

A pull-out 'vintage' Abu Dhabi travel poster w8

weekend



Khalid
Shafar's
exhibition
marries Islam
and design w7

Sarah Dea / The National

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Designs to show change

Selina Denman visits a new exhibition co-curated by the Emirati designer Khalid Shafar that puts Islam into a contemporary context

"You will love this exhibition, I promise," says Khalid Shafar, via email. The Emirati designer is not prone to overstatement – in conversation or, indeed, in his work – so this isn't to be taken lightly. If Shafar says that I'll love the new *Islamopolitan* exhibition, the chances are that he's right.

Which is how I find myself braving Sharjah traffic during rush hour on a Wednesday afternoon. *Islamopolitan* is being presented at the Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah's Al Qasba, and is co-curated by Shafar and the centre's manager, Giuseppe Moscatello. Its aim, simply put, is to spearhead "a proposed conversation between Islam and design". The title of the exhibition, a compound of the words "Islam" and "cosmopolitan", captures the spirit of the exercise – according to the nifty black-and-white catalogue that I pick up on my way in, it "connotes multiculturalism and diversity but also contextualism".

Emerging and established local, regional and international designers and artists were invited to present objects that explore the relationship between Islam and design, both in terms of aesthetics and meaning. It's a bold undertaking – and sensitivity was required. The intention was to encourage debate, while remaining respectful of the religion. And so the focus becomes less on the faith itself, and more on the symbols, architecture, design motifs, rituals and preconceptions surrounding Islam.

"We wanted to present something that would not be offensive in any way, but at the same time was open. This is in keeping with Sharjah's vision – we are holding this exhibition as a celebration of Sharjah being Islamic Culture Capital for 2014," says Shafar.

"It's difficult to define the boundaries, sometimes," Moscatello concedes. "But the fact that Khalid is from the UAE and I have lived here for seven years means that we could define what those boundaries were. And sometimes, those kind of limits can help you to develop a better pro-

ject. Ultimately, we wanted to challenge and trigger the creativity of the designers, especially those based locally, and to see how far they could go with their ideas."

The exhibition is divided into three sections – Practise, Construction and Etiquette. There are 25 pieces on show, by 23 designers, from 12 countries; not all are Arab and, crucially, not all are Muslim. Some were existing pieces, but more than half of the exhibits were created specifically for *Islamopolitan*. And when Shafar and Moscatello say design, they mean it in the very broadest sense of the word – there are chairs, chandeliers, ceramic tiles and wall hangings on show, but also video installations, items of clothing and even a ring by the jewellery designer Nadine Kanso.

Some pieces are extremely personal: Jamal Tayara-Baroudy's *Stitching Paradise*, for example, which sees the artist offer up her interpretation of paradise – a beautifully intricate digital print of a garden, encircled by Suzani-style embroidery. Some are inherently practical, such as Soner Ozenc's *EL* [electro luminescent] *Sajjadah*, an illuminating prayer mat for a new, technology-enabled era. The mat (a prototype of which is to be found at the Museum of Modern Art in New York) is fitted with GPS technology and features a vector drawing of a mosque that lights up when the mat is positioned to directly face Mecca. Farewell, compass.

And some pieces are utterly breathtaking. There's a mesmerising black-and-white self-portrait of the photographer Hazem Mahdy, who is pictured head on, prostrate in prayer, as light falls in stark geometric patterns across the bare skin of his back, head, shoulders and arms. This is coupled with *Amal's Chair* by Sarah Al Agroobi, a sculptural rocking chair that would be remarkable even just for its striking form – but is actually designed to aid the ritual of praying, helping those that are not physically capable of prostration, such as Al Agroobi's late grandmother, Amal, who was the inspiration for the piece.



A selection of the pieces that are on display at the Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah as part of the *Islamopolitan* exhibition. They include, above, at the rear of the image, *The Predicament*, comprising rows of robotic hands on a white background that snap into motion as visitors approach. Photos by Sarah Dea / The National



I'm also struck by *Shababeek Makkah*, which sees the Saudi designer Saddek Wassil spell out the word Mecca using old windows sourced from houses surrounding the Holy Mosque. It's a poignant comment on the need to preserve both the old and the new.

Some of the objects and installations are clear in their intent; others take a little longer to offer their meaning. In a black box in the centre of the space, seven concentric neon circles light up in succession, gradually decreasing in size. The circles represent the movement of pilgrims around the Kaaba in Mec-

ca but also, in the designer Abdul Aziz Al Harbi's mind, the journey from non-belief to true faith. Elsewhere, a bold, oversized chandelier installation, consisting of eight horizontal tiers, represents the eight plants most commonly mentioned in the Quran – jasmine, olive, pomegranate, basil flower, fig, grape, henna and dates. Each of the deep red tiers is adorned with letters, shapes and patterns that relate to the plants, to striking effect.

There's also dialogue between many of the items. A blown-up photograph presents one of the world's more unusual prayer "rooms" – on-board a Saudi Arabian Airlines airplane – by the UAE artist Ammar Al Attar. In front of this are two mannequins wearing Azra Aksamija's *Nomadic Mosque*, a seemingly run-of-the-mill suit that, when unzipped at the legs, extends outward to become the most portable of prayer mats. The idea of a piece of clothing acting as a religious device is intended to examine the issues of integration and alienation, particularly when it comes to Muslims in the West, and the challenges of practising the religion in a context that isn't always conducive to its rituals.

Item 21, *The Predicament*, is sure to attract plenty of attention. Rows of robotic hands set against a stark white background snap into motion as you approach. They grab, clench and fold in on themselves, in mesmerising synchronicity. The piece is intended as a starkly modern, mechanised comment on the age-old Islamic penalty system known as *qisas*, and the controversial question of how criminals should be expected to atone for their acts. But it's also a wry nod to the still commonly-held belief by many outside the region that if you steal something in the Arab world, you can expect to have your hand chopped off.

Far gentler but no less powerful is the *Flower Bomb*, a small black circular vase that is shaped like a bomb but topped with a bunch of tiny white flowers. On closer inspection, you'll discover that the vase is composed of four inter-linked Arabic letters, which spell out the word *salam*, peace. Again, it's an invitation to question commonly held preconceptions about Islam.

As a whole, *Islamopolitan* is sensitive but probing; respectful but thought-provoking. It's informative but also, in many instances, playful; each object has its own merits and

demands attention. The aim now is to present the pieces in other locations, both regionally and internationally, say Shafar and Moscatello, to share "a different kind of Islamic exhibition" with the world.

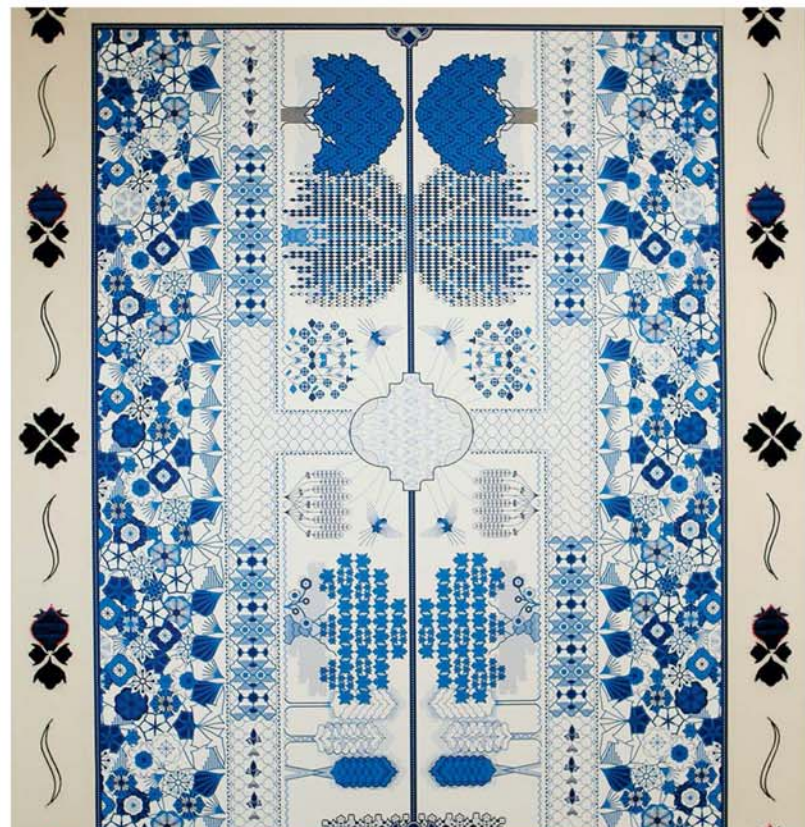
Shafar is right. I do love it. Lofty as it may sound, it's a reminder of what design, at its best, can do: educate and entertain, but also challenge opinions and, potentially, change minds.

● *Islamopolitan* runs until August 23 at the Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah.

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Left to right, the Emirati designer Khalid Shafar and Giuseppe Moscatello, the manager of the Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah, who are the co-curators of the *Islamopolitan* exhibition. The pair see it as 'a different kind of Islamic exhibition'.



Jamal Tayara-Baroudy's *Stitching Paradise* is one of the works in the exhibition.