

Design FOCUS

BUILDING A BETTER TOMORROW

Ten formidable female creatives revealed their remarkable installations at **Dubai Design Week's** eighth season, evoking environmental empathy and challenging design thinking

Words by **AISHA ZAMAN**

As the region's largest creative festival, Dubai Design Week reflects the city's position as Middle East's design capital. The installation programme, entitled 'Design with Impact', featured regional and international artists creating a series of immersive public works. Mette Degn-Christensen, Director of Downtown Design, explained, "This year, we set a precedent for Dubai's ever-growing design and architecture community. Drawing on contemporary designs with industry leaders, the methods and materials used in the installations hope to illustrate various ways in which design can have a positive impact on the environment." dubaidesignweek.ae

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The Solar installation draws attention to the star which is our planet's life force; the sun

SHELL HOMAGE

Centre of the universe

Shell Homage is a global award-winning sustainable brand, providing biodegradable composite materials and products. It was founded by the integrated Egyptian designer Rania Elkalla, who has a background in product and graphic design, as well as experience in material science and production. The Solar installation signified the importance of the sun as a main source of energy and as the centre of the universe. The fascinating circular products depicted the planets in the solar system in veritable multi-coloured shades, emphasising the variety in each planet's characteristics, textures and hues. The designer intended the installation to serve as reminder to cherish the earth, appreciate the abundant natural resources and to carefully ponder the utility of the things we consider as waste. Solar aimed to highlight the issue of climate change, acting as an alarm to be mindful and have appreciation for the planet. The work is

constructed out of Shell Homage's innovative biodegradable material; composed entirely of egg and nutshells. The shells are collected, sterilised, dried and then ground down. This material is then bonded with organic and biodegradable substances. The resulting material is similar in texture to stone or ceramic and can be drilled, sanded or laser-cut. Some of it is mixed with natural colours extracted from food ingredients. The result is that each piece produced by Shell Homage is handcrafted, unique and 100 per cent compostable. The beautiful material looks like marble or natural stone but is made out of food waste. It can be used as a replacement for oil-based plastics and has various applications such as in interior, furniture, light design, home accessories, consumable goods, 3D-printing and jewellery design. "As designers of the future, we should educate, co-create and motivate around finding solutions towards sustainable developments," Rania insists. "Design nowadays is much more than shaping. We have to consider the whole product life cycle. The main aim is to embrace our resources and give homage to their journey." ▶

NOURHAN RAHHAL

Power poses

With a background in interior design, and a 15-week Athath Fellowship (a public design programme in the UAE that focuses on developing design and fabrication skills), Lebanese designer Nourhan Rahhal delved into the field of furniture design. As a result of this fellowship the designer created 'VEE', a piece inspired by the research of sociologist Amy Cudd, who argues that posture and body language impact behaviour. Nourhan's design imitated 'power poses' with the intention to empower users to sit with confidence. VEE is a chair that replicates a proud powerful presence that allows one's natural strength to manifest through the carefully designed details. The piece aims to educate the user on the importance of posture and how it affects the mind and self-confidence, by allowing the user to experience a form of a power pose. It specifically aims to challenge the norm of how young females are taught to sit and almost curl up, when they should be able to comfortably stretch their bodies. As an interactive piece of furniture, it can be utilised experimentally to see individual comfortability with the piece's symbolism. "From previous observations and interactions of individuals with VEE, each person's interaction was unique and personal to how comfortable they felt using the details in the piece, to stretch and help extenuate the feeling of confidence and authority," expresses Nourhan. "I believe designers' attention towards the impact of their work on people and the environment, is growing. This is being done through a more conscious approach of considering how a space or piece of furniture impacts human behaviour and psychology."



The VEE chair's design is founded on power poses

AHED AL KATHIRI

Where is your home?

Ahed Al Kathiri, an emerging artist based in Dubai, living away from her home country of Yemen, uses her work to explore notions of belonging and home. Her installation, Home Dreaming, demonstrated a meaning of home that is constructed from within oneself, utilising memories that form an intimate connection to her grandmother's house in Yemen. Ahed used colourful patterned textiles and layered them into various forms of qamariyat, which are tinted arched glass windows used in Yemeni heritage architecture. They are not only used as decorative elements above windows, but their high positioning allows light to filter through while offering privacy to the inhabitants. Inspired by her grandmother sewing domestic objects from recycled fabric, Ahed recreated a joyful and intimate home environment, by building on a sustainable process to construct a setup outside of it. Using objects that reinforce and maintain the warmth of home creates a spectacular assemblage. She expresses, "Repurposing fabrics in my work is a way of sustaining a home within myself, a cherished reminder that a specific place becomes a home because of how we act within it and the ways in which we preserve and nourish it."



The Yemeni art of qamariyat inspires creative and original window decorations usually made of coloured glass and plaster

STUDIO NADA DEBS

Celebrating 20 years of crafted patterns

The eponymous brand run by Lebanese designer Nada Debs, hailed as one of the most influential women in contemporary design in the region, commemorated its 20th anniversary by showcasing an exquisite display at Dubai Design Week. For the exhibit Nada brought together several collectible pieces placed within a warm and inviting space that aimed to engage, entertain and educate. Her vision for the exhibition was for viewers to connect with the stories, energy, and emotions flowing from the handcrafted furniture and accessories, evoking a sense of nostalgia steeped in history and spirituality as a 'modern memory'. All the products, from the cane embroidery buffet table to the marquetry Mania Bowl and more, paid homage to her genius. Nada is

a true design doyenne in the region whose early recognition of the handcrafted and artisanal aesthetic, that has since riveted the design world, was prophetic. She has propelled numerous marginal rural workshops to international recognition by commissioning innovative products. "My vision has always been to change people's perception of local craft and design, presenting new techniques using age-old craft traditions to create objects with a soul," says Nada. Over the years, she has refined her art of product design with the help of a close-knit team of twenty and by working with craftsmen globally. She currently maintains an office and a retail store in Beirut, as well as a second base in Dubai. "As I celebrate two decades of Studio Nada Debs, I envision a future that is shaped by responsible luxury. Consumers are looking for meaning in all their purchases, and I aim to support marginal craft communities and preserve heritage, while producing high-end pieces of furniture and accessories." ▶

Pictured here, the striking Pebble table by Nada Debs is flexible and reformable, with adjustable lacquered tops



Qamariyat has many formations, both traditional and modern





The circular designs of the 'Grounded in Hope' installation also serve to enforce the idea of renewal and cyclical turnover

GROUNDING DESIGN

We owe everything to our planet

Grounded Design is a boutique interior design studio based in Dubai that specialises in residential, commercial and hospitality projects. Bani Singh, who was born in Iran and raised in Sweden, established the studio in 2017. She entered the design world through quite a non-traditional path. With a background in psychology, she integrates design that sparks emotion, offering the perfect balance between functionality, aesthetics and personality, in order to create authentic and sophisticated design. The Grounded in Hope installation emphasised the need for responsible architecture that promotes peace

and harmony on the planet. The immersive structure closely mimicked the silhouette of a tree. The natural colours and soft configuration of the fabric pavilion aimed to serve as a potent habitat for birds, animals and humans that seek shelter and protection. The usage of repurposed fabric further strengthened the environmentally conscious architectural messaging of the installation. It encourages the spectator to contemplate a move towards a future where architecture has a minimal environmental footprint, bringing peace and harmony to its occupants and the planet. Bani explains, "By rejuvenating materials creatively, responsible design can minimise environmental footprints and ensure a better life for future generations. The aim is to motivate the audience to connect with their roots and remind them that we as humans owe everything to the planet we live on".



Palm veneer is made up of pressed palm fibres

REEM JEGHEL

The narrative of nature

With sustainability in mind, Reem Jeghel, a Syrian product designer based in the UAE, introduced an innovative, biodegradable material called 'palm veneer' to Dubai Design Week. Palm veneer uses the agricultural waste of palm trees in the region. Fibrous parts of the palm trees are collected from around the UAE and pressed to create flat surfaces that have similar qualities to wood veneer. The veneer pieces are then arranged in a composition using wood marquetry techniques, in which the silhouette of the marquetry mimics the organic shapes of the fibrous palm leaves. Using local resources that are usually discarded every year in the country, this biodegradable product aims to reduce emission waste while supporting the local market by refining agricultural waste into products and interiors. This product taps into a new outlook on the narrative of nature in the region while celebrating the palm triptych. Reem states, "My next step is exploring new products that utilise this material. I hope to be one of the designers that are able to innovate and positively contribute to the sustainable design industry in the MENA region."



Innovative products with sustainable qualities were at the heart of Dubai Design Week 2022



The Suhail star is said to have been a reliable tool for navigation in ancient times, for sailors and travellers in the Arab world

REEM AL BUSTANI

Symbol of prosperity

Interior and product designer, Reem Al Bustani, is no stranger to Dubai Design Week, with her debut furniture and lighting collection receiving great fanfare at the 2020 edition. Nowadays, she largely focuses on lighting design, which aims to create a bridge between heritage and modernity. The latest series, Suhail Design, presented this year was inspired by the Suhail star and its importance and fame in the Arab world. Historically, this star signals the beginning of cooler days in the region. It is a symbol of prosperity, abundance, and favourable times. The immersive installation was inspired by the rhythmic sounds of waves rising and falling after the arrival of the Suhail, and the changing of seasons. This was depicted through the combined use of loop LED tube lights and the varying heights of the heads. Along with the lights, mirrored finish metal was also utilised. The gradient of the level of illumination and the choice of colours and their power, successfully highlighted the design in place and created a multisensory experience for the audience. Reem explains, "My design ethos is to create works that blend contemporary originality with heritage, which seamlessly shift between the old and the new by using artistic tools that convey the intended meaning to the audience. To offer an immersive experience that transports the spectator to the past through a contemporary setting." ▶

JASMIN WERNER

Buildings of status

German artist Jasmin Werner's first exhibit at Dubai Design Week, commissioned by the German embassy in The UAE and curated by the Goeth-Institut, celebrated 50 years of diplomatic relations between the UAE and Germany. With the installation 'Schloss der Republik Burj Khalifa', Jasmin explored architectural connections between Berlin and Dubai. The work was composed of five LED-illuminated aluminium sculptures reminiscent of construction scaffolds. Mimicking the rounded corners of Burj Khalifa in Dubai – the world's tallest building – the sculptures were covered with mesh. Normally used for advertisements or renderings of finished developments to hide the interim state of construction sites, the translucent mesh used in Jasmin's sculptures presented printed collages of the buildings' linked histories. Replacing the war-damaged remains of the original Berlin Palace, the Palace of the Republic was built to house the parliament. Steel girders from the demolished Palace of the Republic were sold to the UAE and recycled in the construction of the Burj Khalifa, a luxury skyscraper. In this way, Schloss der Republik Burj Khalifa linked these two buildings, combining both shapes into one scaffolding sculpture and illustrating how architectural history and materials can become migrating vessels of multiple, ideological narratives. Jasmin says, "What interests me is exploring architectures of power and objects of status. These include, transnational connections and structures of social life, economy and ideology as well as discovering stories that the objects carry and thus the associations we end up sharing culturally."



Jasmin's installation reflects a beautiful, physically intertwined history between two nations



Shamal is the dry and dusty wind blowing from the north-west over the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq and Iran

LISA MARA BATAACCHI

Emotional bonds: us and society

World-renowned Italian fashion school Polimoda debuted at Dubai Design Week by commissioning alumna, Lisa Mara Bataacchi. Lisa is a multidimensional artist with a background in fashion design. Her immersive art brings to light emotional bonds between individuals and society. This documents both a personal and a collective identity, in relation to local communities with their traditions, stories and ambitions as well as transnational issues. Recently, her field of interest has been the recovery of ancestral textile techniques, leading her to learn the art of tapestry from expert restorers and textile artisans. 'Shamal. Sand Stone Stars' draws inspiration from the ancient ruins of Zoroastrian architecture and the antique symbolism found along the Silk Road, to highlight the upheavals of nature and the tumultuous present day. 'Shamal' signifies sandstorms blowing from the north-west over the Arabian Peninsula. The sandstorms have swept away travellers, warriors, merchants and submerged temples, monasteries, minarets and entire civilisations. The precariousness of mankind is translated into the image of a sandstorm, but at the same time it is something from which humans can emerge with reflection and enlightenment. The exhibit exuded a mystical aura, offering the audience a chance to walk along the floating silk tapestry structures entitled 'Meditating on Earth' and 'The World Is So Far Reversed'. These were hand-woven by Lisa using raw and naturally dyed yarns, and vintage 1930s lacquer silks. Their irregular texture inspired by the sand continuously shifted its form, floating up and down. In an intimate way, the viewer observed the textiles and at the same time listened to 'Middle East Poems #1, #2, #3', by the pianist-composer, Stefano Maurizi. Lisa's installation aimed to highlight the importance of preservation of cultural exchange between various legacies, just as the ochre-coloured, irregularly textured tapestries inspired by the sand, continuously changed their form but not appearance. These works were reminiscent of archaeological finds, slow erosions, wars, climate change and globalisation. Lisa explains, "Shamal is my concept of an ideal city of the future, in which humans are connected through emotions."

Richly symbolic installations by Bokja invite one to ponder the far-reaching effects of climate change, and showcase the beauty which can be achieved by reuse



BOKJA

Let's talk about the weather

The Beirut-based design studio Bokja, founded by Huda Baroudi and Maria Hibri, crafts meaningful narratives through embroidery and textile to create products ranging from furniture to clothes. The name of the studio reflects the passion the two designers have for repurposing fabric; Bokja is a Turkish word describing a cherished piece of fabric used to wrap a woman's most precious possession – her dowry chest. Bokja's signature style is its assemblage aesthetic; collecting textile fragments of a time and place, fusing them together into poetic arrangements using materials and artisanal techniques, to create contemporary pieces. Huda shares, "The essence of Bokja since its inception has been about sustainability and environmental empathy. We started off by sourcing retro furniture in Beirut's antique markets and covering them with patchworks of old textiles and embroideries

from the Middle East and Central Asia. An organic process has been our ethos ever since we started in 2000." *Let's talk about the weather!* was a contemplative installation in the form of a boxing ring. The designers invited visitors to engage and answer challenging questions, on topics such as climate change, by entering the 'ring of life'. To personalise the experience, participants received strips of ribbon to write down urgent topics of their choice, both personal and universal. The only question to answer: "What anguish drives your anger?" In line with the brand's sustainability commitment, the installation used recycled shaver canvases and silk remnants reborn from the atelier floor, while Einstein's words, 'creativity is intelligence having fun' joyfully cloaked the installation. The exhibit evoked a playful and colourful mood that belied the underlying seriousness of the internal and global issues the world is facing. Maria explains, "We are drawn to the charm of the way things used to be, when people cherished time, embraced luxury and had a personal investment in their possessions. We believe that through the revival of our past, we are able to ensure a better tomorrow". ■