

## Azza Al Qubaisi: a jewel of an Emirati

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The contents of Azza Al Qubaisi's jewellery workshop in Abu Dhabi are as unconventional and intriguing as the designer herself.

"I have collections of octopus tentacles, cuttlefish and fossilised shells," says the 33-year-old Emirati, smiling.

"Of course, I love working with diamonds and tanzanites too, and I also have the most beautiful collection of opals from Australia, which I'm madly infatuated with."

Al Qubaisi's contemporary style and singular vision saw her named the British Council's most successful UAE Young Design Entrepreneur in Fashion and Design last month. This week, Al Qubaisi heads for the UK to join 17 other global finalists and represent the UAE. The group will be treated to a seven-day industry visit, including a stop at London Fashion Week and networking events with established and emerging designers.

"I was so nervous about being put under the microscope and the [jury's] questions were hard so I was very surprised, but also very honoured to have been chosen," she says.

Mitra Khoubrou, a jury member and co-founder of the UAE-based design consultancy Pink Tank, calls Al Qubaisi "a true example of the new generation of Emirati women entrepreneurs".

"Brave, outspoken, not afraid to take risks, creative and sensible - she is an example to her industry and other entrepreneurs," she says.

Al Qubaisi's interest in jewels was first piqued as a young child when her father, a gemstone enthusiast, allowed her to explore the room at home where he stored his precious collection.

"I played with them; cherished them," she says. "I'm sure I was one of the youngest Emirati girls to wear an opal, around the age of 10, and people laughed at me as rubies and sapphires were favoured at that time."

At 18, Al Qubaisi travelled to London and obtained a degree in jewellery design before returning to the UAE in 2002.

"I craved independence and loved executing something from start to finish - cutting woods, melting and soldering metals, polishing sheets - being totally hands-on. I also wanted an art form that could penetrate my own society and jewellery is a big thing in the region. It was tough at first, but it pushed me to really prove myself."

Al Qubaisi made her debut with her first collection in 2004 and says her style was heavily influenced not only by a love of nature but by the traditions and landscape of her country.

"Deserts are my main infatuation," she says. "Water, too, is a theme I love. I worked with cuttlefish for my collection called Marine Symphony. I had a plentiful supply, thanks to the environment here, and I used an ancient technique to fashion it into pendants and rings - watching YouTube demonstrations to help me. Using something local and close to nature makes me happy. Besides, a human probably couldn't make those amazing lines."

The collection is one of Al Qubaisi's most affordable, with pieces starting from Dh600. Her clients range from family friends and jewellery collectors to the Abu Dhabi Royal Family; she is discreet about her more high-profile commissions.

"I'm lucky enough to have made a piece for a 'dream client', although I didn't see her wear it," she says. "It was fantastic as it happened fairly early on [in my career]. It was a one-off - tanzanite and diamonds in a pendant, a full set."

Al Qubaisi admits her love of precious metals and stones sometimes makes it hard for her to part with such one-off pieces.

"I used to put ridiculous prices on the ones I really liked," she chuckles. "But the more exposure I got from around 2005 onwards, the more affordable my pieces became. Because I really wanted my message to reach people - to spread my philosophy."

To make her collections accessible to all, Al Qubaisi is planning a ready-to-wear range. The philosophy behind it, as with her privately commissioned work, remains that of staying true to your roots.

"There are less than a million Emiratis here and I want to creating something genuinely reflecting our culture," she says. "With research, too, I'm getting a better understanding of my country day by day. It's all about finding my true identity."