

ROCKING THE CASBAH

Meet the collective of designers from the Middle East who are the leading exhibitors at this month's London Design Biennale

Words by
DEVINDER BAINS

THE ARTISTS

Hamsa by Talia Mukmel

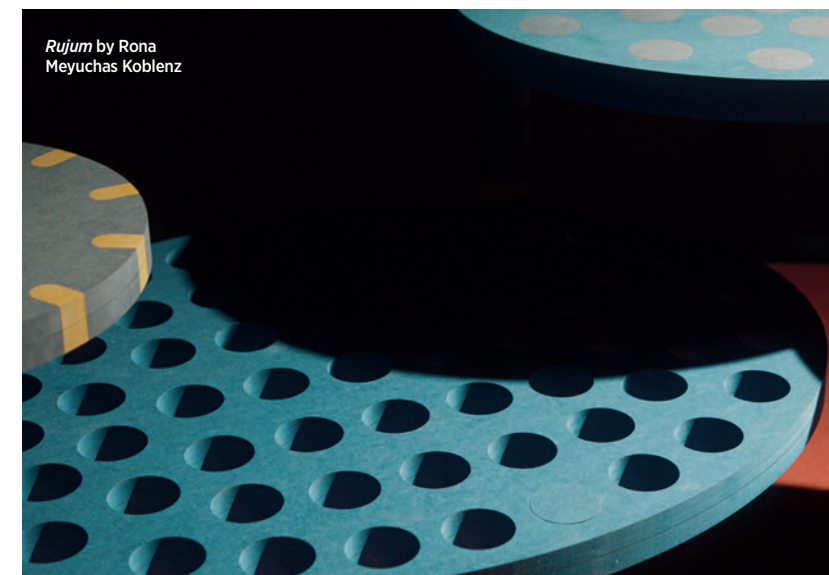
A group of artists that hail from Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Kuwait, Qatar and Palestine have come together to create a joint exhibition that will this month be showcased as one of three special projects at the London Design Biennale – the event will also feature 50 other pavilions from around the world.

The group project is titled *Stream of Consciousness* – a nod to working physically apart to produce their individual efforts for the joint venture, and uses the Casbah as a theme. The different pieces explore the precise geometry of the 'Old City', and how the Casbah and its associations with co-existence and harmony has contributed 'in shaping the Middle East region and its modern architecture'.

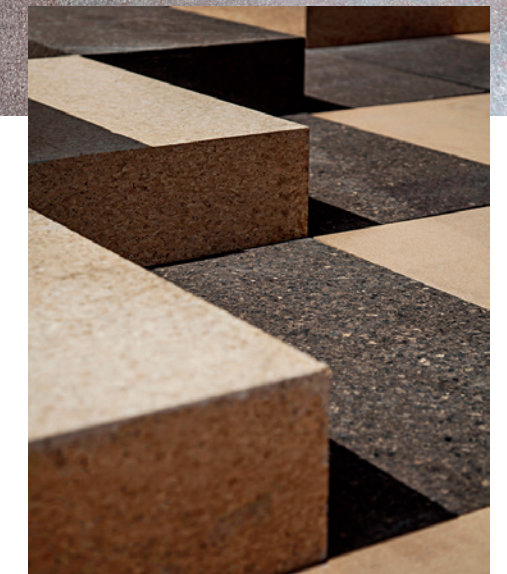
The idea to present a group exhibition is that of acclaimed designer and curator Rona Meyuchas Koblenz, who has submitted the collection under her platform Designers in the Middle (DITM), a concept that she had been toying with since 2009, and then set up in 2015 with fellow curator



La Famiglia by Rona Meyuchas Koblenz



Rujum by Rona Meyuchas Koblenz



“DESIGNERS IN THE MIDDLE IS COMMUNICATING DESIGN AND CRAFT AS A COMMON LANGUAGE TO STRENGTHEN COLLABORATIONS, CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND DIVERSITY”

Rona Meyuchas Koblenz



Da'irah by Kawther Al Safari

Suzanne Trocmé. The pair have since presented *Designers in the Middle* as a series of talks at The Design Museum London, The Victoria and Albert Museum, The Javits Centre in NYC, at Jerusalem Design Week and were invited by Zaha Hadid architects to talk about collaboration during the London Festival of Architecture at the Aga Khan Centre in 2019.

“Designers in the Middle came about as an idea when I moved to Israel after living for many years in London and Milan,” says Rona, who now resides in Tel Aviv. “It came from being curious towards Levantine design and culture, and from my own personal background and experience – longing to learn about the culture from my own home region; the Middle East.”

When Rona was commissioned to write a piece for a local design and architecture magazine, she used the opportunity to reach out to designers from across the region. “The article was never published but the research continued and my interest in design coming from the region grew,” she explains. “Designers in the Middle is communicating design and craft as a common language to strengthen collaborations, cultural development and diversity in the Middle East. What interests me is to bring out the person/designer and the storytelling behind the work.”

For Rona, 2015 then seemed like the perfect time to solidify the status of the platform. “That was an important year, *Middle East Revealed* – an exhibition curated by my partner Suzanne Trocmé with *Wallpaper* magazine was inaugurated, and Dubai Design Week was founded that year too – and so that’s when the global community paid attention to the rapidly developing creativity in the Middle East.”

Rona defines it as the time when regional designers finally started getting recognition globally after years of being blocked due to the associations between the Middle East and conflict. “Social media was, and still is, a great



Top and bottom: *Objetu Closer Together* by Milia Maroun



Rona Meyuchas
Koblenz believes social media put regional designers on the map



Knock Knock by Aisha Al Sowaidi

MEET THE TEAM

The artists working on the London Design Biennale project alongside Rona are spread across the Middle East. Below, she gives us a who’s who of those involved



Milia Maroun is a Lebanese fashion designer with her work crossing boundaries between art and fashion. She is known for her beautiful Kimabayas which are telling the silk route story.



Taher Asad Bakhtiari is a self-taught Iranian artist. In his work there’s a profound study of tribal traditions and cultures.



Aisha Al Sowaidi is a Qatari designer with designs that deal with memory, nostalgia and traces of time.



Talia Mukmel is an Israeli object designer and artist of Iraqi and Chilean origin. She is a third-generation member of a family of textile designers and producers, her work stands out for the material and philosophic research.



Kawther Al Saffar is a Kuwaiti designer, in her work she attempts to bridge the gap between art and design. She focuses on finding patterns for human intimacy and truth.



Nawal Araft is a multidisciplinary Palestinian designer and artist living in Israel, most of her work strives to make connections between different societies and encourages dialogue on political and cultural issues.



A matter of Life by Taher Asad Bakhtiari

channel to communicate the design from the region and I think it allowed that self-expression and level of exposure,” she explains. “Middle East designers are dynamic and they are not afraid to integrate experimentation and research in their work, and the use of different materials and appreciation of tradition and craft – so there is something very fresh about it.”

And it’s Rona’s passion for this regional talent that prompted her to invite six designers from across the Arab world to work with *Designers in the Middle* to produce the collection for the London Design Biennale’s theme of ‘Resonance’. But it was no mean feat as the designers were kept apart due to Covid-19 travel restrictions and also the Beirut explosion.

“The first time we met was in a Zoom meeting, and we have continued to work remotely,” says Rona. “The name of our pavilion is *The Stream of Consciousness*. It is organically shaped by flexible thinking – by tolerance and trust – it’s our design and curatorial process, a thread through which our nomadic storytelling is told.”

So how did Rona pick her designers? “It involved a lot of research and sometimes, what seemed to be right didn’t work with the collective group,” she explains. “At the end, it was my intuition that was stronger and which I trusted. The designers don’t know each other, each worked on a design without knowing what the others are doing. It was all tailor-made for the event.”

The collective have future plans to show the works in Dubai and Qatar and you can follow the journey and progress of all the works on Instagram at @designers_in_the_middle. ■

The London Design Biennale will run from 1st to 27th June. For more information about the collective and its other designers outside of this project, visit designersinthemiddle.com