

SEANKELLY

“Idris Khan: Monument and Memory,” *Aesthetica*, January 10, 2017.

# Aesthetica

## Idris Khan: Monument and Memory



Installation view from Idris Khan's UAE monument. Courtesy of the artist.

Residing right across Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque – the UAE capital's most prominent landmark, *Wahat Al Karama* pays tribute to those who gave their lives in support of their country's sovereignty, dignity and freedom. Following a competition held in early 2016, British-born Idris Khan was selected as the chosen designer of both the Memorial and the Pavilion of Honor. It contains 20,000 cubic meters of concrete, over 5,000 tonnes of steel and over 120km of cables. Khan explains his thoughts for the commission and the larger conceptual intention for the country.

**A: How did you begin to design for such a monumental and responsive piece?**

**IK:** I was sent the brief by my NY gallery Sean Kelly in December last year. I'm not particularly interested in the competition nature of public art as I believe that something good will come out of showing faith in one artist. However, I thought it was such an interesting project and one that allowed me to be ambitious. We were given obvious site restrictions but really only one that mattered. "Don't go above 30 meters in height."

At first, I suddenly turned into a landscape architect, thinking that I had to create something different to my current work. I had just started to move more seriously into making three-dimensional work; I've been working with an engineer to help me understand the possibilities and form and scale, and started making large clay models of a sweeping canopy that covered the park. So I peeled back and sketched very simple charcoal lines that represented support, each vertical line supporting the next at different angles. I then started to imagine these lines as enormous tablets.

After the presentation to the judging panel, I knew I had made a good impression. I think they could feel the emotion in my voice of how much I believed in the project, and I hope I delivered everything I said I was going to that day. I am not sure it was expected, but I knew how much my work lends itself to making a memorial. I used so much energy in conveying why my sculpture should be the winning design. I guess it worked, because now we are looking at something that will be remembered for generations. It gives me great pride to have been able to create this work. Given that I only won the award in March this year I think everyone who worked on this project deserves so much credit. It is a phenomenal effort. The memorial was made internationally. The aluminium was cast and painted in Australia and China, the steel in the UAE. The glass for the sculpture in the pavilion was made in Germany. The amount of project managing, and the attention to detail on the monument has been amazing. To bring this project together in eight months was astonishing.

**A: How have you adopted a sense of authorship over this work, considering its cultural and historical connotations?**

**IK:** I knew the work would be a major part of a country's history – a huge part of the city's landscape and, as such, a part of the cultural awareness of future generations. I was proud to be a part of the development of the country and to make something that will hopefully inspire a generation's curiosity in art, sculpture and how as a contemporary artist can influence the emotions of anyone who looks at it daily.

I do feel making this work was an act of collaboration with a country, not in terms of being influenced over the design, which I wasn't, but to be part of a conversation with what the government of the UAE found important in what they wanted to convey with the monument. It was to create a park for reflection: of loss and remembrance. It was to create a spiritual place in the city and so I didn't need authorship and I was happy to be a part of its creation and it was a generosity of spirit.

**A: Do you think that artists must inherently be sensitive to the current society, and therefore bring something new to it in terms of positive connections / contributions?**

**IK:** I believe that an artist should make art for whatever reason they want. Somehow even when an artist is trying to be none political it's hard to escape how current society can influence the work. Contemporary artists react to everything around them and somehow there is always an urge to create connections with the environment that they surround themselves in, whether they choose to or not. In this case, I feel I have created a place to reflect. It is a place for serenity within a very busy city of construction and growth. I believe this monument has a positive and hopeful resonance

**A: What were you hoping to achieve with the structures in terms of an architectural vision and a commemoration for sovereignty, dignity and freedom?**

**IK:** I was more concerned with conveying unity, support and to create a feeling of loss. This is a place where people can visit and perhaps remember anyone who has ever been close to them, not only the brave who chose to go to conflict, but to be a memorial for all. The structures allude to the momentum of falling, only to be caught mid fall. The tablets are supported which is what I think a family is all about. Someone always being there through the bad times in life.

The shadows that the monument cast a very interesting moment in the work. Due to the harsh sun in the region the shadows throughout the day are very sharp and strong across the work. It almost looks like a sun dial, and for me, this dynamic moment reminds me of the short time we have on this planet. It's a very poignant and beautiful part of the piece.

**A: How does the *Pavilion of Honour* tie into a sense of symbolism?**

**IK:** It's a place of serenity and reflection. It is the first time the visitor to the park is confronted with the names of

the soldiers who lost their lives on duty for their country, which adds a level of emotion to their experience. The roof structure almost mimics the tablet form of the monument, but this time creates a protective covering that forms an oculus in the centre of the space. This hovers over a glass sculpture.

Using eleven tons of recycled Aluminium melted down from armoured vehicles brought back from conflict, the room is lined with 3000 rectangular plates. The names are embedded into these plates and a light shines across the face. I wanted the whole room to be an installation of light. This is a poignant act to create a feeling of reflection, serenity and intimacy.

In the centre of the pavilion surrounded by a slowly moving pool of water, stand seven glass panels. The glass is embedded into the floor of the platform and rises up, almost leaning onto each other which has a direct relationship with memorial. The glass is inscribed with the soldier's oath both front and back. Still legible from whichever side you read it, the fourteen sides of the glass are marked with calligraphy that moves over viewers' eyes and guides them around the room. The accumulation of the words in the middle forms a comprehensive spirit and emotion that holds the centre of the space.

**A: How does the written word come into play within the construction and engage with its audiences?**

**IK:** To be honest, I really wanted to layer the words more on the monument, but it was important for them to be able to read the words on the piece, which I completely understood. It was important for me that if the words were to be read, then they had to be positioned all over the sculpture, which meant each poem or quote being at a different scale, and also being at great height and at eye level.

By sandblasting and stamping the text into the surface of the aluminium it allowed me to control the amount of visibility the words had. I wanted them to become part of the surface and not to be painted on top. That way, the viewer had to search for the language, and this dictated the way their eyes moved across the sculpture. This guided the viewer through the tablets from beginning to end.