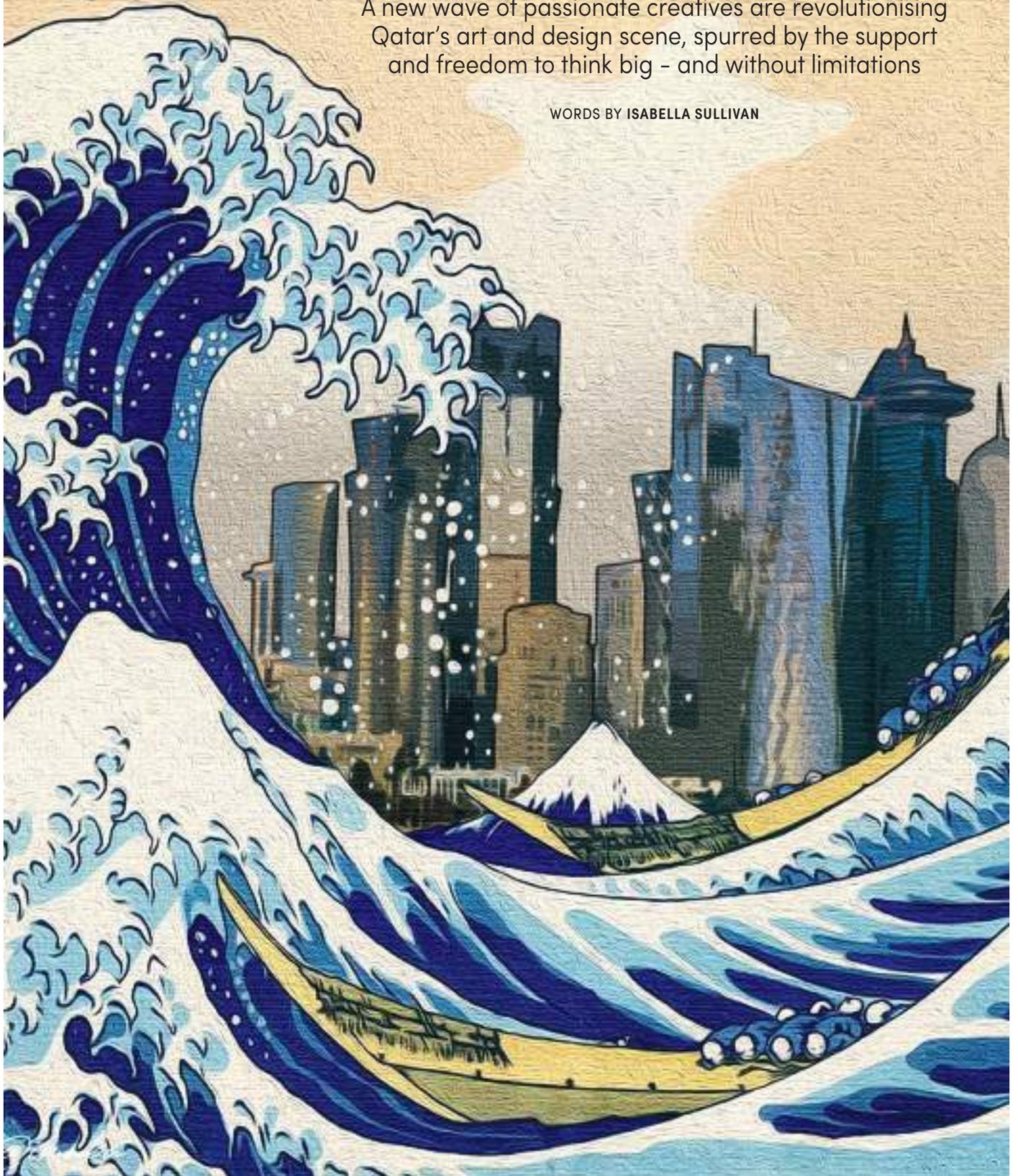


ART AND SOUL

A new wave of passionate creatives are revolutionising Qatar's art and design scene, spurred by the support and freedom to think big - and without limitations

WORDS BY ISABELLA SULLIVAN







It's a balmy autumn day in a peaceful garden courtyard of Msheireb Downtown Doha. Amid the cream limestone townhouses and landscaped greenery, a seemingly incongruous swath of colourful graffiti art adorns a wall. It's almost startling, by any means, for a glossy Gulf metropolis, but this is the work of Mubarak Al-Malik, one of the most revered artists in Qatar. Al-Malik disrupts the perfect façade of the Qatari city with his vibrant outdoor murals – but it's just what Doha wants. This tiny capital, one of the richest in the world, is undergoing a renaissance, bolstered by a wave of government initiatives reimagining it into the art and design hub of the Middle East. Never have there been more creatives, more galleries and more incubators for talent.

The original and most prevailing incubator is Fire Station, a commanding space that was once the home of Qatar's first civil defence authority. That was, until 2014, when it was repurposed to

Sheikha Al Mayassa, are legendary. Doha houses the iconic Museum of Islamic Art, Mathar Arab Museum of Modern Art and Al Markhiya Gallery at Katara; next year, Qatar will showcase "Jeff Koons: Lost in America" at the QM Gallery Al Riwaq. But what's most exciting is the new generation, cultivated by Her Excellency and various institutions, spurred by an undeniable drive to create without boundaries. Qatar is becoming a place of possibility, a place for artists to think how they want, and in turn, create.

"At Virginia Commonwealth, I had so many questions," says Nasser AlKubaisi, an emerging Qatari digital artist and interior designer, "but mostly, what if Vincent Van Gogh or Leonardo da Vinci were living in Qatar?" He went about creating a distinctive aesthetic, channelling these iconic styles through modern digital art. AlKubaisi begins by sketching on paper before uploading to Photoshop, finishing his work off by printing on canvas. "I'm deeply

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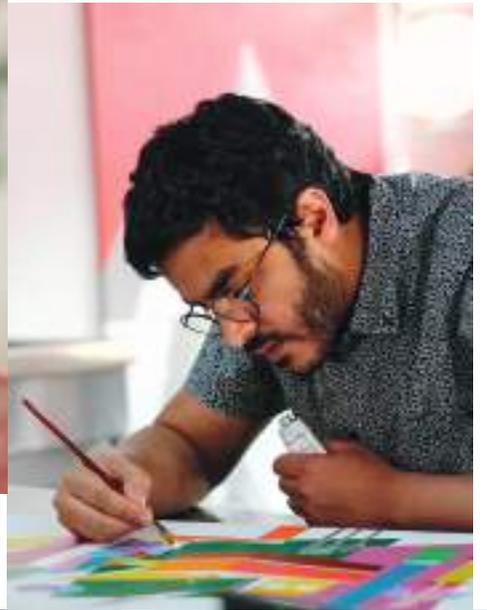
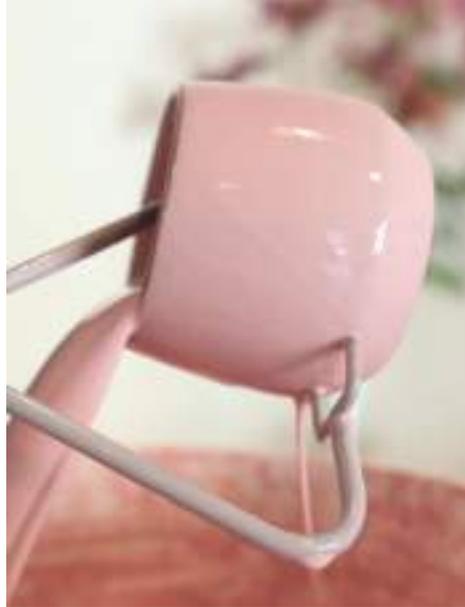
host Fire Station: Artist in Residence, transforming Qatar's creative landscape. Now the venue has gone from putting out fires to lighting ones of creativity, with 18 resident artists selected through an open call. The 700-square-metre Garage Gallery is no longer a home for bright red engines, but a showcase of the nine-month government-funded residencies and mentorship programmes. Many galleries have mandates to feature emerging artists, and in Doha, more galleries focus on the emerging than the established. Eiwan Al Gassar Gallery in the St Regis hotel is an amalgamation of local and international art, design and performance, mostly from up-and-coming creators. In Msheireb, the sun-filled courtyard of AlHosh Gallery prides itself on being not only a gallery, but a nurturing artistic community.

Indeed, the country's art credentials, led by Her Excellency

in love with the riches of our culture. I love to reflect these elements in my paintings," he says. "If you have a strong culture, you can stick to it and evolve it." His heritage is intrinsic to his work: *Starry Night* in Doha reimagines Van Gogh's famous sky over West Bay, while his take on the *Mona Lisa* sees da Vinci's masterpiece dressed in a burka. He posted his first artwork in 2019, at a time where digital artists were few and far between. The piece soon caught the attention of Sheikha Al Mayassa, who began sharing and promoting his work. "She is doing amazing things for Doha. She helped me grow," says AlKubaisi. Once he made a name for himself, AlKubaisi began digital art and Photoshop workshops to birth a new generation of digital artists.

AlKubaisi's work is, by default, entirely contemporary, but his nostalgia for classics prevails. "I love the feeling of touching a proper →

Clockwise from top: Fire Station Gallery; the colourful Box Park Doha; *Small Lie* by KAWS at Doha's Hamad International Airport; *Doha Lilies* by Nasser AlKubaisi; pottery at Clay Encounters; Mubarak Nasser Al-Thani; Galeries Lafayette Doha; Clay Encounters; Wadha Al Hajri's architecture-inspired designs; the creative hub M7; the Wadha store at the National Museum of Qatar; an installation by Bouthayna Al Muftah. **Previous pages:** AlKubaisi's work imagines classical artists in modern Doha; Katara Cultural Village



canvas,” he says. “I frame them with a classic retro frame, which gives it a fun twist.” With residencies at Fire Station and a Gucci campaign under his belt, he attributes his success to Qatar’s passion for art. “In every home in Qatar, you’ll find at least one artwork,” he says. “Art is a beautiful way of communication.”

A need to educate and empower each other is palpable among Qatar’s young creatives, swept up in the wave of heady experimentalism, and, most importantly, with support from powers on high. In the Venetian-esque Qanat Quarter on The Pearl, Reema Abu Hassan, a Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts Qatar graduate and now lecturer, flits around her pottery studio. On the walls, sticky white labels with the names of members and students, and row upon row of kitschy crockery creations alongside benches and potter wheels. The former architecture student opened Clay Encounters three years ago, a pottery studio offering classes, events and memberships where budding ceramicists can satiate their imagination. “Back then, I felt that there wasn’t a space where makers can come, get their hands dirty and be a designer – it was all very exclusive,” says the entrepreneur. “Seeing the lack of space to create made me realise how important it was.”

At first, locals were sceptical; pottery is not a typical pastime in the Gulf state. “We took a gamble, but people saw the passion here and were drawn into it,” says Abu Hassan. Today, her charming waterside studio has become a melting pot of creativity, offering pottery classes for children and a space where budding ceramicists,

the National Museum of Qatar. “Residences like the Fire Station have created a hub for local artists in town,” she says. “We have more galleries, more interest in contemporary art and younger collectors, too. The scene has grown so much in recent years.” Her latest pieces are inspired by memories, and Al Muftah will soon achieve her dream of opening a studio, alongside a permanent exhibition at the National Museum of Qatar.

Qatar’s art scene spans copious mediums and styles, as this drive for freedom of expression births extreme experimentalism. But few are as thought-provoking, or against the grain, as the work of Mubarak Nasser Al-Thani. At his rural studio in the desert outskirts of Doha, mesmerising madcap canvases are piled up high. One large masterpiece dominates the space: a blur of colours and shapes emblazoned with unexpected, yet hypnotising, words: “cancer,” “Obamacare,” “H1N1,” “anxiety.” He calls it *Stigma*. His works could be viewed as controversial, but not in Qatar. “I grew up being comfortable and in a country that is progressing and allowing more space for its citizens to talk,” explains the artist. “I was told, ‘We want you guys to feel free to express yourself.’ I knew we were free, but to hear it from them was so important,” he explains.

Al-Thani’s journey has seen him sketch, paint and sculpt across subjects spanning dolls, buildings, landscapes and even Hebrew writing; now, he’s turned his attention to papier-mâché. As we speak, he’s preparing for a new exhibition in spring 2022 at Fire Station Gallery entitled “Road Trip,” which captures how roads

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locals, tourists and expats can come and go as they please. “I think the reason that we are successful is that we’re open to everyone; you don’t have to be something to get in or you don’t have to know someone.” Hassan herself creates ceramic art, fulfilling commissions, selling them in her studio and collaborating with other local talents. Recently, she designed clay beads for Qatar-based designer Paula Bouffard and collaborated on a communal artistic workspace in the city.

In many ways, Clay Encounters embodies the cultural shift in Qatar. Qataris and expats are intertwining creativity and collaboration into their daily lives. Driving through Qatar, this country’s love for the creative couldn’t be more apparent. In historical Souq Waqif stands César Baldaccini’s *Pouce* – an incongruous towering gold thumb sculpture – and just around the corner lies a rent-free studio space for local artists to create and make a living. Outside Sidra hospital, nine sculptures known as the *Miraculous Journey* were crafted by British dystopian artist Damien Hirst.

Bouthayna Al Muftah, an artist whose work takes inspiration from Picasso and Cy Twombly, is a product of this new Qatar. The epitome of abstract expressionism laced with Arab heritage, her works have been exhibited across the world. Her art is born out of a drive to reconnect with her Qatari roots, developing an abstract form of storytelling through calligraphy and sketching.

Her most famous work, *Faces* – monochromatic abstract drawings of women from the past – was displayed at Fire Station Gallery and

connect people. Poignant, after the past year. “There will be a lot of iconography – there’s a cowboy next to a Chinese noodle box, toys from my past placed in photographs,” he explains. He owes his ability to experiment and develop to his home country’s nurturing environment. “In New York, I’ve known artists who’ve given up because of the lack of support. I haven’t seen that in Doha – I see people continuing to do what they want to do,” he insists.

Currently, most incubation programmes take place at Fire Station Gallery, but with such fertile environs for emerging talent, a new and more encompassing incubator was hatched. Enter M7, a soon-to-be-opened state-of-the-art bastion of innovation and an entire creative ecosystem in itself. “It’s a complete cycle, we take them from the ideation stage to the commercial,” says Fahad Al Obaidly, head of public programs at M7 and a designer himself. Towering above central Msheireb, seven floors will house ateliers, studios, galleries for exhibitions and talks, but also offices for media and agencies. Various incubation programmes are on offer, all available free or for a small charge. The ground-floor concept store, Studio 7, is a sprawling industrial space packed with furniture, ceramics, fashion and art, allowing creatives to sell their work to the public. The emporium is due to host the world-famous Christian Dior “Designer of Dreams” exhibition, and art and fashion grants will launch in 2022.

For fashion designers, it’s never been a better time to produce. Haya Al Adsani’s HarlienZ became the first Qatari brand to →



debut at New York Fashion Week in 2019, and more home-grown brands are popping up across the city. Much like in the art world, experimentation is sweeping through into the sartorial realm. In her shop on the grounds of the National Museum of Qatar, Wadha Al Hajri's unique style is tangible. Fluid earthy interiors sweep like the petals of a desert rose and a mirrored open cube as a "self-reflection room." Al Hajri never studied fashion; a love for architecture and design inspired her to launch her eponymous label. "I wanted to empower women with my designs and not overpower them," explains Al Hajri, who bases her designs on how they look in a room.

Her creations are a vision of a new Qatar, a sea of calming neutrals and soft hues in highly stylised and flowing shapes and cuts. She recently ventured into handbags, candles and fragrances, and even has her own coffee blend for clients. It's a far cry from her first collections, which she kept a secret. "We've always appreciated art and fashion, but the design scene was not what it is now," she says. "I'm proud to say people are accepting fashion right now. It's a beautiful time to be in Doha, to witness that change. There's a lot of young people who want to create."

Like AlKubaisi, Al Hajri is grateful for the work of Sheikha Al Mayassa and her mother, Sheikha Moza. In fact, Sheikha Al Mayassa invited Al Hajri on one of the city's most discreet new creative initiatives, the CP Club – 14 grand townhouses in Msheireb operating as a members club. Al Hajri's space, like her store, is awash in whites, neutrals and natural limestone, and showcases her latest design experiments, such as a stylish folding chair.

It's at Al Hajri's townhouse project – just one on a peaceful square of grand abodes designed by Diane Von Furstenberg, Donna Karan, Armani/Casa and fellow Qatari Aisha Al-Sowaidi – where Mubarak Al-Malik's colourful mural of a woman in a burka sits above the sun-bleached stones. It's perhaps more symbolic than originally intended: a burst of unobstructed, colourful wildness rising above the gleaming manicured grounds. In itself, it's a symbol of the people shaping this tiny nation into a place for creativity and experimentation – and ultimately, unobstructed possibilities. ☪

WHERE TO STAY

Mandarin Oriental Doha

Located in the heart of Msheireb Downtown Doha, Mandarin Oriental Doha sits on a serene climate-controlled square overlooking M7. The CP Club, museums, cafés and coffee shops are a short walk away. Rooms take inspiration from the traditional Qatari house, with white marble bathrooms, soothing neutral hues and plush carpets. Most have balconies and terraces overlooking the cultural district. Art is a prevalent theme even inside the hotel's cool confines, with works adorning the corridors, lobby and 10 dining outlets (including Izu by Chef Izu Ani). The hotel's rooftop pool is one of the most tranquil spots in the city – shimmering blue and overlooking the gleaming white rooftops towards the Persian Gulf. Doubles from AED 1,700; mandarinoriental.com

GETTING THERE

Qatar Airways flies to Doha from Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Muscat, Jeddah, Riyadh and Kuwait City, with an average flight time of two hours. Travellers can experience the Q Suite with closable doors, ambient mood lighting, fully lie-flat beds and generous storage space, along with a large TV and a fantastic in-flight dining menu. Flights land in Hamad International Airport, recently voted the World's Best Airport by Skytrax and a destination in itself. Before departure, make sure to visit some of the curated artworks on show, including *Small Lie* by American artist KAWS, and visit one of its many luxurious lounges. qatarairways.com

Clockwise from top left: Bouthayna Al Mufftah displays her work; *The Flying Man* by Dia Al-Azzawi at Hamad International Airport; Wadha Al Hajri handbags; Nasser AlKubaisi's Monet-inspired *Sunrise in Doha*; a dress by Al Hajri; Katara Cultural Village; ceramics by Reema Abu Hassan; Al Hajri's folding chair; Ahmed Al Bahrani's *A Message of Peace to the World*; *Falcon* by Tom Claassen at Hamad International Airport; an Al Mufftah installation; *Finding Desert Land* by AlKubaisi

