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## Telltale creations

As the UAE celebrates its 40th National Day, **identity** speaks with Khalid Shafar, a young Emirati designer exploring his heritage through contemporary furniture. **TEXT: SAMIA QAIYUM**

**He talks fast, and he talks passionately...** about his bold ambitions, the future of design in the UAE and preserving his heritage through his contemporary, delightfully quirky creations. Meet Khalid Shafar, an up-and-coming Emirati furniture and objects designer, currently based between Auckland and Dubai, who describes his design aesthetic as "a revival of the 50s, 60s, and 70s avant-garde styling re-interpreted with today's furnishing trends".

Our conversation starts with a debate on where the line between artists and designers blurs. "I firmly believe there's a big difference between the two. They come from the same sphere, sure, but I always say that artists face no limitations when they express themselves on a blank palette. When a designer comes to produce something, he has to design a functional piece. You have to question if it can be employed for practical use, or whether it is merely positioned as a piece of art to complement its scene."

According to Shafar, there are three pillars dictating his design process – creativity, functionality and practicality.

"I'm not trying to squeeze practicality in every one of my objects, because it sometimes complicates the whole design and kills some of its elements", he says. But this is a man who looks beyond the

aesthetics. He refers to a bench he designed earlier this year for display at Art Dubai and around the city: "This is an example of where I was more focused on functionality and practicality. The three-seater bench becomes a nine-seater with a simple flip so that more people can rest, relax and share moments and stories. Although aesthetics was not the dominant element, I used a metallic finish to reflect Dubai as The City of Gold."

And it's this innate sense of Dubai, and Emirati culture in general, that consistently makes an appearance in his furniture, telling vivid tales of the country's oft-forgotten history. "My heritage heavily influences my designs. This part of the world lacks a long design history, which presents a challenge. It made me thirsty to explore my culture and preserve some of its crafts. By nature, we were Bedouins and always on the move, so we don't have stable architecture that we can refer to. From the Arab world, I had to look to North African countries like

Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia as well as Palestine, Jordan and Syria. They have a rich history of crafts and a distinct architecture style. It had me questioning, 'Where is ours?' It's extremely limited... you see it either in a museum or Dubai Heritage Village. It's dying and that's my fear. So now I'm starting to dig deep and understand the elements that were used in the past," he explains.



Clockwise from top left: *T-Light* from the 2012 collection; *Dubai Journey* carrom board; variations of *The Palm* coffee table



His new collection takes on two different directions: one follows a cultural theme, while the other is vibrantly coloured and almost sporty in nature. As his past experience dictates, objects on the cultural side will attract more interest. "They have so many stories to tell, and carry a lot of meaning. I can spend hours talking about them," he enthuses. He cites the *Dubai Journey* carrom board as his favourite piece: "The game actually originated in India, and later moved to this part of the world. I tried to tell the story of Emiratis travelling through the desert in an artistic way. It was so interesting going from the research part of the process and coming up with a story, linking each part of the board with the story. It was the perfect tribute from me to my hometown, Dubai." Another one of his very unique designs is *Arabi*, the result of an experiment at this year's Tasmeem Doha. A number of designers from the Arab world were invited to perform live demonstrations of their designs, and given a theme of 'link'. The aim was to provide visitors with insights into the design process and the meaning of design as a connector. He chose to explore ways in which to use the *Egaal*, the black band that men from the Arab region wear on top of their head covers: "For me, its circular shape is the natural form of 'link'. I made a space divider or screen by combining several *Egaals* together."

*Arabi* successfully proved that a fashion object can be used in furniture making, and deservedly received a lot of support and interest. He was later commissioned by The Caravan Gallery to recreate it for display at a Berlin exhibition. But where is it that he found his flair for experimenting with unconventional materials? "A big part of this came after my collaboration with the Campana Brothers. I saw them use almost

everything imaginable, things that we usually discard [including cardboard, which in Brazil is considered a valuable material] to produce beautiful pieces of furniture and art. It definitely made me a more courageous designer."

Shafar discovered his passion for art and design very early in life, and designing furniture was one of the long-term goals he'd set for himself. He decided to specialise in Furniture & Objects design after taking courses at the prestigious Central Saint Martins in London. He later moved to New Zealand to take a cabinet making and woodworking course at the Centre for Fine Woodworking in Nelson. Giving up a successful career in marketing, Shafar found his opportunity to transition around the time of the financial crisis.

"Why New Zealand?" I ask. "Unfortunately, there's a lack of education here in the UAE for people wishing to major in product or industrial design. And I





Clockwise from top left: *Edam* hall table replaces drawers with a built-in leather pouch; Khalid Shafar with the Campana Brothers in São Paulo, Brazil; *Gemini* chair folds into a table



knew that in order to work professionally as a furniture designer, I would need to have a solid educational background. Moving to New Zealand was a very courageous decision on my part, but I wanted to learn the basics of furniture making. I don't want to be a fairy tale designer, creating a very innovative piece that wouldn't be functional. I need to know at the start of the process whether a design is feasible or not", he replies.

Besides the lack of proper college degrees in design, Shafar and I discuss some of the other challenges that designers in the UAE face. "People should be made aware of careers in design much earlier in life, and they should be pushed towards these majors. There's a real lack designers from the Arab world. A few have achieved global success – Karim Rashid, Zaha Hadid – but who's next? In the West, people like Philippe Starck are referred to as masters. If we go further down, there are professional designers and emerging designers. But we don't have them here."

After education, Shafar believes that designers need support in every sense of the word: "We're a very brand-conscious society, so the question is 'Will people trust local brands or still opt for the Made in Italy label?' But we've gotten a lot of encouragement from the local community." Shafar claims that the perception of design in the Arab culture presents another issue: "Design is seen as a female domain and has always been associated with the softness of a human. For us, manhood is very tough. Men in the region avoid going into design professions because of this misconception. But I have to say that lately, I've seen a few good examples of local talent. People like Sultan Al Darmaki in the shoe domain, Khalid bin Sultan Al Qasimi in the fashion domain... hopefully, we'll become leaders, encouraging followers to enter the design world. So it starts with education, followed by emotional and professional support from the media and retailers. This gives us the courage to take the next step, and take our products outside the UAE."

Simple lines mixed with rich details and fine materials are the hallmarks of Shafar's designs; he credits his unique aesthetic to dividing his time between the UAE and New Zealand: "Not being exposed continually to the local scene helps me

from becoming too regional-oriented, and opens up an international scheme in terms of design. And being only partially based in New Zealand, my interest in preserving my culture isn't eliminated. It creates an internal fight within me." And it's a fight that clearly manifests in his objects; you certainly see the influence of Emirati culture, yet there's nothing traditional about them.

"I think that living in more than one city helps me in merging different styles, and bringing forth a certain uniqueness. And that's a message I want to share with my fellow local designers: We need to act locally, but aim internationally. My brand is called Khalid Shafar for a reason; I want this name to have a global presence. I want to be the next Tom Ford. Admittedly, he's from a different industry, but as a story of a marketing genius and how he built his brand... it's very inspirational."

Shafar recently returned from Japan after launching his 2012 collection at Tokyo Designers Week (where he was representing the UAE), and is now hosting a solo exhibition entitled *Inspirationalists* at The Pavilion Downtown Dubai. It seems like the ambitious young designer's aspirations may just be coming true. **10**

