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FURNISHING THE FUTURE

As Downtown Design opens in Dubai, fair director Rue Kothari discusses its importance in breaking creative barriers and bringing UAE designers into the global scene

Words by Devinder Bains

Rue Kothari has to be one of the busiest women in Dubai right now. As fair director of Downtown Design – the leading design fair in the Middle East and the anchor for Dubai Design Week, both descending on Dubai Design District (d3) this month – she has been on a seemingly relentless mission to bring the concept of design down from its pedestal since taking up her role in 2015.

And as well as its ongoing objective of swapping the elitism of the design industry for education and, ultimately, personal enjoyment, this year's Downtown Design is giving a platform to the burgeoning number of talented regional designers. "This is the first time such a large collection of regional talent has been curated under one roof," explains Rue. "A strong focus for the region is our mission as a fair, interlinked with my personal belief that it's crucial to support our homegrown designers: to nurture their growth and help them develop their creativity, so that they become commercially successful." Rue, who has lived in Dubai for 15 years, left a successful career as editor of one of the region's top interiors magazines to head up Downtown Design, and soon saw the birth of Dubai Design Week, which was launched three years ago to give context to the already blossoming fair. "Design Week was launched to inform, educate and entertain our visitors on the culture, innovation and creativity of the Middle East design scene," says Rue. "With the government investing in the creative economy, and with design as the key driver, events like Downtown Design and the wider Design Week are crucial in promoting awareness of our burgeoning design industry." Rue is proud of how much the fair has grown since its inception six years ago. "Last year we doubled in size.

This year, we've grown by 30 per cent, to incorporate 175 high-end international brands, three pavilions, six large-scale installations and 40 regional designers," she enthuses. The look and feel of the fair is getting an exciting overhaul for 2018, and even design novices will find plenty to connect with as they move around the exhibits. "We're so invested in the visitor experience that every year we hire an award-winning architect to masterplan the whole space. This year H+A has designed the venue on the theme of 'Liveable Cities' – with green spaces, natural light, flow and visibility. It sets our event apart on a global scale," Rue explains. "We've established a new blueprint and fresh creative direction that will transcend what we've done to date."

The earthy updates includes a giant landscaped garden, designed by local landscape architects, Desert Ink, bespoke cafés, pop-up retail and a Design Bar created by Bishop Design, winners of the Commercial Interior Design Interior Designer of the Year award. And there are some new aspects to the fair itself – most notably *Downtown Editions*, a showcase dedicated to bespoke and limited-edition design, and an element Rue is personally very excited to see. "This is our platform to promote individual designers, up-and-coming studios, design collectives and craft councils from around the world, with a strong focus on the region," she says.

Presenting local and regional designers to the global scene is intrinsic to Downtown Design 2018, which will see the 40 hand-picked Middle East designers sit alongside three design weeks: Amman, Beirut and Casablanca. "Ultimately, we'd love to say we'd launched the first crop of UAE design brands," says Rue.

With so much talent and creativity on show, what is her stand-out piece? "Do not miss Preciosa's *Breath of Light* installation. This won the Best of the Best Red Dot Award this year. It's a large-scale installation that is activated by your breath, and literally needs to be experienced to be believed."

Downtown Design will see around 36 female designers showcasing at the fair this year, and Rue has two particular names to look out for: "Vera Dieckmann is a powerhouse of creativity. The chandelier she has designed will be produced by Lasvit – and the quality of the idea, the originality of the piece and the sophistication of the design proves that she is one to watch on the design scene in Dubai."

Then there are furniture designers Newsha Dastaviz and Dana Al Matrook of The Line Concept: "They are smart, driven women who have seen a gap in the market and have run with it. They're creative, hardworking and humble – I can see them going from strength to strength – perhaps becoming one of the first established 'made in the UAE' design brands." When asked about the beginnings of her own love for design, Rue declares: "I've always been this way." She describes her response to design as "visceral", and tells us that, given the chance, she would go back to school and study to be an architect. With a particular penchant for grand, beautiful buildings, Rue says her obsession with structure also extends to her style. "I love clean lines with eccentric detailing and mostly black," she says. "It's a total reflection of my personality, which I express in what I wear and the pieces I buy for my home." *Downtown Design runs from November 13 to 16 at d3; Downtowndesign.com*

Photography: Borna Ahadi



Rue leads Downtown Design, the commercial centrepiece of Dubai Design Week, both taking place this month

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Rue Kothari



Vera has been carved out as a designer destined for global success

VERA DIECKMANN

Head of design and architecture,
Albal Design Studio

“The only thing I’ve always wanted to do is create beautiful things, even if nobody cares.” It’s the last line Vera Dieckmann says in her interview with us, but it’s the one that sums up everything the head of design and architecture at Albal Design Studio in d3 is about.

Vera’s passion for design appears infinite. She’s experienced 22 years of highs and lows in the industry, worked everywhere from New York and Switzerland to China and Italy and started

all over again, after losing her design studio in Germany in 2008 due to the economic crisis. But she’s never lost the devotion to design that she found at an early age. “My mother is an artist and I grew up between gouache and canvas,” remembers Vera. “So the decision to be a designer wasn’t ever very far away. When I was 10 years old, I saved my pocket money until I had enough to purchase the famous Wassily Chair by Marcel Breuer, and made my parents renovate my room exactly how I’d designed it.”

Vera’s long-lasting love of design comes to fruition this November, when she will be exhibiting her work at Downtown Design for the first time: adding another achievement to her already impressive CV. “I am a big fan of the fair, it reminds me a lot of the early beginnings of the Biennale Interieur design fair in Kortrijk, Belgium,” says Vera. “The last two years I’ve participated as a guest and visitor but this year it will be very different to see the event from the other side: as an exhibitor. It’s such a fantastic platform for regional talents to showcase their work: this interface of the manufacturing industry and the creative talents is unique.”

Vera will showcase a beautifully extravagant light installation called *Flow*, for which she taken the design lead on at Albal. “It’s inspired by the importance of water in the UAE,”



Flow light installation by Albal Design Studio in collaboration with Lasvit

she explains. “The ‘flow’ gives a new light experience – influenced by the reflection of the sun on the water’s surface. I created the initial design, and we executed it in cooperation with Czech glassmaking and design company Lasvit. We designed a floating morph installation combining different surfaces, structures and reflections. The shapes are organic: a reminder of soft shapes mirroring the water’s reflections, ripples and pebbles, while being combined in a layered way.”

And Vera admits she is fascinated by the UAE: its scenery and pace alike: “I’m inspired by the desert and the sea,” she says. “The surroundings and the contrast of urban life with the desert. Dubai is a very fast city. The work environment requests a lot from you, so it showed me to listen to my inner pace and believe in what I do. It’s inspiring.”

Vera counts American design duo Charles and Ray Eames as well as architect and furniture designer Eileen Gray as further inspirations: “I like the simplicity and modernism of their designs, the vision of their items and their braveness to create something so different, against the mainstream of

their time,” she says. “Eileen Gray was an incredible woman. She had a unique eye for proportion and shapes, her designs are still reflecting the spirit of our time, even if some are more than 80 years old.”

Vera, who is working on her own home accessories brand XO Atelier, to be launched later this year, also has a keen eye for sartorial style. “I sometimes design clothes for

myself and I always wear a ring out of my own collection,” she explains. “I love fashion, and think it’s the smaller sister of architecture. I can understand why so many good fashion designers started their career as architects.”

But for now her attention is firmly on Downtown Design, and the installation that has taken five months to complete from its initial conception. “It started in May, with a hand sketch which I shared

with the team at Lasvit while I visited the factory for another project.” says Vera. “They were keen on developing it further. We worked on my sketches while Lasvit started with the 3D render. It’s been a long and complex design project, and it really is worth checking out.”

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Dana (left) and Newsha have been picked to form part of Downtown Design's new showcase, *Downtown Editions*

NEWSHA DASTAVIZ AND DANA AL MATROOK

Designers and founders, The Line Concept

“We haven’t ever shown at the fair before,” says Newsha Dastaviz, one half of furniture design duo The Line Concept. “We have been so busy with projects and probably wouldn’t have exhibited had we not have been contacted by the fair and been given a push. But we’re very glad they pursued us, and are very excited to be part of the fair.” Newsha and her business partner Dana Al Matrook might be relative newcomers to the Dubai design scene but they’ve been big fans of the fair for years and know it’s the perfect partner to showcase their second capsule collection. “We love Downtown Design, we make time to visit every year and are always so excited to see the design landscape in Dubai develop so well,” says Dana. “We feel quite present in d3, as we designed a capsule collection of outdoor furniture called Modern Nomad for the beautiful leather brand Montroi’s boutique there, and we also produced a large

walk-through mirror installation for another client called Key Concept there last year. So this somehow feels like a natural progression.” “Downtown Design fosters an appreciation, interest, and opportunity for people to see how inspiring, refreshing and important interesting design is, regardless of how involved they are in design,” Newsha adds. “Also, it of course puts Dubai on the map globally for investing in showcasing both global and regional design. We are especially excited about the *Downtown Editions* showcase as a new concept within the fair this year. We are very passionate about fostering emerging talent present in the region.” And it is among the designers at *Downtown Editions* that the never-before-seen collection from The Line Concept will sit. The design studio, with its own production facilities in Al Quoz, is known for its bespoke, handcrafted pieces that fall

somewhere between the clean lines of Scandinavian design and the largely retro feel of the mid-century modern trend. Their work with timeless materials like woods and antiqued metals add an artistic edge. “We love working with solid woods, genuine marble and stone, brass and metals,” explains Dana. “We feel these materials complement each other so beautifully, even with the most minimalist of designs.” And the two women have experimented with these materials and more for the showcase at Downtown Design. “For our capsule collection, we spent a whole day off-site in a small room at our workshop sticking sketches, colours and inspirations from everything all over the walls,” says Swedish-Iranian Newsha, who has lived in Dubai for 10 years and is a mother of two. “We then narrowed down what we decided would be the themes for our collection, spent another whole day fine-tuning the materials to be used, and then produced samples of each of these materials.” Dana, a mother-of-three, who was born in Dubai but has lived in England, America and Germany, explains the next steps: “We then spent a few weeks designing and tweaking the different pieces for the collections. Once we were ready, we created mock-ups of each piece to study and fine-tune lines, details, production methods and structural integrity. We then began production of the final versions.” And once the show is complete, what’s next for the brand? “Our new capsule collection, and then we’ll see,” says Dana. “In terms of our grand plan, we would love people to think of us when they hear of Dubai, and say ‘oh, isn’t that where that brand The Line Concept is from?’”

Chairs and table designed by The Third Line



Photography: Borna Ahadi

DESIGN HIGHLIGHTS

If you’re heading to Downtown Design, running from November 13 to 16 at d3, mark these three exhibits as unmissable



PRECIOSA, BREATH OF LIGHT

Designed to make an audience literally catch its breath, this award-winning lighting installation includes a vast cluster of tiny bulbs that are activated by a single breath. Multiple activations of the light create a central thunderclap, and it must be seen to be believed.



DOWNTOWN EDITIONS

Making its debut at Downtown Design this year, *Downtown Editions* is a showcase of original limited-edition design objects, featuring the largest ever presentation of regional talent, six large-scale interactive installations and a landscaped indoor garden.



MARC ANGE, LE REFUGE

Alongside the world’s most coveted furniture and lighting brands, experience the ethereal beauty of award-winning designer Marc Ange’s iconic installation, which will be featured on the waterfront at Downtown Design.