

TANK

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The Problem of Evil

Bad apples, the Book of Enoch, a plague mass, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Manichaeism, meat, subterranean networks, Eartha Kitt, French cults, organoid intelligence, Paddington Bear, sins of the father, a manuscript-ruining imp, malevolent goats



Aline Asmar d'Amman



**" As architects we can write
with materials like writers
write with ink"**

Interview by Caroline Issa
Photography by Mitch Zachary

Aline Asmar d'Amman, architect and founder of the design practice Culture in Architecture, intends for her work to extend far beyond its physical placement in the world. Her design philosophy unites the real with the imagined, the past with the future, the ruined with the pristine. These ambitions are woven throughout her projects, from her eponymous furniture collection to her renovations of Paris's Hôtel de Crillon and the Eiffel Tower's restaurant Le Jules Verne, to her transformation of Venice's Palazzo Donà Giovannelli into the future Orient Express Hotel. Her life's experiences, rooted in Beirut and punctuated by spells living in Paris, undergirds the fabric of her practice.

Imbued with the spirit of literature, femininity and handwork, her distinct approach is evident within the walls of her newest project, Le Petit Salon.

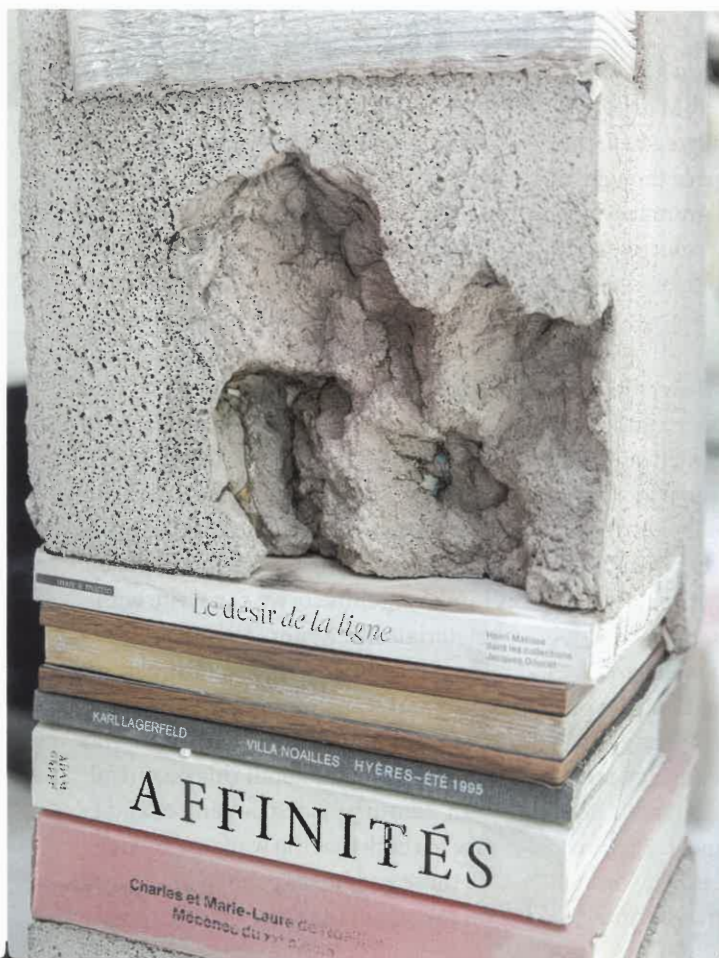
Situated in Chanel's Rudy Ricciotti-designed la Galerie du 19M, where 12 artisanal maisons are aggregated, the salon offers a private space thoughtfully assembled by Asmar d'Amman which celebrates the many perspectives and expertise that make up the best of French craft.

Caroline Issa In your work, you blur the lines between art and architecture, and between surface and depth. Tell me why.

Aline Asmar d'Amman Beauty has great impact on our lives. To quote Dostoevsky, "Beauty will save the world," because it changes your perspective. I was born in Lebanon, where an adverse context makes you appreciate life. It shapes your eye to capture beauty wherever it appears, whether in a ruin, a broken stone, or the remains of a monument. I grew up with a thirst for beauty. It is important to stay dazzled by the transformative

effect that human beings have on materials, on materiality – whether in fashion, art or architecture. This is why I embraced architecture as an adolescent growing up in a country where everything needed to be rebuilt. At the same time, I was drawn to a world of words. When heavy bombing would happen, I would hide under a table and open a book. I read a sentence by Anaïs Nin which read, "Had I not created my whole world, I would certainly have died in other people's." To make a big *ellipse*, this is how I met Karl Lagerfeld. I believed a simple letter would reach him. As architects we can write with materials like writers write with ink. I'm interested in stories of the past and craft and transmission; in the echoes of a building, what it has to say. I was talking recently about this beautiful 15th-century palace in Venice, and I like to think that the walls are talking, all these goddesses painted in allegories on the stone, the scars on the stones.





I think about Ruskin's words about the flesh of time being these stones. I immediately go back to a book.

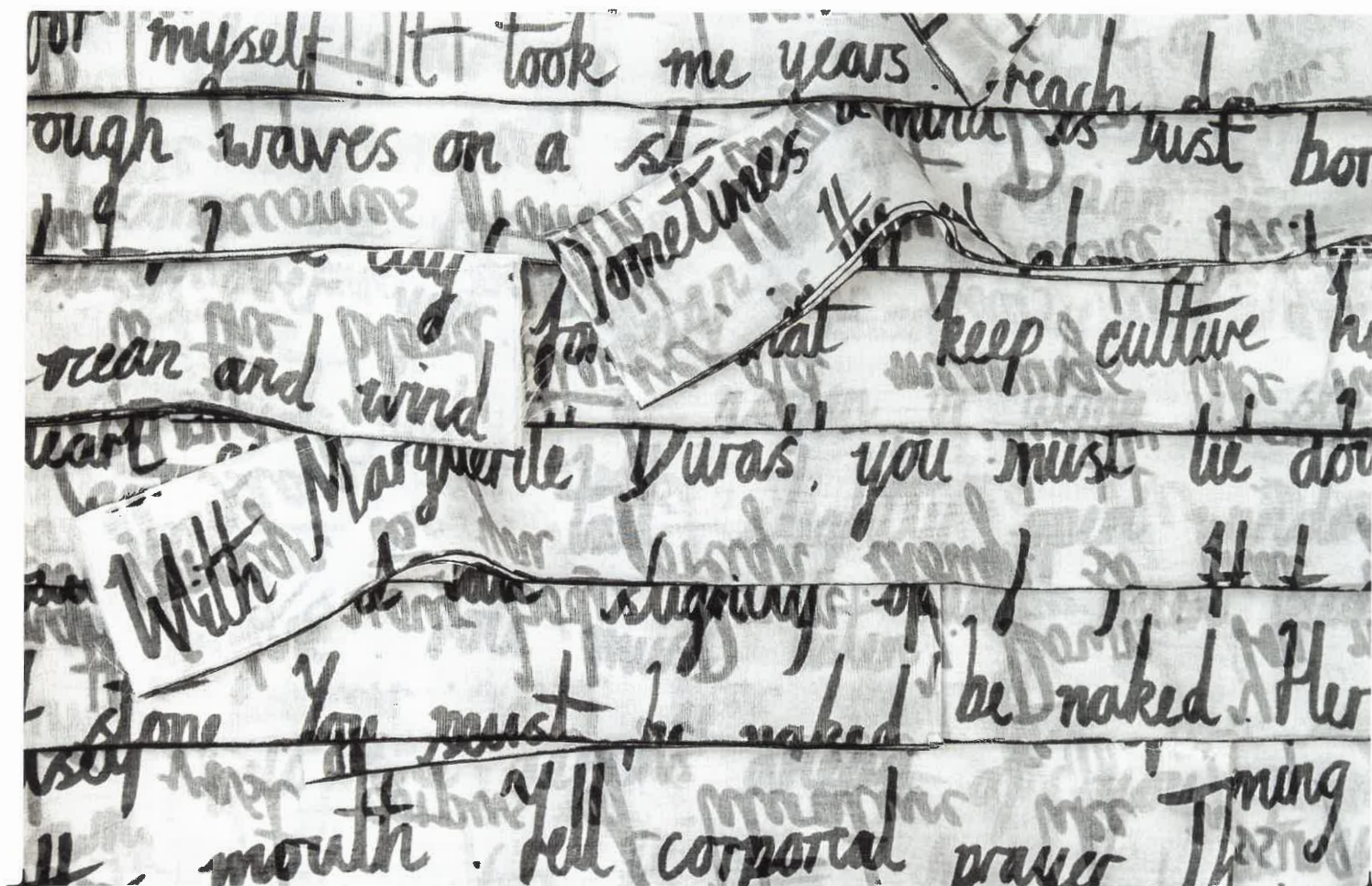
CI That's such a beautiful articulation of your work. How do you connect those abstract ideas, the inspiration you get from reading from a book, to the materials that surround you?

AAA By looking for sense and meaning. It's extremely important to realise that what we do as architects and interior designers is not something that you can achieve quickly. You have to give it some depth and meaning so that you cherish what you create. We speak about sustainability in all of the creative fields, and I always say that the first act of sustainability is to build something grounded in a story, the understanding of its history, to know how you're going to anchor it to the future. I'm not into nostalgia at all; I like to invent new realms and express new creations in a contemporary way. Stories are not fantasies, they

are poetic truth. I didn't invent that – the German poet Novalis said that the more poetic something is, the more true it is. But you have to be strongly attached to the project and understand that projects are full of compromises. You have to listen to timelines, to reality, to the fragility of a material. But it is important to surround ourselves with people who share the same passion. With Chanel, this is what brought us together: this feeling that excellence, this endeavour, has a noble aspect. The relentless act of doing and redoing, of not counting the hours, and imagining that going from a pleat of cardboard to a structured order of architecture could happen. Once you have a vision, you have to make it happen; but there needs to be a bit of craziness and enthusiasm. Sometimes it keeps us awake at night, which is fine. These abstract ideas don't come to life alone, they come to life thanks to the great addition of competencies. I'm lucky to have had these doors opened. The beauty of the story with Karl was

that it was very pure, it wasn't based on relationships or a business affair. It started with a letter, and continued with a lot of exchanging letters and sketches. It opened my eye to the house of Chanel not just existing as a fashion house but a manifesto, an act of resistance and resilience. When you think about fashion or high-end interior design projects with so many people involved, and how a circle of goodness is happening thanks to all of the creativity, that's phenomenal. This is what drives me every day. I also want to erase the false idea that high craftsmanship is only for the ultra-rich. We are here at la Galerie du 19M, located at a crossroads of such a dynamic area. The building is by Rudy Ricciotti, and it has anarchy in it.

CI I can see this rebelliousness in your practice. You've worked in France, Italy, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. How do you locate your identity in this global context and how does that shift over time?



AAA What is an identity at the end of the day? We are an expression of so many cultural references or identities. Adonis, the Syrian poet, says, “My body is my country.” If we weren’t strangers to the world, we wouldn’t look at it with such amazement. The comfort zone always kills you; if we remain in one space, not confronted with others, not taking any risks to embrace another culture. This is why I called my company Culture in Architecture. These words are so important to me; they are the foundation. It means that if we land on a project in Singapore, we have to understand what we’re doing in Singapore. What’s the essence of the craft here? What does it transmit? How do cultures cross the country? Going back to my own country, to Beirut, I have to ask, what do I want to portray there? In Paris, how do you relate to the city of lights, the city of culture, where so much has already been said about beauty? How can you become a little soldier who adds to that shine and glory? The moti-

vation is always to remain true to the location, to the context, to see what we can weave together in a conversation, because it enriches any project. For instance, I just returned yesterday from Geneva, where we were working on a beautiful private project on a lake. We were having a conversation with the client about why it is so relevant that we play with the wind and the lake of Geneva. If a unique craft only exists here, then you can create that bridge with the idea, with the drawing, with the materiality of it. Suddenly, every city becomes a platform to another, bridges are created. It’s a wonderful mesh of values. Once I found myself in a work session, sitting with Mr Lagerfeld around the table. There were a few people from my team and we had these wonderful intimate work sessions where we would sketch for hours. I would request half a day to come and fill his office with materials and samples so that when he walks in, it’s all set up for work. He stops, and he looks around and says, “Look at us, I’m

German, you’re Lebanese. Where does your collaborator come from?” I said, “She comes from Korea, and her from Italy. And you, from Belgium, and you, where do you come from?” And he said, “We are foreigners, in love with the world.” That was such a beautiful sentence – we are all strangers in love with the world. The title of the Venice Biennale this year was “Foreigners Everywhere.” We shouldn’t think about that as a negative or a limit. It’s an invitation to embrace each other’s cultures and commonalities.

CI I would love to hear the quotes that inspired the walls of your room.

AAA This salon was inspired by women and by women authors. I stumbled upon a book, *The Chronology of Water* (2011) by Lidia Yuknavitch. I’m married to a Swiss person, and when we go away in the summer, we go to a small village with no libraries, so I have to drive to another village where there is one. One day in that small village in Switzerland, the librarian

gives me that book and says, "This is for you." When I read it, it was so strong and bold. In the essay "Dreaming in Women", she writes,

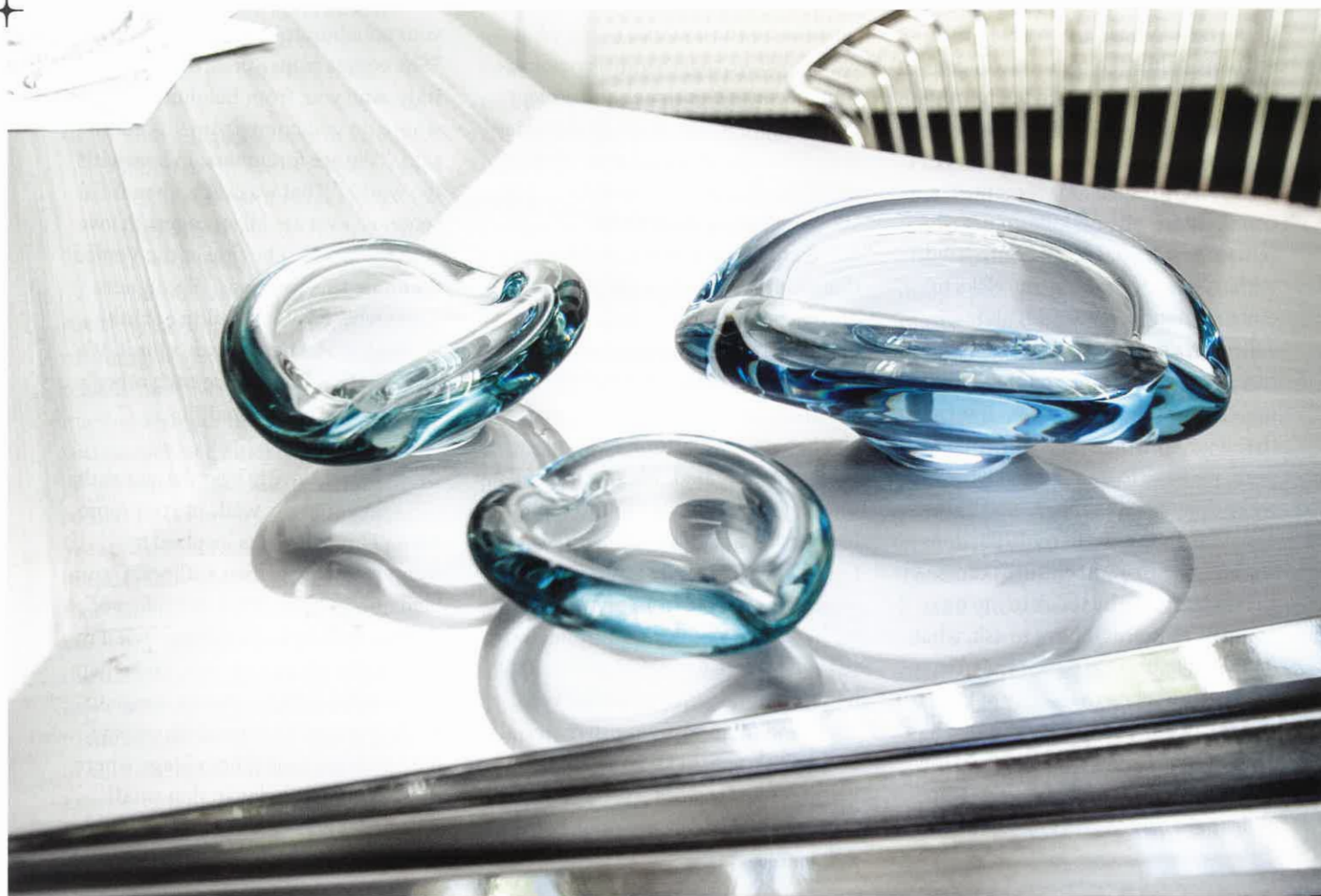
"Sometimes a mind is just born late, coming through waves on a slower journey. You were never, in the end, alone. Isn't it a blessing, what becomes from inside the alone. With Marguerite Duras, you must lie down on a bed in an apartment in a foreign city - foreign to you - foreign enough so that you become the foreigner. Lose your name and your language. Lose your identity moorings. Lose your very thoughts. There must be shutters on the tall slightly open windows. The room must be blue. [...] With Gertrude Stein there will be eating and paper. Tea and money. She will say it gracefully. She will say it with ice-cream. Eating and paper. A flesh circle. So kind... Make quiet for Emily Dickinson. Sing gently a hymn in between the heavens of storm. Let the top of your head lift."

At the end, she says,

"With Virginia Woolf there will perhaps be a long walk in a garden or along a shore, perhaps a walk that will last all day. She will put her arm in yours and gaze out. At your backs will be history. In front of you, just the ordinary day, which is of course your entire life. Like language. The small backs of words. Stretching out horizonless."

When I read those pages, I thought, this woman is able to give me these goosebumps. How can I as an architect pay tribute to that feeling? By freezing these words and sentences and placing them in the delicate hands of the craftsmen, we can make them into poetic materiality. We worked in the harsh factories of Ateliers de France to bring that cardboard into hard material. It's like the Corinthian and Doric orders for neoclassical architecture; it's a play on proportion that's tattooed with

words; it's speaking to you if you want to listen to it. On another floor, there's an important object I wanted to tell you about that pays tribute to the entire eight maisons here, a giant dream-catcher called *Le Mobile des Métiers*. Every maison has, at my request, created an unexpected poetic object, an element of *décor* representing their craft. It's hanging on each branch in the balance. The raw and the precious, the balance of these eight branches coming together as this huge dream catcher, is also this message that welcomes all the guests who come to *Le Petit Salon*. It creates another dimension, another scale, another proportion; the scale and proportion of architecture blown out to the space. I hope this is the beginning of a great conversation with all of the maisons, as this is what *Le Petit Salon* means: the act of joy, and of being together. ®





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the Galerie du 19M team