

# Q U I N T E S S E N T I A L L Y

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AIN'T NO MOUNTAIN HIGH ENOUGH · BLURRED LINES · VIVA LAS VEGAS  
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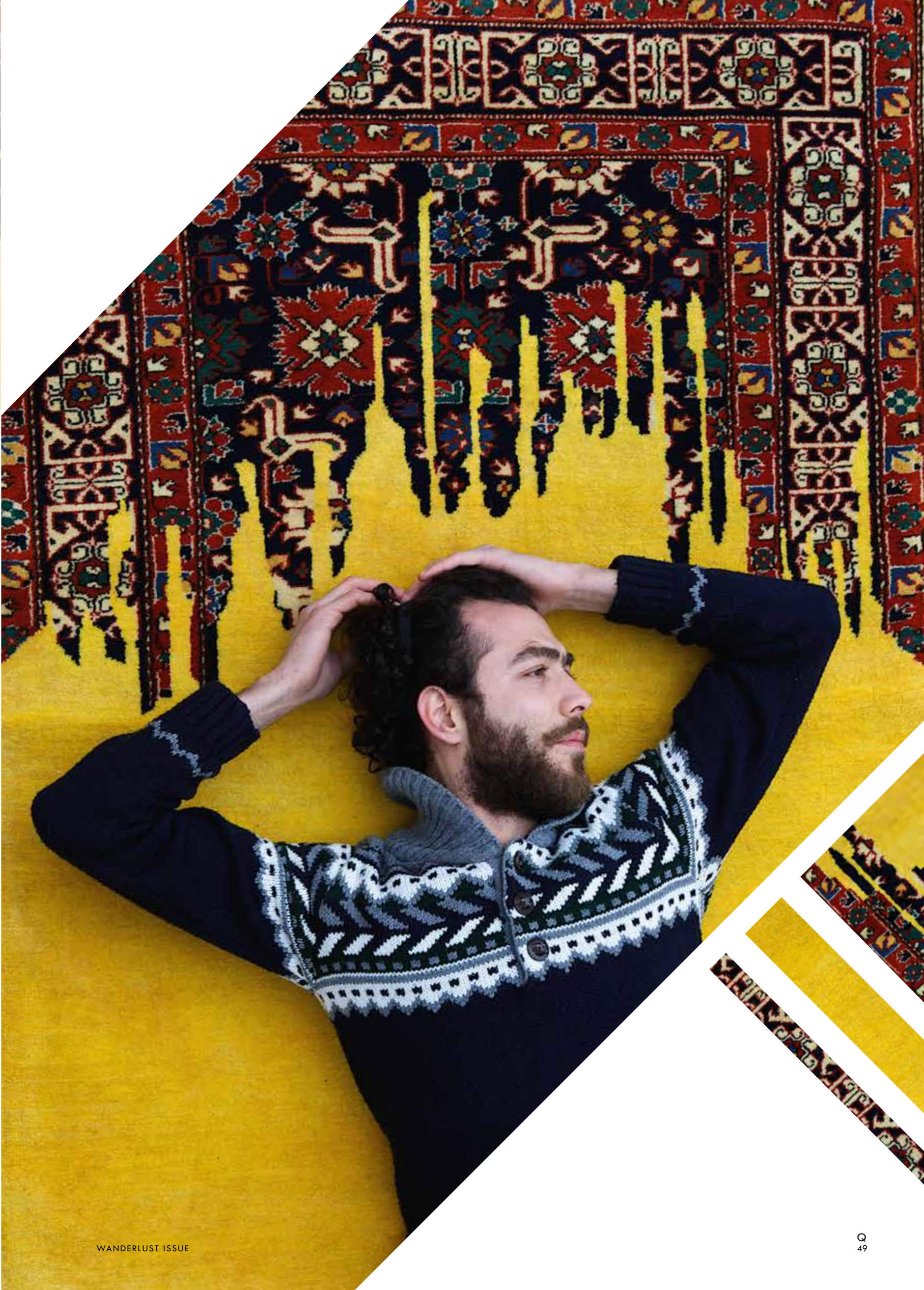




# PATRICIA LIFE'S TREN

THE IRREPRESSIBLE RISE OF THE BIG ART AND DESIGN FAIRS HAS BEEN A BOON FOR THOSE MAKERS AND COLLECTORS, BUT FOR THOSE KEEN TO SEEK OUT NEW TALENT, A MORE CREATIVE APPROACH IN LESS OBVIOUSLY ACCESSIBLE MARKETS HOLDS REAL TREASURES FOR THOSE WHO KNOW WHERE TO LOOK

written by ROB ALDERSON





## IN THE MIDDLE EAST, CONTEMPORARY DESIGNERS ARE REDEFINING THE REGION'S CULTURAL PROFILE, FUSING ARABIC AESTHETIC TRADITION AND CUTTING-EDGE CREATIVE THINKING

In many ways, the rise of the big art and design fairs has been a very positive thing for makers and collectors alike. But as these events become big business, curators may also take fewer risks, and so the same names are offered the same platforms from Milan to Miami. This is great for those chosen few, but it's not so great for collectors who are interested in seeking out new talents and their wares. This requires a more creative approach and a willingness to explore markets that may seem less immediately penetrable, but which hold real treasures for those who know where to look.

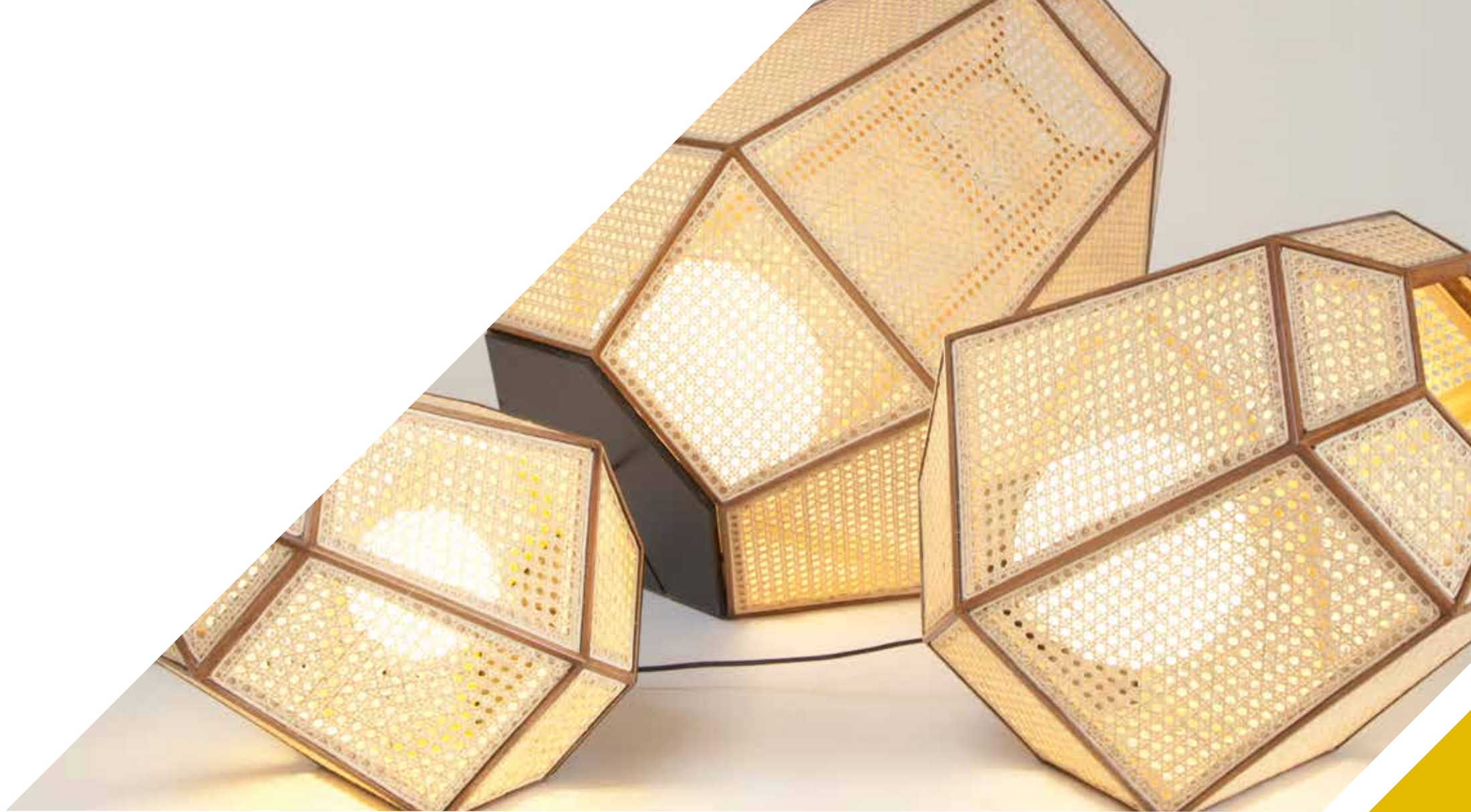
One of these energising and exciting scenes can be found in the Middle East, where contemporary designers are redefining the region's cultural profile, by fusing Arabic aesthetic tradition and cutting-edge creative thinking. Interestingly, a similar movement in food – spearheaded by chef Yotam Ottolenghi – has seen a new global appreciation of Middle Eastern cuisine, so the region's visual artists and high-end designers are following in some talented footsteps. It also seems fitting that new platforms are springing up to showcase this increasingly interesting movement – Wallpaper\* magazine has curated two Middle East Revealed exhibitions in the past year, while the inaugural Dubai Design Week held in October 2015 put a big emphasis on celebrating the diverse creatives who are changing the way we see Middle Eastern design.

Dubai is an obvious place for a new fair of this kind, given the amount of excellent work coming out of the Emirati country at the moment. In Khalid Shafar, they have one of the region's most intriguing talents – an interior design star who left his original career in marketing to pursue his passion for making furniture and products that have both style and personality. His inspirations are eclectic and elegant – so in his Illusion Stool he uses Danish weaving techniques to evoke Dubai's night-time energy, while his marble Octa Shelf merges Art Deco and Bauhaus themes with the octagon, which recurs frequently in Islamic patterns. Similarly, Dubai-based multidisciplinary designer Aljoud Lootah creates a dialogue between past and present, by "mixing traditional silhouettes and concepts with modern elements." Her influences too are wide-ranging, from traditional Emirati craftsmanship to the Japanese art of origami (as in her striking Oru series of chairs and cabinets).

Lebanon is another country where the design scene is really thriving, so much so that Dubai Design Week is dedicating an entire show to celebrating Brilliant Beirut. Designers such as Nayef Francis – whose Weaved Lamp of beech wood and wicker somehow feels

both very modern and slightly nostalgic – is among those leading the way. The rest of the world seems to be cottoning on that something interesting is happening down on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean. Marc Dibeh was named one of the breakout stars of the 2013 DesignMiami/ show for his Wires series of lamps, and his stock has continued to rise, thanks to his ability to imbue his pieces with beguiling narrative threads and his impressive versatility. Similarly David/Nicolas – the studio of David Raffoul and Nicolas Moussallem – has won an increasing army of admirers in recent years, thanks in no small part to their stellar turn at the 2014 Milan Salone where their Chaise Maurice chairs brought together earthy copper accents with vintage-looking upholstery. The series, like much of their work, was designed to reflect the mix of backgrounds, religions and cultures that make up modern-day Lebanon.

This mix of cultures seems to define the work of many of the Middle East's brightest new stars. Dana Awartani is a half-Palestinian, half-Saudi Arabian artist who studied at London's Central Saint Martins. Now back living in Jeddah, she says her work is inspired "by traditional Saudi Arabian patterns and motifs to explore the cultural role of the Arab world in today's globalised society."



PREVIOUS PAGE:  
Faig Ahmed pictured with his work 'Flood of Yellow Weight', a handmade woollen carpet, 2007. Image courtesy of Faig Ahmed Studio

THIS PAGE, LEFT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Aljoud Lootah, Oru Series, Cabinet, 2015. Nayef Francis, Woven Lamps, 2015

NEXT PAGE, TOP AND BOTTOM: Dana Awartani, Progressional Drawing #6, gel pen and coloured pencil on paper, 2013. Khalid Shafar, Illusion Stool, 2010



From her gorgeous geometric paintings and drawings to her sumptuous ceramics, Dana's work is exhilarating because it not only celebrates the aesthetic heritage of Arabic art, but uses it to ask questions about our relationship with this complex region.

Faig Ahmed provokes similar discussions through his extraordinary carpets. Based in Baku, Azerbaijan, Ahmed takes huge, intricately beautiful Azerbaijani rugs and reweaves them in all manner of eye-popping ways – some appear to be melting while others look like they have been pixelated or warped by a computer screen. It's a fun way of exploring some pretty serious questions about identity and artistic heritage.

In fact, this is a common thread to be found among this super-talented generation of Middle Eastern designers. Their work manages to engage with some of the important debates taking place within the region, but their pieces are also stylish, elegant and exciting. The secret seems to be nearly out, so savvy collectors shouldn't waste any time exploring this Eastern promise. ©



**THE GALLERISTS TO GO TO FIRST**  
*Carwan.* Beirut Carwan was founded by two French architects in 2010 and claims to be the first contemporary design gallery in the Middle East. Its curators combine their unerring eye for local talent with excellent international contacts.  
*Tashkeel.* Dubai Tashkeel is a contemporary arts organisation with a particularly strong design bent. With studio space, creative residencies and an impeccable exhibition programme, it's a great place to discover the high-end design stars of tomorrow.  
*Smogallery.* Beirut Another Lebanese treasure, Gregory Gatsereia's Smogallery excels in curating shows that blur the boundaries between art and design. Focusing on unique works and limited-edition pieces, it explores the form-and-function dynamic with real style.  
*Gallery Design.* Riyadh An interesting space in the Saudi capital, Gallery Design is predominantly a luxury interior design showroom. However, it features collections by many of the region's best practitioners and holds exhibitions of their work.

THERE IS A COMMON THREAD TO BE FOUND: **THESE DESIGNERS' WORK ENGAGES WITH DEBATE WHILE ALSO BEING STYLISH, ELEGANT AND EXCITING**

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