

SEANKELLY

“Linear Rhythms,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, April 18, 2017.

Harper’s BAZAAR ARABIA

Linear Rhythms



Idris Khan's monument for Abu Dhabi's Memorial Park

In Abu Dhabi, opposite the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in the new 42,000 square meter Wahat Al Karama (Oasis of Dignity) Memorial Park, 38-year-old artist Idris Khan has designed and built the UAE's first permanent monument of remembrance for the armed forces. During a ceremony that involved the seven Emirates and other dignitaries, the 23 meter-high public commission was unveiled by Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi on 30 November 2016, National Commemoration Day.

I sat with Idris in London (he also has a studio in the Dordogne, France) just after New Year's Day to discuss his landmark year and this commission that was described by *The Art Newspaper* as “the world's largest, most prestigious” of 2016. Idris and I first met in 2005 when I was the Commissioning Editor for Contemporary Art at Phaidon Press and Idris was an emerging artist included in *Vitamin Ph: New Perspectives in Photography*. His career has blossomed since then and he is now one of the world's most successful artists.

Khan's monument in Abu Dhabi began with a brief from his New York gallery Sean Kelly in December 2015. Realising the project required an ambitious scope and provided an opportunity for him to articulate the integration of his ideas about material and their meaning. In January 2016 he stood on barren land, and was told the only restriction was ‘no higher than 30 meters’, and was given a month to make his proposal. He won the competition in March with a scheduled completion for November 2017, but then plans changed and it was finished in seven months. Khan, still in awe of the speed and the result, noted: “It was a phenomenal effort with amazing organisation.” The Crown Prince, he explained, told him, ‘by doing this for us, you now always have a home here.’

Once Idris's proposal was accepted, he had to create something people could respond to emotionally. ‘What is a monument?’ he asked himself. He realised that “it is a place to congregate and remember, a place to reflect emotions, a symbol of a country's belief and support for their nation, to feel pride in the people who selflessly provide protection.” Ideas about “support” preoccupied him. He was inspired by American artist Chris Burden,

especially his Beam Drop (1984), in which steel beams were released from 100 meters into slow setting concrete where they randomly stuck at eccentric angles, leaning against each other. Khan started by drawing straight lines at different angles that were connected, each supporting the next. The linear effect meant they never completely lost balance, yet were caught in between, creating an exciting rhythm. This is visible in the Memorial.

Khan's work has consistently addressed themes of memory and loss through a process of compressing time. However, the restriction of a photograph is that you can't physically enter it. With a sculpture you can experience physical emotion and a sense of loss through light, shadow and scale. Throughout his work, he has been inspired by pre-existing information and layers of meaning to create exciting rhythms, such as when he scanned photographs of water towers from the German photographers Hilla and Bernd Becher, or every page of the Qu'ran, which he layered to create a rendered image that was at once blurred and fragmented almost like memory. These early works influenced his approach to the architecture of the Memorial.

Having always worked in monochrome, Khan has endowed the Memorial with a sumptuous painted gradient over the aluminium surface that softens the exterior to create a vertical series of paintings. Using a formal minimal grid in different tones of greys references paintings by Agnes Martin, an important influence for Khan.

The pavilion Khan designed for the park is another architectural aspect of the overall scheme. The roof structure mimics the tablet formation of the Memorial, yet here there is an oculus that opens up the space to the sky hovering over the names of the UAE martyrs imbedded in the pavilion walls using eleven tons of recycled aluminium melted down from armoured vehicles returned from conflict. The room is lined with 3,000 rectangular plates with the names of the fallen martyrs carved on them, each encompasses a warm light that illuminates the surface. In the centre of the pavilion surrounded by a slowly moving pool of water, stand seven glass panels, three and a half meters high, made by laminating five sheets of toughened anti-reflective glass, each weighing 1.2 tons. The front and back of the glass is inscribed with the soldier's oath. The accumulation of words communicates an emotional spirit. In direct relationship to the Memorial these glass tablets almost lean on each other. The viewer walks around the sculpture and feels the sensation of being pushed and pulled through the central core that reflects the names on the wall.

The Memorial appears to be a recently discovered ruin. Khan's intention was to make it appear as if it was always a part of the landscape, as if it emerged from the sand. He describes this as creating "a feeling of being overwhelmed by its scale-like it represents the weight of history." The Memorial consists of 300 tons of steel and 111 tons of 900 cast aluminium panels, each one hand painted to construct 31 tablets. The texture is strong but delicate, enticing the viewer to come closer to see and touch the surface on which there is a combination of Arabic calligraphy cast or sandblasted into the aluminium, incorporating poems and quotes from both Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan and Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Using the height and structure of the monument, the calligraphy guides the visitor to search for the text, looking up, across and down, scanning the entire sculpture to reflect, as Khan's hopes, "and recollect a memory of a loved one, while gaining comfort from what is written."



Interior of the monument



A close-up view of the Memorial Park with the names of the UAE martyrs engraved in Arabic