

Afra Al Dhaheri

Emirati artist Afra Al Dhaheri discusses her Expo 2020 Dubai installation, *Pillow Fort Playground*, and how it brings together shared childhood memories.

First off, let's talk about the large scale of the pillows.

Afra Al Dhaheri: I use the pillows to reference a memory that lives within the collective consciousness of society. As a kid, I always played with pillow forts. I remember the pillows were huge and it was an effort to drag them around, let alone create towers and houses. We would build these temporary structures inside our home while our city was being built outside, so I found that relationship interesting. In terms of their size, the pillows are scaled up to the same proportions as they would have been to me when I played with them as a child, so that adult viewers will also feel like children when they encounter the work.

Why did you choose to work with marble?

Marble was introduced to our culture as an object associated with luxury. When I look back at growing up in the 1990s, my family constantly told us that those were the

good days, when everyone could afford almost anything, because there were just a few people here and a lot of oil. I used to go to my grandparents' old house in Al Ain, where there was marble everywhere. Even the staircase was marble! That was their idea of luxury and that was how it was introduced to them. It was a Western idea. When I was first approached about Expo, I was asked to think about what I would like to monumentalise from our contemporary age. Marble ties into this idea of monumentality. In Western history, when figures were monumentalised they would always be carved in stone or marble, but we don't have anything like that because our faith does not believe in idols. So, I thought, what if you idolise or create monuments for objects instead, does that make it different?

How did you approach creating a piece for the Expo Public Art Programme?

This is my first public artwork, but I've

Afra Al Dhaheri. Image courtesy of the Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi





Afra Al Dhaheri. *Pillow Fort Playground*. Marble. 357 x 160 x 289 cm, 143 x 120 x 52 cm. Public Art Programme, Expo 2020 Dubai. Images courtesy of Expo 2020 Dubai



learned from other artists that when you're dealing with public art, you need to consider that you're bringing an object and imposing it on the public space and therefore need to be mindful of how people will react. I wanted the public to feel invited, as if it were their own place.

While researching, I looked at how Japanese culture welcomes art into the public space. They have a great respect for their own culture and artistic disciplines, so when international artists are invited to produce or propose public art in Japan, it has to fall within the parameters of the local culture and relate to the Japanese people. Also, coming from a culture and background where the majority of my family members become engineers, doctors and the like, I'm the first one to be an artist. My mom was always a craftswoman, but that was never taken as an occupation. So, in my personal circle, a lot of the time my family and friends don't understand my conceptual work. I found that this project has

been an opportunity to connect with them, for them to understand and share a memory that is also their memory, not just mine.

What do you hope the future of *Pillow Fort Playground* will be?

When we were in the early stages of the project, we did a few location visits and I realised that the site is visually congested. So I thought about how I could produce something that will be noticed, because there's so much visual noise everywhere, so much to see and be excited about. Eventually I realised that this is a place to rest, hence the playground idea, and I wanted the piece to almost be a palate cleanser, where visitors could hang out, reminisce and maybe share some memories with their children. When it was decided that the piece would be permanent, I think that created another conversation. But I think I'll wait first for people's responses once they've seen it.

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PRESENT

History always leaves an imprint on the here and now. We take a look at a selection of the major happenings of the moment, including the standout exhibitions and art events attracting the attention of art lovers across the world, including in our own homebase of Dubai, which is hosting the much-awaited Expo 2020.

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