are different ways to be rational, a hypocrisy in the city, he thinks, that does not exist in the Beqaa.

His mission is to elevate the artisanal into high art. His mission is a happy accident of forms, an anti-gravity, to float in the voids. His mission is to colour with forms, to colour in the wood, shading and tonality.

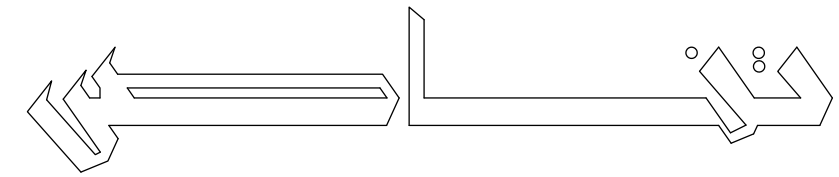
His mission is to accept tonalities, shade, to adapt, living.

Hourany places the contradictions of his life into his sculpture, allowing the intellect to come up against the poetic, the initial design to come up against the individual grain and tone of the wood.

Can Hourany find his way into a specific piece of wood, adapt to individual form, colour, shade? Through this process he finds his way into the gap, the happy accident, a way to float in the void.

Amy Todman

# INTERTEXTUALITY



It is difficult to categorize the various typologies of my sculptures; their essence is elusive, only appreciated when viewed. The faces and sides of the sculptures hold equal significance for me, lacking predetermined hierarchical relationships. Each form is indebted to the fluctuating processes that shaped it. At times, I envision these forms as elements of a new iconography, while at other moments, they present challenges to contemplate. My purpose is to test my sense of form through direct carving in wood. Any necessary surveying is conducted based on the executed model, never beforehand. As Moore states, "A sensitive observer of sculpture must also learn to feel shape simply as shape, not as description or reminiscence."

My education has led me to believe that there is an inherent connection between geometrical and polymorphic typologies, suggesting a direct correlation between abstract (intellectual) and figurative (sensate) forms. While these two strains of thought may appear distinct—one being primarily problematic and the other fundamentally architectural—they both rely on the uniform procedure of tangible figuration. This reliance on the figurative empowers both intellectual and sensate perceptions, the latter often tied to the process itself.

The sculpting techniques employed in my practice include folding, form-finding, deconstructed geometries, free-form approaches, and hybrids. These methods explore the development and variation of form, independent of physical constraints or basic geometries. The supple biomorphic meets deconstructed solids; the bodily intersects with the prosthetic. My work embodies complexity rather than simplicity, evoking fear rather than serenity. When viewing these sculptures collectively—calligraphies, portraits, human bodies without organs and organs without bodies—one might also envision simulacra, biomorphic forms, and ornaments. They could even be imagined as part of an unknown ritual practice, which is plausible given my passion for collecting diverse "objects."

Through morphing and mutation techniques, my sculptures do not strive to embody a particular innovative aesthetic. Instead, they explore the interplay between the initial idea or sketch and the materials used. In this abundance, procedural experimentation gives rise to unpredictable forms. Thus, experimentation in sculpture transcends composition and style; it is a continuous journey toward new forms. This process provokes what comes next, what appears, and what will be seen. The work can spontaneously absorb additions, subtractions, and technical modifications without disturbing its essential order. Sensitivity to volume and mass, the interplay of hollows and protuberances, the rhythmic articulation of planes and contours, and the unity of conception are all essential elements of my practice.

## Arabic Calligraphy

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Profoundly inspired by descriptive geometry and architectonic models, my sculptural calligraphies aim to explore indeterminate geometrical intersections that transcend the reductive predictions of linguistics. While language signs, symbols, and diagrams evoke ideas of certainty, my forms investigate how they might also nurture uncertainty. In this context, "détournement" represents an attempt to

turn a technique against itself, prompting critical questioning. Theoretically, these sculpted Arabic quotes and words challenge my passion for the utopia of experimental architecture. By employing various fonts and styles of Arabic, I seek new heuristic methods for producing investigational tectonic language that traditional architecture does not allow.

Each volume and component within these constellations of forms serves as an alchemist's alembic, carrying the architectural references of past and future eras. From a pedagogical standpoint, during my doctoral studies in «Art Practices» from 2006 to 2009, I engaged with intricate yet unpredictable cyberforms. This engagement resulted in largely virtual drawings and models, which, while impractical, formed the foundational vocabulary for my sculptural creations. I adopted sequential methodologies to conclude a drawing or a form, driven by my obsession with repetition. Sometimes, over one hundred iterations can emerge from a single word or even a letter.

For me, understanding something involves the ability to transform it through drawing—fixing and metamorphosing it on paper as a diagram before scripting it. This process parallels the concept of "intertextuality" in linguistics, where the meaning of a text is shaped by other texts through various strategies such as quotation, allusion, calque, plagiarism, translation, pastiche, or parody, as well as through interconnections perceived by the audience. Once drawn, countless transformations can be achieved through the act of drawing these letters. The form to be executed is the one discovered through "process" rather than through final graphical representation. There is always space for the "happy accident," as theorized by Bergson, and the results of this methodology manifest as reforms born from these serendipitous moments. In two or three dimensions, the act of 'forms making' is intellectual; thus, formal abstract models derived from mental letter geometry are neither the result of rigid rules nor do they conform to them.

Practically, most of my sculpted calligraphies are hybrids where the organic merges with the geometrical. The technique cannot be improvised when it comes to decoding; it must begin with a careful assessment of volume, adapting the raw wood material to the intended shape, without missing the words. The remainder of the process becomes artisanal.

## Architecture As Sculpture

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With intensive practice in architecture and urban planning from 1999 to 2021, my experience has been profoundly rewarding. The transition to sculpture arose from a dissatisfaction with conventional approaches to architecture and its dominant representational regimes. The iterative rhythms of design commissions were increasingly called into question. Working on forms without being constrained by function is one of the boldest pursuits a designer can undertake. It is a logical path to escape the comfort of familiar territory and to radically explore a subject's vitality and evolution as a means of cultural engagement. The forms created through architectural design can generate new contexts in which architectural appearances become continuously surprising and dynamic. These emerging forms and combinations challenge us to reconsider what architecture is in a moment of foundational inquiry.

I continue to work in the field of architecture, but I have recently focused extensively on sculpture. This particular artistic expression allows materials to play their melody in complete freedom, albeit always under my watchful eye. I am driven to dissolve the boundaries between painting and sculpture, sculpture and architecture, architecture and music, and fine art and industrial design. While beauty is not my primary aim, all categories of art—idealistic or realistic, surrealistic or constructivist—must meet a simple criterion: “They must persist as objects of contemplation.” Unlike the painter, the sculptor faces a more complex challenge. One cannot paraphrase Pollock’s famous statement by saying, “When I am in my sculpture, I am not aware of what I am doing.” The sculptor must remain outside the work, a conscious craftsman throughout the creative process.

## Portraits

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Is there anything triter than a head? Is it still possible today to create and appreciate contemporary sculpture that takes the head as its theme? Since the beginning of the Western tradition of sculpture, countless heads have been modeled. Historically, they represent the earliest medium of portraiture, appearing long before the advent of oil painting. My head sculptures grapple with the question of whether it remains viable to explore this theme in contemporary art. If it did not hold significance, they would not exist.

However, I strive to avoid using the term «sculpture» to define a portrait. Instead, I use it descriptively to indicate, “This is sculptural.” This choice is intentional; referring to a portrait transformed into a sculpture can narrow and limit the interpretations of the work. It presents a closing definition that confines rather than expands understanding.

When considering the compositional breakdown, I perceive the portrait as composed of forms inscribed within a rectangle and/or ellipse. My primary intention is to create new heads, which consist of multiple intermediate forms that resemble the natural. My methodology as an architect is as follows: by composing and combining hundreds of such forms, I could produce a realistic portrait. However, that is not my aim, as noted by “Joannis Avrammidis.” For me, portrait sculpture is grounded in mastering drawing rather than mere knowledge, alongside the processes of construction and deconstruction. Initially, the figures and portraits are laid out at linear and elementary levels, gradually ascending toward the vertical (like a totem) and the horizontal (reflecting a nomadic vision).

## Totem

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Undoubtedly, each species corresponds historically to an exclusive timeline, whether horizontal or vertical. The focus is primarily on the notion of time: the time we lose and the time we find. Despite its varied appearances, the stories behind the totems share “time” as a common denominator. I have always viewed the totem as a sign that is both allegorical and historical, akin to a “timeline.” The meanings of these signs differ according to civilization and, particularly, the axis of time. These

“totemic” signs embody the rights of civilizations over defined territories, portraying their idols, scenes of life, dances, and other cultural aspects.

These sensitive structures, formed by the superimposition of several volumes, often lead us to rediscover the order of time, offering insights into lost and past moments, while evoking the presence of those who have shaped our histories. In our oriental culture, the family tree is regarded as an equivalent of the totem, often inscribed with names or portraits. In my family, this was certainly the case; we frequently encountered these family tree charts displayed throughout our homes, typically hung on the walls.

The idea of representing the portraits of our ancestors in constructed totemic forms first emerged during my architectural studies in 1994. Creating a mockup of a tower marked the beginning of this journey. The signs of art—shapes, geometries, figures, portraits, symbols, and other formal aspects—concretely offer a tangible construction of a lost/found time, an absolute original time that encompasses all others. The history of civilization, comprised of the stories of each individual we have lost, continues through reinvented sensitive signs, among which are the totems.

Men and their lost portraits appear in my totems, responding to both the time we lose and the time that is lost, with the hope of rebuilding and rediscovering it. In these totemic works of art, all historical, human, symbolic, allegorical, and phenomenological dimensions converge, creating a fusion that transcends its individual components: figures, portraits, and more. Thus, the worlds of signs unfold according to “timelines,” or real lines of memory and learning. These lines, in turn, interact with one another, generating a new form of symbolic language situated between art and architecture, history and the future, and sculpture and assemblage.

It is important to highlight what Richard Serra stated in an interview with Liza Béar in 1973 for *Avalanche*: “But when you’re talking about intentions, all you’re telling people about is the relation of physical facts. And I think an artwork is not merely predicting correctly all the relations you can measure.”

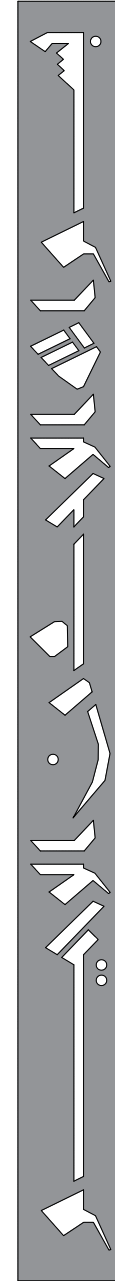
Joseph El-Hourany

Chapter I

# Arabic Calligraphy

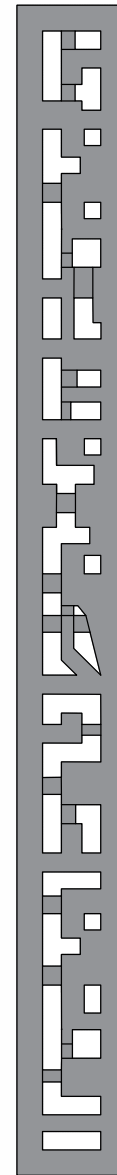
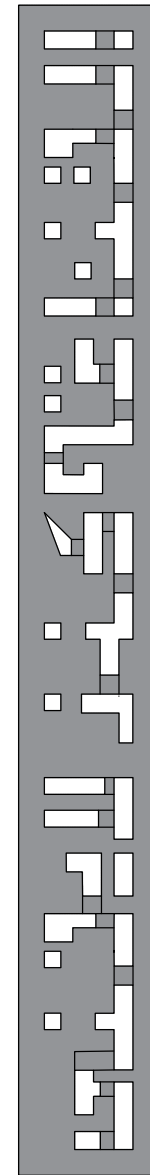






بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

Beech wood | 165x13x9cm | 2023



القنّاعة كَنْزُ لا يَفْنَى

Beech wood | 115x12x9cm | 2023



مصابب قوم: قوم سلا: قوم قو (لا)

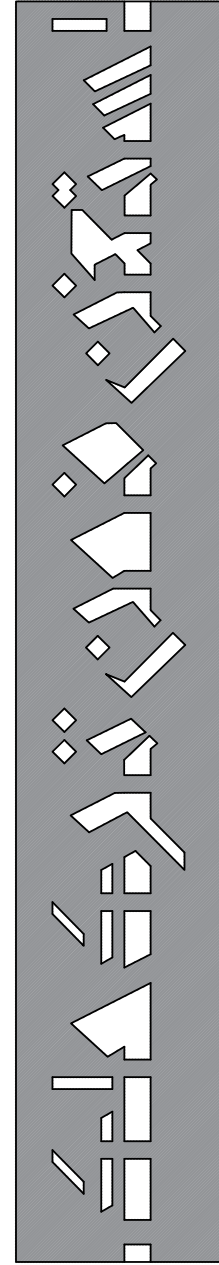
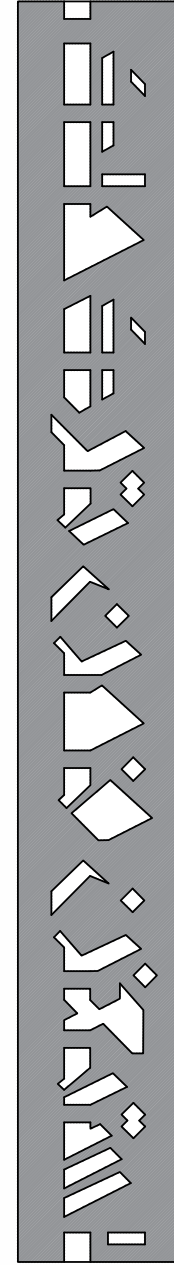
مصابب قوم: قوم سلا: قوم قو (لا)



مصابب قوم عند قوم فواند

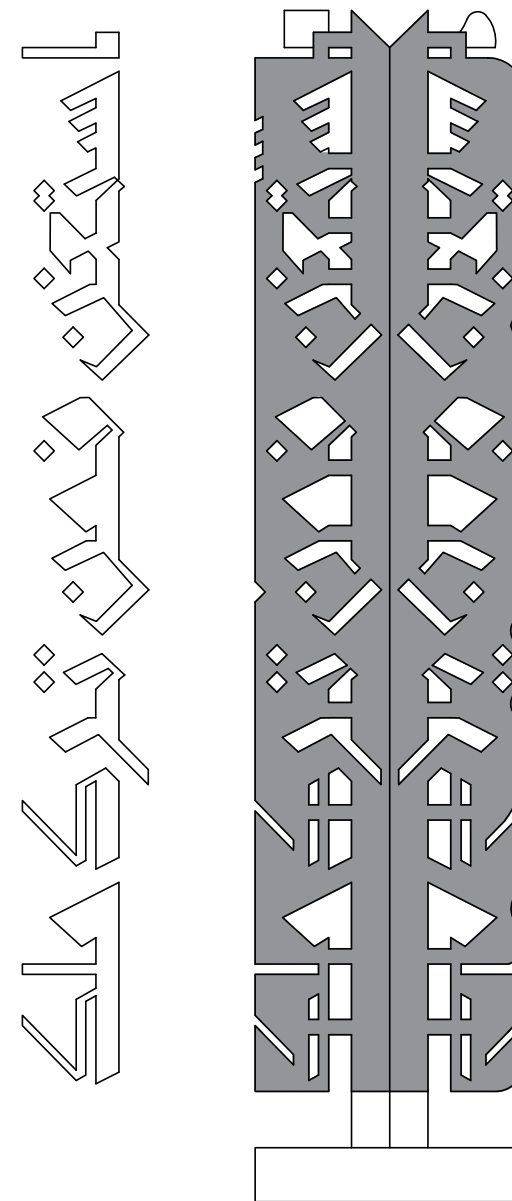
Beech wood | 115x12x9cm | 2023





إِسْتَفْنِ فَمَنْ تَرَكَ مَلَكًا

Beech wood | 75x12.5x9.5cm | 2023



إِسْتَفْنِ فَمَنْ تَرَكَ مَلَكًا

Beech wood | 79x18x10 cm | 2023





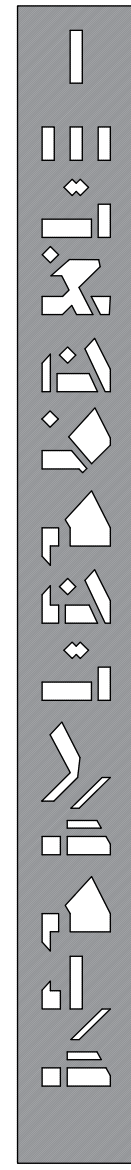
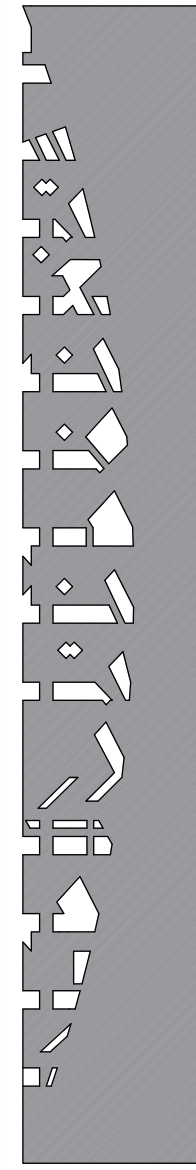
وَلَا تَقْنَعُوا بِالرُّبُوبِ وَاللَّهُ

وَدُونَ حُرِّمَتْ فِي بَيْتِ اللَّهِ



إِذَا غَامَرْتُمْ فِي شَرْفِ سُرُومٍ. فَلَا تَقْنَعُوا بِالرُّبُوبِ

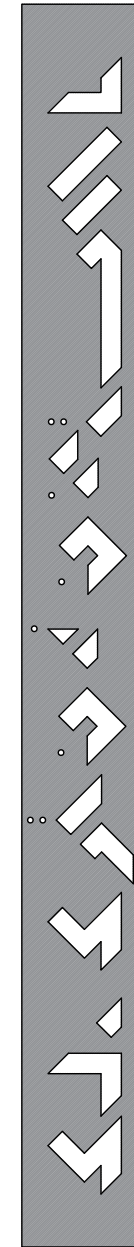
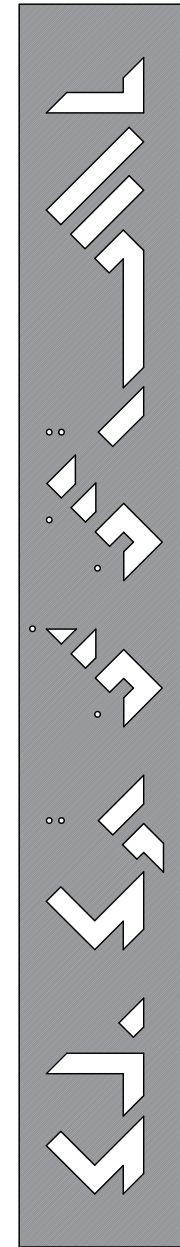
Beech wood | 95x14.5x10 cm | 2023



إِسْتَفْنِ فَمَنْ تَرَكَ مَلَكًا

Beech wood | 95x14.5x10 cm | 2023





إِسْتَعْنِ فَمَنْ تَرَكَ مَلَكًا

Beech wood | 95x13x9.5 cm | 2023





ومن العداوة ما ينالك نفعه

ومن الصلوة ما يصنع ذمها



وَمِنَ الْعَدَاوَةِ مَا يَنَالُكَ نَفْعُهُ وَمِنَ الصَّدَاقَةِ مَا يَضُرُّ وَيُؤَلِّمُ

Beech wood | 121x11x9 cm | 2023

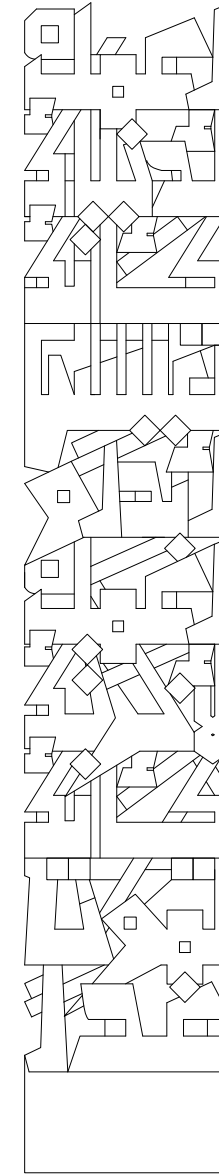
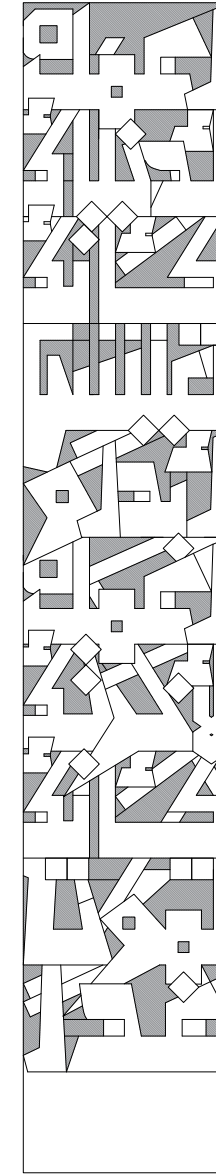


سَلَى قَدْرٍ أَهْلِ الْعَزْمِ تَأْتِي الْعَزَائِمُ

عَلَى خَدِّهِ الْعَمَلُ مَا يَجِي الْعَمَلُ



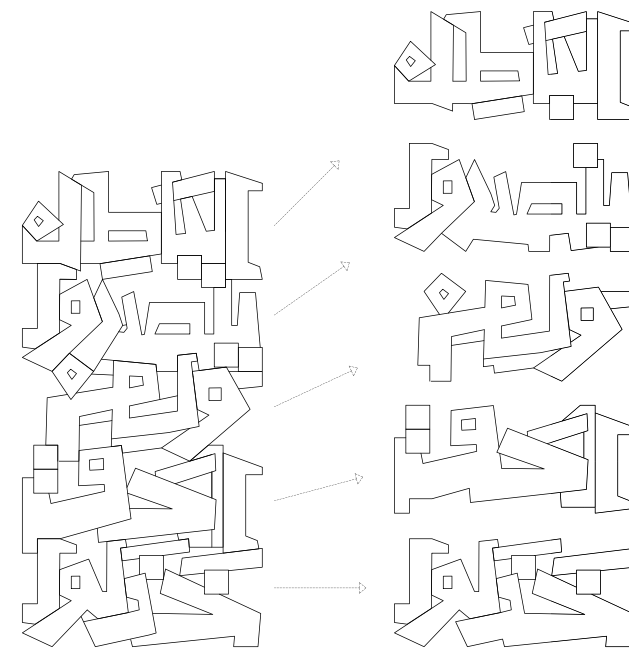
عَلَى قَدْرٍ أَهْلِ الْعَزْمِ تَأْتِي الْعَزَائِمُ  
Beech wood | 121x14x9 cm | 2023



إِعْمَلْ لِدُنْيَاكَ كَأَنَّكَ تَعِيشُ أَبَدًا، وَاعْمَلْ لِآخِرَتِكَ كَأَنَّكَ نَعْمَتٌ غَدًا

Beech wood | 126x21x9 cm | 2023





خَذَلُوا الْحَقَّ وَلَمْ يَنْصُرُوا الْبَاطِلَ

Beech colored wood | 60x30x9 cm | 2023



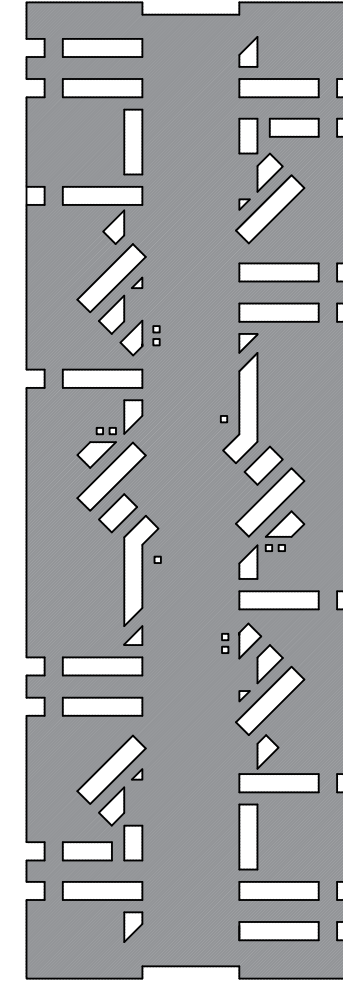
اللَّهُ جَمِيلٌ يُحِبُّ الْجَمَالَ

اللَّهُ جَمِيلٌ يُحِبُّ الْجَمَالَ



اللَّهُ جَمِيلٌ يُحِبُّ الْجَمَالَ

Beech wood | 145x18x11 cm | 2023



اللَّهُ جَمِيلٌ يُحِبُّ الْجَمَالَ

Beech wood | 58x20x10 cm | 2023





بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ  
مَدِينَةُ الْمَدِينَةِ  
بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ

بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ  
بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ  
Beech wood | 152x20.5x10 cm | 2022



لَيْسَ التَّطَاوُلُ رَافِعًا مِّنْ جَاهِلٍ وَكَذَا التَّوَاضُّعُ لَا يَضُرُّ بَعَاقِلَ

الْحَيَاةِ مِثْلَ حَيَاتِ الْجَوَابِلِ

وَمَا رَفَعُوا كَلِمَةَ رِيسٍ وَلَا كَلِمَةَ نَبِيٍّ

وَمَا كَانُوا لَهَا بِعَدُوٍّ أَوْ أَوْلِيٍّ



لَيْسَ التَّطَاوُلُ رَافِعًا مِّنْ جَاهِلٍ وَكَذَا التَّوَاضُّعُ لَا يَضُرُّ بَعَاقِلَ

Beech wood | 163x14x9 cm | 2022





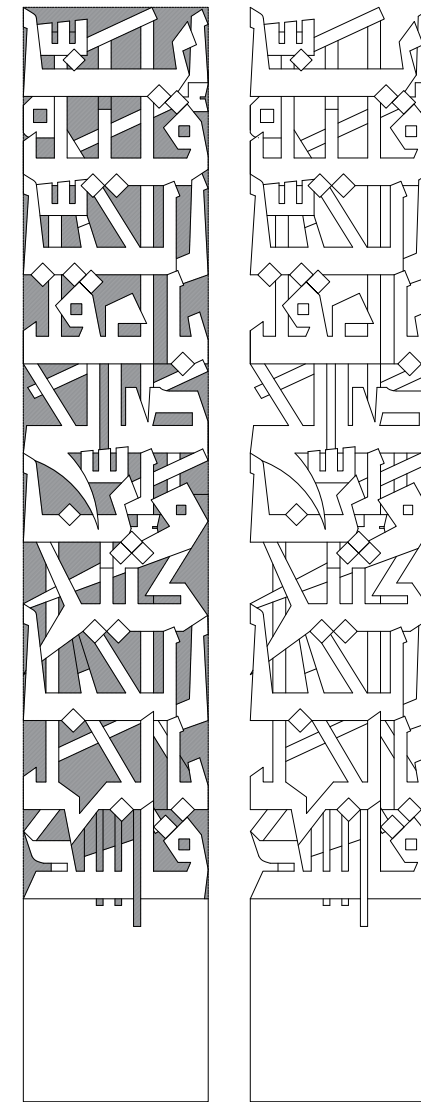
إبتسم عند المزيمة وتواضع عند النصر

إبتسم عند المزيمة وتواضع عند النصر



إبتسم عند المزيمة وتواضع عند النصر

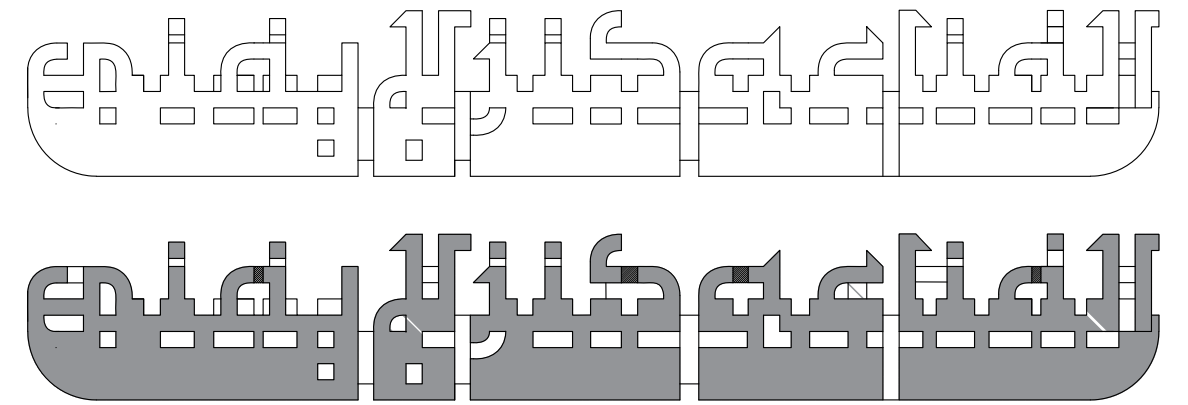
Beech wood | 162x14x9.5 cm | 2022



إِنَّ قَلِيلَ الْحُبِّ بِالْعَقْلِ صَالِحٌ وَإِنَّ كَثِيرَ الْحُبِّ بِالْجَهْلِ فَاسِدٌ

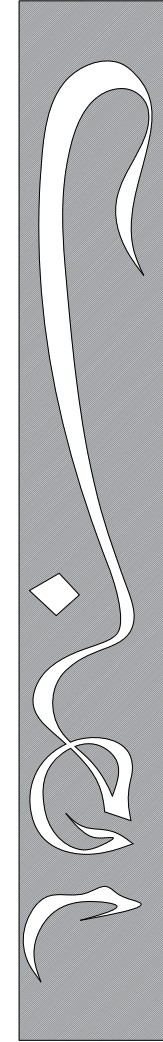
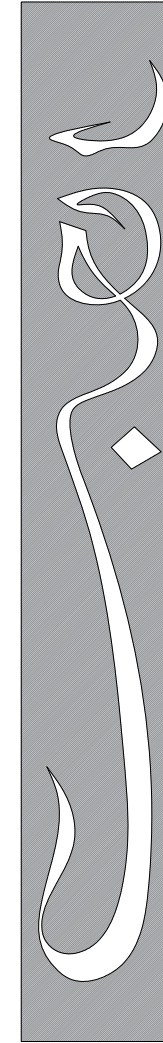
Beech wood | 166x26x10 cm | 2024





**القناعة كنز لا يفنى**  
Beech wood | 15x100x10 cm | 2023





الْحُب  
Beech wood | 71x9.5x9.5 cm | 2021

Chapter II  
Portraits



3 Double Heads

Frake, Mahogany and Fir wood | 78x20x15 cm | 2017





11 Portraits  
Tauari wood | 35x150x6 cm | 2019





21 Portraits

Oak wood | 47x85x5 cm | 2018





28 Portraits  
Oak wood | 40x153x5 cm | 2018





99 Portraits

Oak wood | 42x148x5 cm | 2023





30 Portraits

Oak wood | 44x150x5 cm | 2022





100 Portraits  
Walnut wood | 30x150x6cm | 2022





80 Portraits  
Oak wood | 45x150x5 cm | 2010

Chapter III

# Pixelized Portraits





99 Portraits  
Beech wood | 31x140x6 cm | 2023

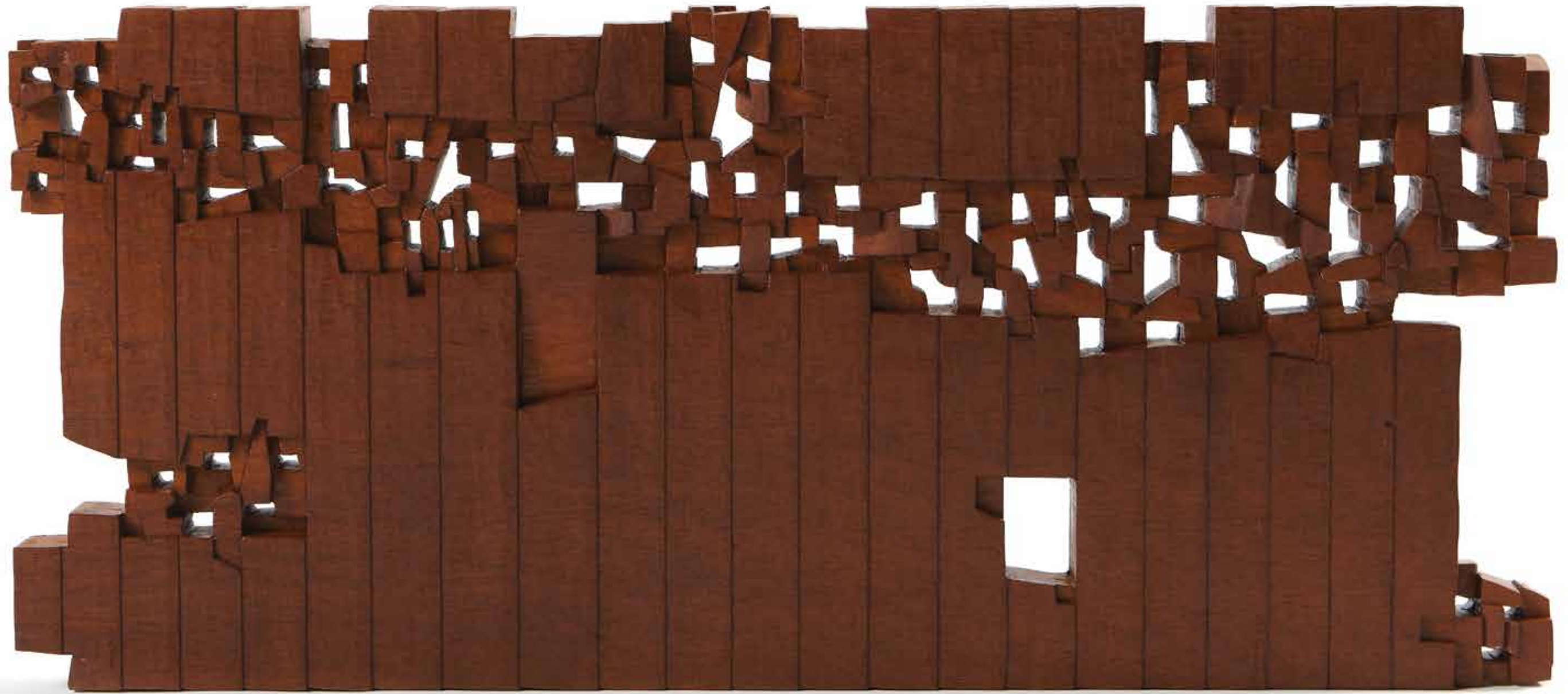




101 Portraits  
Beech wood | 98x22x10 cm | 2024







44 Portraits  
Iroko wood | 45x100x6 cm | 2023



44 Portraits  
Iroko wood | 44x102x6cm | 2023



Chapter IV  
Abstract



Untitled  
Beech wood | 33x198x6 cm | 2019









Untitled  
Walnut wood | 27x124x6 cm | 2019

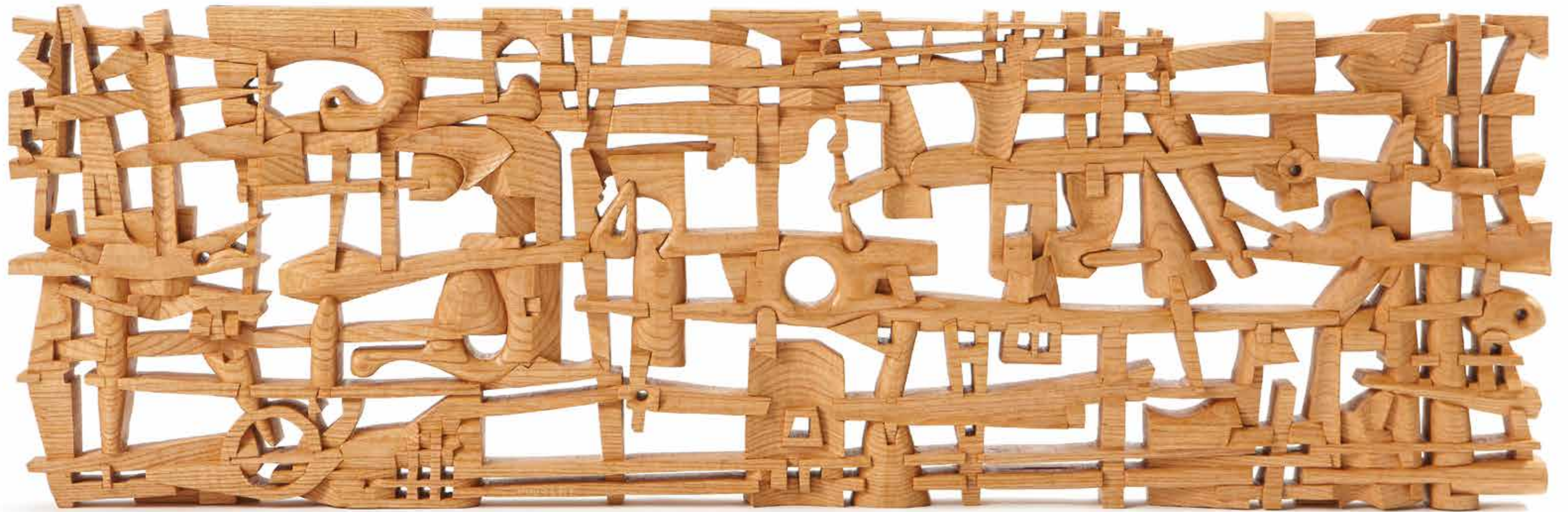




Untitled

Tauari wood | 22x140x6 cm | 2020





Untitled

Oak Wood | 45x140x6 cm | 2020





## About the Artist

Joseph El Hourany is an architect (M.Arch. 1999) and urban planner (MS. 2005) who lives and works in Lebanon. He has worked on many architectural and urban planning projects both in Lebanon and abroad and was elected as president of the 'Arab Architects Organization' in 2023. His doctoral research, completed in 2010, explored parametric architectural principles in the age of cybernetics.

In 2021 Hourany held a solo exhibition at Saleh Barakat Gallery (Beirut, Lebanon). Recent group exhibitions include MENART (2022, Brussels); MENART (2022, Paris); Art Dubai (2023; 2022; 2021); Abu Dhabi Art Fair (2024; 2023; 2022; 2021, UAE); IMA (2021, Paris).

Hourany has also published several works, including *The Future Of The Past* with John Carswell (2003); *Specimen Zero* (2010); *Specimen One* (2011); *Guvder* (2012); *Henri Edde Architecte Moderne* (2019).



SALEH BARAKAT GALLERY

غاليري صالح باركات

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Design by Carol Chehab  
Photography by Mansour Dib  
Printed by Salim Dabbous Printing Co. sarl  
November, 2024  
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