

APOLLO

THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE

40 UNDER 40 MIDDLE EAST

Adib Dada

4 SEPTEMBER 2019



Photo: Joe Kesrouani

Beirut

i a a itin is i u tto es ri e his ro essiona his the re an rea o his a ti ities in his ho eto n o
eirut a a is the oun ero the ther a a a an hiteesurn onsu tan that a o ts a ho isti a roa h to
ro e ts ro ui in re enerati e house to rsuan hite sa in the eirut i er an ta a s in
o n hat o e inite an en iron enta a ti ist onsi erin ho to inte inrate nature an eo e
sustaina i it to a as e tso or a a sa s



Dada is not the first environmentally engaged architect, but his passion for biomimetic design makes him stand out. After training as an architect in Lebanon, he studied technology and living systems in New York, then earned a graduate certificate in biomimicry at Arizona State University. Biomimicry is design inspired by nature, recognizing that everything is interconnected and we're part of nature. This is the backbone of many companies, he explains, detailing how, for instance, driverless cars are modelled on algorithms that look to the navigation skills of ants.

This integrated approach is reflected in a recent afforestation project in the Lebanon, which involved planting 800 trees around blighted Beirut river districts this spring. This quest to rewild the city plays to Dada's strengths, prompting him to collaborate with the curatorial organisation Temporary Art Platform as well as artists like Ahmad Harb and Amal Aoun. He participated in a workshop which is part of making us think about how we make public spaces. It's about inviting artists who can make a difference and, at the same time, about integrating the community and other social engagement practices in rethinking the city.

He clearly finds working with artists gratifying. In 2016, Nigerian-born artist Tobong Nanga presented an ongoing land conversation performance project at Beirut Art Centre, focusing on humanity's link to the earth. Nanga's initiative, touching on social issues and environmental crises, chimed with Dada's concerns and priorities. In 2018, he created a table-top circular structure built in an interactive way based on urban ecology, working with different parties such as indigenous groups and police marshals.

Dada also formed part of the land conversation multidisciplinary team when the project launched in Shanghai the same year, lining up with local urban planners and activists. That was very much more of a scheme incorporating architecture, urban aspects and the ecological angle. Art is a vehicle that can reach out to people, especially with an issue as complex as climate change. His other projects include designing the exhibition set at Tal Al-Houweith: Art and Ecology at the Tim Museum in Guangzhou, using leftover and recyclable materials.

Dada even sees local art and culture projects through the prism of nature, viewing them as ecosystems to be nourished. Building a contemporary collection for the Achat Club, a membership-oriented Beirut waterfront designed by the architect Steven Holl, put his organisational and aesthetic faculties to the test, turning into a three-year project which drew on a raft of local artists, curators and interior designers.

The collection consists solely of works by Lebanese artists. He acquired works by 1,000 artists, for around \$40,000, and also pieces by more established figures around the \$100,000 mark. It was a hard hat with the different artists. And when artists started recommending artists, it was a very organic process.

Beirut still bears the scars of the civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990, but Dada is helping cement the city's status as an art hub in the region. Working with the artist's foundation established in memory of his late sister-in-law, he helped convert an abandoned factory on the Beirut coastline outside Beirut into a temporary exhibition space in 2018. The works of a painter and architect, were dotted around the disused site. He loved that space, and it's not really used as a venue. He told her story there, he says.

He has also collaborated with Solidere, a local developer responsible for redeveloping huge swathes of ruined Beirut, launching dramatic public art commissions by the Argentinian-born artist Pablo Picasso and the Belgian artist Arne Jacobsen in the Beirut downtown area. Dada clearly feels frustrated though by the red tape of local politics and the roadblocks faced by public and private organisations set on launching culture projects. But he remains upbeat. He doesn't need that support but it would be good.

The next decade will bring more strategic projects he hopes to nurture and develop under the Dada umbrella. A pilot live/work unit in Beirut is one of several innovative schemes in the pipeline. He never pretends to be a curator. He likes to be a creative director with the vision and strategy and have a knack of finding the right collaborators to build multi-layered projects, Dada says.

aretha aris