



Beyond

THE FAÇADE

Emirati artist Asma Belhamar is leaving
her mark on the UAE

Words by Jessica Michault
Photographer: Amer Mohamad
Stylist: Beagy Zielinski
Make-up artist: Aida Glow
Jewellery: Chaumet

Asma wears a shimmering gold abaya,
sheila and under dress by Manaal
Hamadi; Her necklace is the *Bee My
Love* in rose gold, by **Chaumet**. The
background is the artist's own piece
titled *Studies for Reassessing The Motion*



Both pages: Asma wears a striking red blazer by Max Mara, her sheila is by Manaal Hammadi, her rings are from the *Bee My Love* collection from **Chaumet**. The frame is from the creative's own work titled *Visions on the Periphery*





Asma wears an abaya and sheila by Manaal Hammadi with the *Bee my Love* necklace in rose gold by **Chaumet**

Against a massive blank white wall images flicker in a darkened studio, taking up the entirety of one side of the room. First a photo of a beige canvas covered in abstract geometric shapes. Next a close-up of a deep brown sculpture covered in repeating angular three-dimensional indentations. Then a series of photos of whitewashed walls photographed against a bright blue sky, its decorative railings formed out of motifs that look both familiar and undefinable as they slop and undulate across the images. Before them stands Asma Belhamar, the artist who gave each piece life.

As she is photographed in front of her body of work for this cover shoot everyone on set quickly understands that this artist is in constant exploration. A woman that isn't tethered to a single medium, or avenue of artistic expression. An Emirati who proudly wants to examine the visual codes of her country and how the cultural melting pot of the UAE has brought to life cities that are a melange of beautiful touchpoints that, when combined, have created a uniquely new architectural narrative for her nation.

"Being a modern Emirati woman means honouring our heritage while actively shaping the future. It's about balancing tradition with progress and using our talents to contribute to the UAE's evolving story," shares Asma.

Over the years Asma's singular creative vision has not gone unnoticed. She has crafted a number of public commissioned works, including *The Edifice of Sba* at March Project at the Sharjah Art Foundation, *Distorted Familiarities* for Expo 2020 and this year's Union of Artists, where she collaborated with four other artists on the project by Dubai Culture in partnership with Art Dubai.

And her talents were further recognised by the UAE's Ministry of Culture just this month. It has awarded her a National Program for Culture and Creativity Grant to continue to pursue her artistic endeavours. Funds that will support a new solo exhibition Asma plans to put on next year

that will include original pieces produced in ways that incorporate green and sustainable practices.

Born in Dubai 36 years ago Asma was drawn to the idea of being an artist from a very young age. She remembers fondly spending her summers in Ras Al Khaimah as a child visiting her uncle, the respected ceramicist Salem Jawhar, who studied his craft at Baghdad University. "You could see the influence of the Iraqi aesthetic in his work," she remembers. "I was fascinated by his studio. It felt like a playground to me, because it was full of all these colourful objects. All of these different creative things that we were not allowed to touch. I thought to myself, 'I want to be like him. Have a studio where I can go and explore ideas.' it had a real impact on me."

Even just the notion of seeing a man making a living and raising a family as an artist was eye-opening for Asma. "Having him as an example of someone who is practising art every day, full time and approaching it as a career, not a hobby, really inspired me and gave me a clear direction."

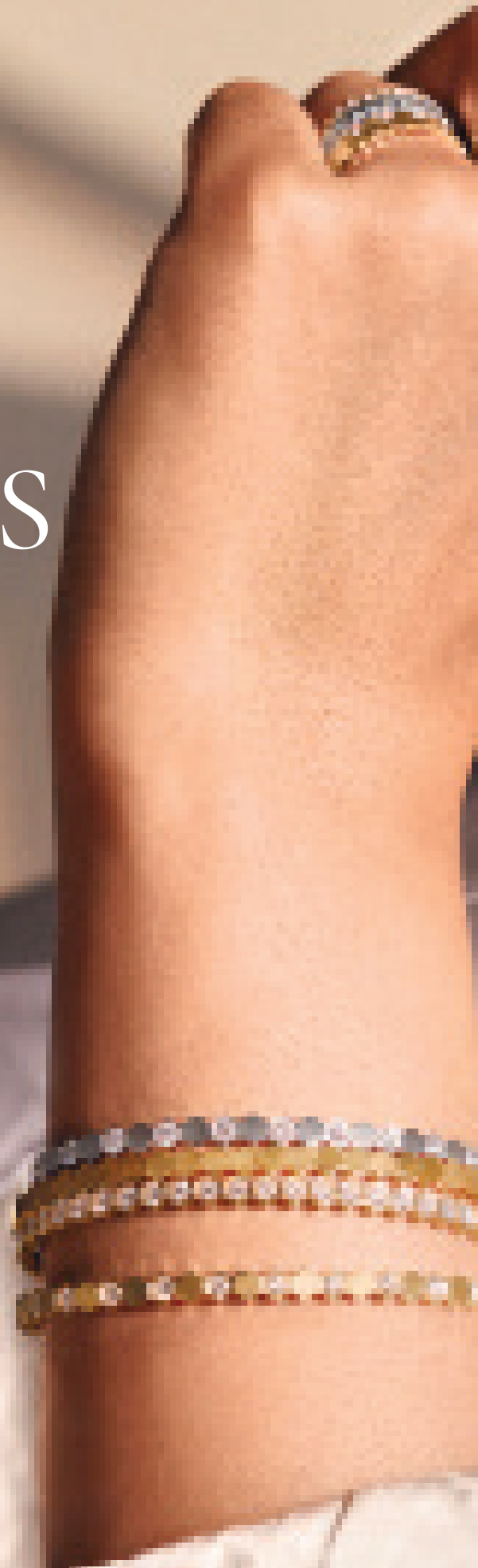
While being an artist was always in the back of her mind, growing up Asma learned other skills via sport that would come in handy later when she began to follow her passion. Through her brothers, she discovered the world of karate. But the appeal of the martial art went far beyond the flood of endorphins that practising any sport provides. "I loved the discipline of the sport, and also the respect. Not necessarily for those who were older, but for those who had a higher belt rank – they had earned it. I liked that it had a moral code," explains Asma. She would go on to earn a black belt in the sport and travel to places like Korea, China and Spain as part of the UAE's national women's team.

But living the life of an artist wasn't always a sure bet for Asma. The oldest of six children, it still took a bit of convincing, when it came to her family, about her chosen career path – especially in regards to pursuing higher education abroad. After getting her BFA in Visual Arts from Zayed University in Dubai,

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Asma wears a jacket by Jacket by Loro Piana with a sheila by Hanayen, her bracelets and rings are part of the *Bee My Love* collection by **Chaumet**. The background is *Distorted Familiarities* by the artist



Both pages: Asma wears a dual-tone cape by Taller Marmo with a sheila by Manaal Hammadi. Her jewellery is from the *Bee My Love* collection by **Chaumet**. The background projection is an image of the piece *Monuments of Alfreej* by Asma Belhamar



Asma applied to the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design in the United States. Out of over 700 applicants, she was one of only 12 students accepted into the MFA Textiles programme. “I told them ‘If you all want to come with me then come, but I don’t want to give up on this dream’ and when my family realised just how dedicated and serious I was, and what a huge opportunity it was, they understood that nothing was going to stop me.”

During her studies, Asma honed her artistic aesthetic. She discovered artists whose forms of expression motivated her. For example the abstract landscapes of Julie Mehretu, an Ethiopian American contemporary visual artist. “She is inspired by space, or at least the memory of space. She’s also heavily influenced by architecture. But she treats her surface in a way that creates depth. Like layers upon layers of architectural drawings, which end up becoming these abstract shapes on top of each other,” recalls Asma.

structures that surround them every day. She wants to explore the emotions around what happens when the familiar becomes lost to progress, cherished landmarks are overrun by megastructures and the city you knew as a child has made way for modernity.

Asma points to the fuss over the Toyota Building’s famous sign being taken off the landmark tower in 2018. It was such a cultural reference point that in 2022, due to popular demand, the owners of the building restored it to the edifice. Now it is once again a blazing red touchstone to greet drivers heading north towards Sharjah. On a more personal level, Asma also recounts how her family even has nicknames for one another in relationship to when they were born and how that coincided with developments in Dubai. “So we have Omar Metro, because he was born at the same time as when the metro station was inaugurated,” explains Asma. “Our lives are so intertwined with our everchanging environment.”

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Another favourite is the American artist James Turrell, known for his work exploring the juxtaposition of light and space. “I remember visiting the MoMa PS1 where he had built this concrete room with a sky window. His artistic element is light so in the room he had constructed there was this hidden effect that created a ombre light, it was so powerful,” remembers Asma. “I like works that have some sort of interactive element to them, or that use light as a tool. I came to the realisation that I really enjoy the way that light interacts with the facades of buildings, how it changes over the course of a day,” she shares.

After graduating from RISD Asma was determined to return to the UAE to practice her craft. Her fascination with the ever-evolving man-made landscape of the UAE, the impact of architects and builders from around the world on her birthplace plus the integration of different cultural touchpoints into the façades of the cityscapes acted as the perfect foil for her creativity. Through paintings and sculptures Asma has found her artistic happy place in how people interact and connect to the

One of her more substantial pieces, *Distorted Familiarities*, which was created for Expo 2020 and is now a permanent fixture of Expo City is a perfect example of how Asma sees the connection between people and their surroundings. The installation has been described in press material as a piece that “speaks to the distortion experienced commuting from mountainscapes to cityscapes, where the change from landscape to architecture and from topography to iconography feels like a journey through shifting scales and times.”

The starting point of this particular oeuvre was an abstract approach to the facade of the Nasser Rashid Lootah Building (better known as the Toyota sign tower). Asma has many fond memories of creating this piece but what she cherishes most about it was that she was able to collaborate with local construction builders, who had no formal experience working on art pieces.

“It required a lot of work with all sorts of groups – architects, engineers and people with very different backgrounds. And I remember I was working with



Asma wears a bold denim jacket, by Kristina Fidelskaya with a vibrant purple sheila by Manalal Hammadi. Accessorised with the Hortensia watch, with bracelets and rings from the *Bee My Love* collection, all by **Chaumet**. The background image is by *Monuments of Alfreej* by the artist



Both pages: Safa wears a black abaya and sheila both by Manaal Hammadi and jewellery from the *Be my Love* collection by **Chaumet**. The background image is of *Distorted Familiarities* by Asma Belhamar

INSPIRE



these amazing Pakistani and Indian engineers and I didn't tell them what exactly my inspiration was for the piece but they recognised the structural codes of the Toyota building and understood what I was trying to do right away," she shares. The anecdote perfectly illustrates just how powerful these monuments to a particular era can be for people, no matter who they are or where they come from.

While the creative focus of Asma's physical artwork and sculptures might be centred around the cityscapes and how people interact with them. There are other more intangible ways that she is helping to construct the future of the UAE. For the past six years, she has been a teacher at her alma mater, Zayed University. There she is helping to shape the minds of future generations of regional artists who now turn to her for guidance and inspiration.

"This generation is much more opinionated than I was when I started" reflects Asma. "They want to have a voice and make statements, and you can see how social media has impacted the way they interact with the world around them. They are able to connect with so many different points of view, which is great because as a teacher it is my job to not just show them the fundamentals and the tools of being an artist, but also how to explore and apply an idea in a way that isn't cliché or obvious."

Asma also sees her role as a teacher as an opportunity to grow as an artist herself. She finds inspiration in her students. In the way they can sometimes view projects from a macro perspective. She admits that she can sometimes go down a rabbit hole of detailed minutia when she is focused on a project. Also just working in a creative environment on campus lends itself to being more emboldened to try new things, bouncing ideas off her peers and stepping outside her comfort zone when it comes to exploring mediums of artistic expression.

Currently, Asma finds herself fascinated by the concept of the power behind the use of a single colour to tell a story. "I'm interested in allowing the value of colour to be the most dominant element of the work but I also want to try to depict the idea of making the space I am creating somehow nostalgic. Creating something that feels both like a memory but also is still alive and part of the present moment," she says about the pieces she is working on now.

Looking ahead Asma is very hopeful about the future of the expanding artistic community in the UAE. Having grown up during a time when museums and exhibitions were few and far between she is thrilled to see how her

country has now built, and is actively supporting, its burgeoning artistic landscape. She also feels like the rest of the world is finally beginning to take notice of both the homegrown talents of the Emirates and the artists who have made the country their home.


"Through my art, I try to highlight the elements or the aspects that the Emirati culture captures. Yes, there is the Islamic and Arabic culture but there is also a universality to it as well. When you look around the UAE, just by observing its architecture, you can see how collaborative, how tolerant this country is. How supportive it is to different forms of creative expression. Because of this, when people come to visit they don't feel like strangers, they will find aspects that feel familiar to them," reflects Asma.

As the day of shooting the cover story comes to an end and the creative team does a celebratory round of applause, just a look out across at all the smiling faces perfectly illustrates Asma's point. Everyone is from somewhere else in the world, each one an artist in their own right. They have all joined forces to help Asma tell her story of connection and collaboration. Proof positive that through art we can always find a common ground.

Follow @asmabelhamar on Instagram.

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Asma wears a structured denim jacket, by Kristina Fidelskaya with a vibrant purple sheila by Manaal Hammadi and a the stylists own turtleneck by Manaal Hammadi. The necklace is from the Bee My Love collection by **Chaumet**. The background is from the artist's work *Visions on the Periphery*