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EMIRATI KHALID SHAFAR ON LIVING THE DREAM
THE VINTAGE COUTURE BAZAAR

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Living the Dream

Not many people would be brave enough to leave a successful corporate career to pursue their true passion. But Emirati Khalid Shafar tells *T Emirates* that taking that bold step was key to turning his dreams into reality.

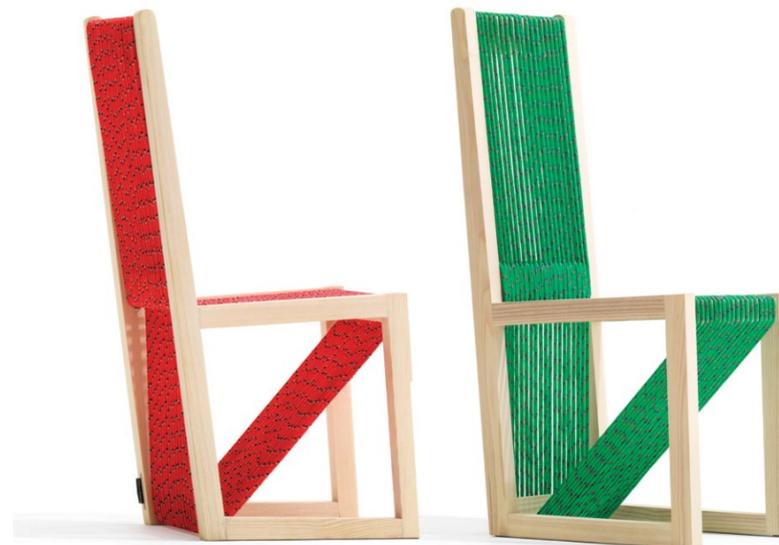
BY ORNA BALLOUT

KHALID SHAFAR WAS “NEARLY AT THE PEAK” of his career in 2009. Yet he saw the financial crisis in Dubai as the ideal opportunity to exit the corporate world and follow his ambition of carving out a career as a furniture designer. Although his family didn’t openly express how they felt about his instinctive actions, Shafar admits that he “could see the worry in their eyes”.

With a new gallery in the heart of his home town (the Ras Al Khor Industrial Area in Dubai) displaying his covetable handmade furniture collection alongside his collaborations with international brands, it’s clear that Shafar has no regrets – just big ambitions. “I want to be one of the strong references of Emirati style, if not the first,” he says, adding that in the future he would like researchers to come and study his design ethos.

Considering his personality to be quite “earthy,” Shafar believes that his traditional traits are quite the opposite of what people expect from him. “I’m not an IT type of person or a software designer. I sketch and then prototype – but I think it’s because I have the luxury of having a workshop at the gallery,” he shares, laughing when he further reveals that he’s been using the same phone for three years and is still using Version 1 of the iPad – the one without a camera.

Shafar’s design objects each tell a fascinating story. As we sit on his “Illusion



Dine” chairs at his gallery, the down-to-earth Emirati tells the tales that have shaped his design and work ethic. He remembers how, when he was younger, men used to stroll outside his house calling people into the street to sell them goods

hidden inside the colorful sacks they carried on their backs. He fondly recalls the sense of excitement he experienced

rummaging through the bags in search of toys and trinkets, while his mother would seek out textiles and garments. This memory is what gave birth to the idea of the ingenious “Auction” table, one of his most beloved pieces, with the heavy fabric bag gathered under its round top. “I thought about mothers with kids and a lot of toys scattered around the house, who want to hide and store things quickly when guests come over; the sack is inspired by those merchandisers” from all those years ago, he says.

While 33-year-old Shafar had always envisaged himself as a designer, he pursued a corporate career in marketing before leaving his job in 2009 to move abroad and study in New Zealand. During his travels, Shafar got the ultimate opportunity to work in Brazil with his idols, the Campana Brothers. “I love the simplicity of their design philosophy. The way they transform such simple and humble materials into functional pieces of design and art.”

Among his own design objects displayed at the gallery, I spotted the book by, and about, Tom Ford – a man he counts as another inspiration. “I really appreciate the way he has positioned himself in the market, and how his boutiques across the world are of the utmost luxury,” he says. And a fashion connection can

also be seen in Shafar’s own work. “I treat my work as fashionable items. The labels on the pieces I’ve created have been inspired by labels on garments – I think it adds a soft touch to a piece that has been crafted from wood.”

Acknowledging challenges in the local market, Shafar says there are not many things available to a start-up company, and getting a license can also be difficult as there is no specific design category. “My company is listed as a trading company, which is not what I’m doing purely; I’m designing and manufacturing,” he stresses. But he’s got the patience and passion to build his brand. “I still consider myself an emerging designer. I need to build a reputable Emirati brand comprising pieces that are designed and produced in the UAE.”

During his time off work, Shafar is a self-confessed “foodie” and takes great delight in visiting “fine dining” restaurants with his friends. “If I get a dish that I love, I don’t like to share it with anyone, not even a bite,” he chuckles. Aside from food, he is a keen traveler, and with the demands of his job he can be out of the country as often as 10 times a year. “Istanbul is one of the most inspiring places I’ve ever visited. I’m fascinated by the Ottoman era and the mix between new designs, nice food and exhibitions.”

Although Shafar’s new life is a far cry from the corporate world he once commanded, it seems that old habits die hard. “I thought that

the workload would be very flexible, especially considering I’m managing my own time,” he says, adding somewhat surprisingly: “But for the past few months I have been starting to get really excited when the weekend approaches!”

For more info, visit khalidshafar.com

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IMAGE COURTESY OF KHALID SHAFAR.



IMAGES COURTESY OF KHALID SHAFAR.



Clockwise from top: ‘Illusion’ chairs; ‘Palm’ coat stand; ‘Auction’ table; ‘Egaal’ table lamp.