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weekend



An Emirati designer who is bringing local flavour mainstream w7



Sarah Dea / The National

design

Past is perfect for now

Selina Denman talks with **Khalid Shafar**, an Emirati designer whose quirky creations are inspired by local culture

Khalid Shafar vividly remembers the Indian merchants that used to pass through his neighbourhood when he was a young boy. Carrying oversized sacks filled with fabrics, toys and any number of other treasures, the merchants would roam around Dubai, announcing their arrival with cries of 'lelam, lelam', the Malayalam word for auction. On hearing these cries, housewives would rush to their doors to see what new treats were on offer.

"I used to hear them and I used to see my mum and my neighbours sitting with them," Shafar, who is now 32, recalls. "You don't see them anymore but the story is still well known. Any local person will remember."

Years later, this simple childhood memory became the inspiration for Shafar's Auction coffee table, one of five pieces that make up the Emirati designer's latest collection. The table consists of a large, sack-shaped fabric base, a homage to the hoddalls carried by those memorable merchants, topped with a simple slab of Travertine marble. The beauty of the design lies in the fact that the sack can be untied and has a hollow interior that acts a secret storage area.

Auction is a perfect example of Shafar's attempts to create a new brand of "contemporary Emirati design". His aim is to take local stories, elements and materials

and create designs that are modern and unique, rather than "ethnic" or overly "oriental".

"My pieces are not traditional, classical, Emirati heritage ones. They still have those original stories but they fit in any interior space. They don't only fit in the Emirati house; they fit in any house, in any culture. I want them to appeal to everyone. If I see that a piece will fit anywhere, for me it's a success," he says.

For Shafar, it's all about telling stories. Hence The Trap, one of the other standout pieces from the 2013 collection, which is inspired by the contraptions used by local fishermen. A sliding bookshelf is housed within a dome-shaped "trap" made of interwoven wire mesh and can only be accessed when it is pulled out through an opening in the side of the dome.

Fallen Palm is a bench inspired by the ubiquitous palm tree, with a seat made from goat's hair that has been sourced from a local tannery. In keeping with Shafar's seeming obsession with multi-functionality, the bench features two hidden drawers, and its wooden protrusions can be used to stack magazines. The Lazy Folds daybed and sofa is made using a pure cotton stuffing that was a standard feature in old Emirati homes, and the Flip lounge chair has a back that can be flipped around depending on whether you want to sit normally or in the traditional, cross-legged style. The collection is tied together by the repeated use of ash wood and the colour black.

The pieces were unveiled in late November, to coincide with the opening of KASA, Shafar's new showroom in Dubai's Ras Al Khor district. A little slice of calm in the heart of one of Dubai's oldest industrial estates, KASA, with its stripped back concrete floors and ceilings and minimal decorative features, is cool, no-nonsense and quintessentially Shafar. It's something of an anomaly in a neighbourhood filled with grubby warehouses, dusty roads and tooting lorries, but Shafar has high hopes for his chosen location.

"I have an attachment to the area because my family's construction business is located here so I've been coming here since I was a child. And my workshop is here, so for me it makes sense to produce, design and display in the same place.

"Also, I have a vision for this area. Five years ago, Al Quoz was all factories, labour camps and warehouses; now it is the art district of Dubai. So why couldn't Ras Al Khor become Dubai's new design district? People think it's a bit far away from the city but in fact, it's in the heart. And designers and artists like to be surrounded by that industrial, urban feel. If it will happen or not, I don't know. But if it does happen, it'll be an honour for me to have been one of the first to move here. I'm sure when the first gallery opened in Al Quoz, it was a very courageous thing to do."

While Shafar is eager to imagine a time when Ras Al Khor is a thriving design hub, he accepts that there is still not enough design being produced in the UAE. His standing as



Khalid Shafar, top, demonstrates The Trap bookshelf in KASA, his studio located in Ras Al Khor in Dubai. Above left, also in Shafar's studio, Fallen Palm bench and, above right, Auction coffee tables. All pieces were inspired by Shafar's life growing up in the UAE. Sarah Dea / The National

There has also been the view, culturally, that decoration and interior design was mainly a female [pursuit]. But I do think the country is becoming more and more open to these things

Khalid Shafar

one of the first – if not the only – professional, full-time Emirati furniture designers is testament to this.

While there is local talent to be found, a lack of educational opportunities, along with certain cultural issues, are obstacles for local furniture designers, he says.

"We don't have proper product design and industrial design courses. Interior design is very different to product design – you need to look at joints, you need to look at weight, you need to look at dimensions."

There is also a tendency to view work that involves using your hands as an inferior undertaking, says Shafar, and a lack of understanding when it comes to what furniture design actually entails. "When I first started, everyone was calling me a carpenter," Shafar recalls. "There has also been the view, culturally, that decoration and interior design was mainly a female [pursuit]. But I do think the country is becoming more and more open to these things."

"There is also an issue with the infrastructure, in terms of the manufacturing chain, suppliers and factories. It is very challenging for people

to prototype a new idea; it is very expensive for an emerging talent. Factories don't give seriousness to this issue because they don't see the commercial value. So people sometimes give up quickly."

Had he embarked on a design career straight out of school, he too may have been put off by such obstacles, Shafar admits. However, although he always had an interest in design – and as a child "preferred drawing lessons to football" – he ended up doing a degree in management and went on to work with large corporations such as Dubai Holding.

He did, however, do a diploma in interior design in his spare time and always planned to set up his own design house. And when the economic crisis hit in 2009 and the company he was working for started restructuring, he realised that it might be the right time to take his leave. He enrolled in a woodworking and furniture course in New Zealand and literally started carving a new career path for himself.

The move has certainly paid dividends. Shafar's first collection was unveiled in November 2011 and

generated a lot of interest. Having launched his second collection and the KASA concept at the end of last year, he is now working on a number of new projects for this year's edition of Design Days Dubai, which is taking place from March 18 to 21.

One of these is a collaboration with the French company, Moissonnier, which has given Shafar free rein to redesign one of its most iconic pieces, a traditional commode that Shafar says he has taken to a "new extreme". He is also designing a collection of three rugs for the Hong Kong-based carpet and rug company, Tai Ping and, as with last year, will be creating a new piece for the Beirut-headquartered Carwan Gallery.

He was also selected to take part in the inaugural Design Road Professional, an initiative organised by the Dubai Culture & Arts Authority, in association with Tashkeel and the Creative Dialogue Association (CDA), a private independent and not-for-profit organisation based in Barcelona. With the aim of encouraging intercultural dialogue and creative exchange between

local and international designers, the initiative included trips to London and Barcelona, where Shafar attended design festivals and workshops and met with industry stakeholders. He is in the process of designing a piece inspired by the experience which will also be showcased at Design Days Dubai.

As if that weren't enough to keep him busy, he is creating an installation for the new Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah, which is scheduled to be unveiled ahead of the Sharjah Biennial in March, is helping to design a new contemporary, home-grown cafe concept, and has already starting planning his 2014 collection.

Ask him about the future and Shafar has three words: New York and Milan. "I want to be in those cities, somehow. How is not yet clear."

"The challenge is for us to compete with international designers, expose our culture on an international stage and tell them, 'We have something here. It's not just about the glamour of the structure of our buildings – it's also about what's inside those buildings'."

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