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Khalid Shafar: Dubai's home-grown design star
Marco Piva's tribute to Italian craftsmanship*
Wooden wonders: rediscovering blonde's charm
LED by light: ultimate illumination for all moods

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Made in Dubai

Emirati design pioneer and advocate Khalid Shafar reveals how he is making waves around the world – and in Dubai.

TEXT: JOANNE MOLINA



PHOTO BY FAROOD SALIK



Illusion air chair



Arabi space divider



Puzzle rug

With his inimitable ability to blend UAE culture and craftsmanship with contemporary design, Dubai-born Khalid Shafar has forged a global reputation. Highly sought-after by top design brands and industry professionals, he is committed to thoughtful designs, including his energetic new installations that will create important dialogues about the future of design during art, design and cultural events in Dubai and Abu Dhabi this October.

Shafar trained at the American University in Dubai in business; and then furniture and object design, first at Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design in London and the Centre for Fine Woodworking in New Zealand – providing a diverse background that is an invaluable asset. Since his first solo collection launched in 2011, his design savvy has led to collaborations with the Campana Brothers, French cabinetmaker Moissonnier, and Kartell.

Shafar's design philosophy is rooted in material culture. "Simple lines mixed with rich details and fine materials are the hallmarks of my objects," he explains. "It's a revival of the '50s, '60s, and '70s avant-garde sleek styling re-interpreted with today's furnishing trends. I believe it's the 'tale' that is the aesthetic side of each object. Whether you belong to the tale or not, you still react to it."

He is deeply committed to an international design culture. "Design should be universal and versatile [rather] than tied to a particular culture or ethnic background. It should appeal to a wider audience and adapt to different spaces and tastes. But, designs that evoke certain cultures gain the interest and attention of certain clients and the recognition and exposure of global design. There are more sensitivities and constraints [that] a designer should consider when designing for the Middle East [when compared to] other regions – notably cultural, political or religious aspects," he reflects.

'The Nomad', Shafar's overwhelmingly popular – and extended – interactive public exhibition at London's Chelsea College of Arts as part of the Shubbak festival will be revealed in Dubai at d3 during Design Week. Inspired by a collaboration with the American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC), "the concept brings historical architecture and the traditional material of arish (palm fronds), rethinking it into a format for the 21st Century – a 'reappropriation' as it were. It's made from my preferred material, wood (African Teak)," Shafar explains.

The result was phenomenal. "It made strangers get closer in enclosures, removed all communication barriers and opened a space for interaction and



Fragrant candle by Shafar

The *Trap* bookshelfThe *Palm* coat stand

connection. It carries a social message for architecture in the UAE, exploring how old methodologies and architectural components can be re-purposed to fit our current lifestyle."

But his heart is always in the UAE. "Culturally inspired yet contemporarily presented, my design approach revolves around defining some UAE design aesthetics and attributes. I think the *Illusion* line illustrates how Dubai can be seen in my objects. It was inspired by my love of city life: the buzz, the vibrancy, the many cultures; a tribute to my yearning for city life. The *Illusion* stool for me is my Dubai," he explains.

His favourite line is *The Palm*, first introduced in his 2012 collection and still evolving. "It gained international recognition and has become a signature for my brand. Another line is *Arabi*, made using unconventional material, the egal that men in the Arab region traditionally wear on top of their head covers."

Refreshingly, Shafar is a committed ambassador for the region's design scene, mentoring young UAE creative entrepreneurs as part of the ADMAF/British Council initiative, The Cultural Excellence Fellowship. "My advice to aspiring designers is to think global and act global. Two things will make you stand out in

the crowd: the quality of your work, and the benchmark and position you set for yourself and your brand."

His thoughts on the future of design Dubai are bright: "Dubai is leading the fast movement in this part of the world. Internationally, the debate between technology integration in design and design materiality and the 'making culture' will continue and evolve, creating a new breed of hybrid design."

His forthcoming exhibitions include a new installation in collaboration (for the second time) with the American Hardwood Exports Council for Downtown Design; and during Design Week he will present a ground-breaking interdisciplinary exhibition.

Shafar explains the concept: "A group of good friends and pioneering designers from different creative disciplines will introduce a new flavour in Ras Al Khaymah, at my showcase space KASA and its surrounds. We will create thematic presentations that address a milestone and key environmental platform in Dubai. Each will present a project exploring this theme – from architecture and product design, fashion and jewellery, to food and taste."

We can't wait for him to lead the way. 📸