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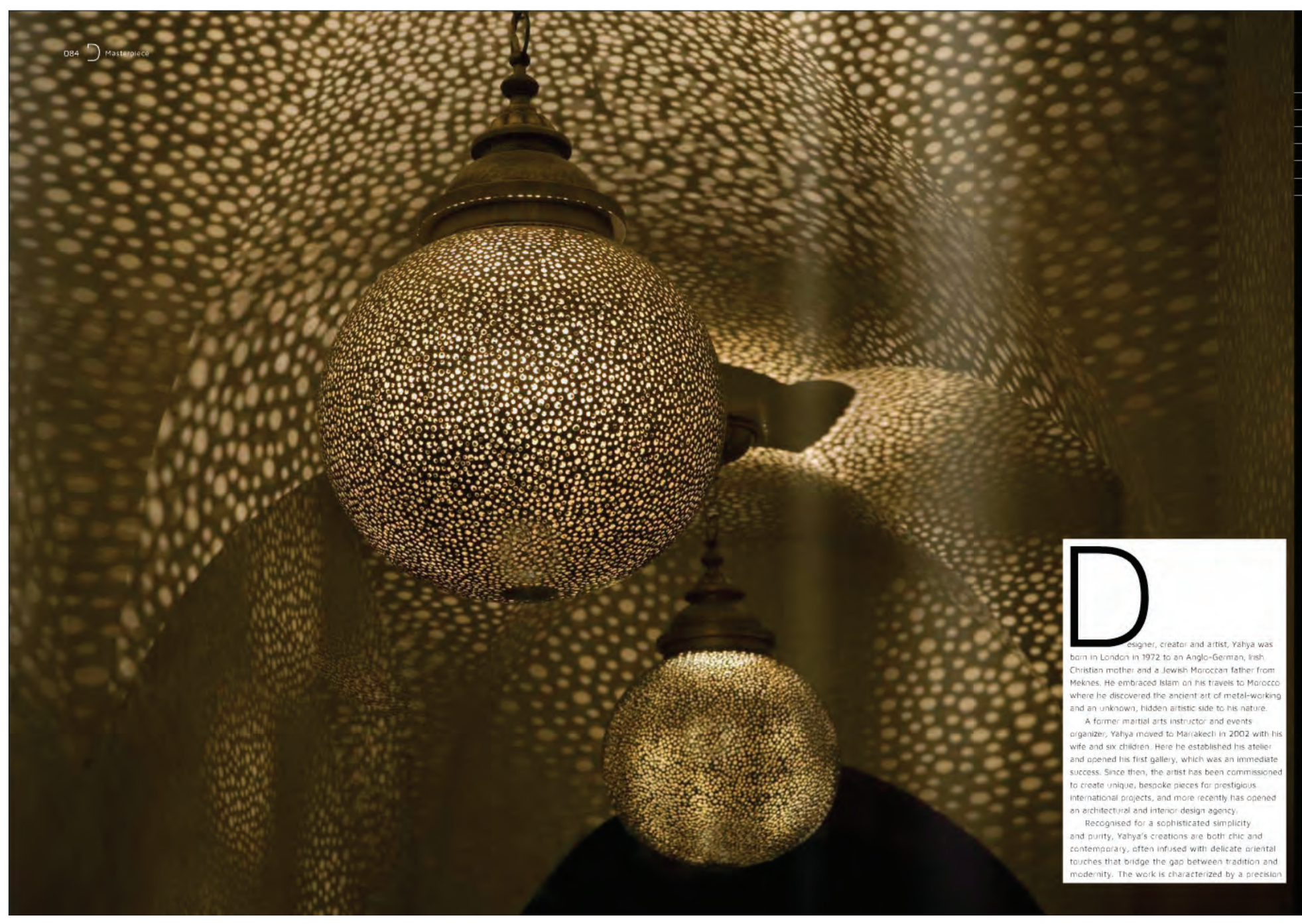

A FUSION OF CULTURES, nationalities and religions, artist Yahya's reputation has been established on a refined luxury, which is both discreet and timeless. With no previous artistic training, his work is characterized by contrasting yet complimentary influences and is a harmonious fusion of eastern elegance and western minimalism. Durrah chats with the artist to find out more.

Artistic Fusion

Designer, creator and artist, Yahya was born in London in 1972 to an Anglo-German, Irish Christian mother and a Jewish Moroccan father from Meknes. He embraced Islam on his travels to Morocco where he discovered the ancient art of metal-working and an unknown, hidden artistic side to his nature.

A former martial arts instructor and events organizer, Yahya moved to Marrakech in 2002 with his wife and six children. Here he established his atelier and opened his first gallery, which was an immediate success. Since then, the artist has been commissioned to create unique, bespoke pieces for prestigious international projects, and more recently has opened an architectural and interior design agency.

Recognised for a sophisticated simplicity and purity, Yahya's creations are both chic and contemporary, often infused with delicate oriental touches that bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. The work is characterized by a precision and obsessive attention to detail, combined with an innovative approach to design and production, which transcends fashions and trends.

From the smallest through to the largest creations, from inlaid mother of pearl jewellery boxes through to 12 meter chandeliers, each piece is made completely by hand and the result of a unique heritage and a tradition of forgotten ancestral techniques. The quality, consistency and finishing is of the highest standard possible.

Yahya's body of work is diverse and encompasses many materials, working with wood, crystal, glass, leather and marble to create collections of lighting, furniture, decorative accessories, artworks and sculptures. He is not afraid to experiment in order to explore different methods, ideas and possibilities that enable him to develop new techniques.

Difficult to classify, the works of art are subtle but sophisticated, audacious yet mysterious. Passionate

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Some pieces have necessitated over 100 artisans about 18 months of work to complete, which would have taken a single artisan more than a lifetime to realise.

about his art, removed from the constraints of formal training, Yahya is a visionary, in constant search of the artistic ideal. He has developed a distinct and individual style, which transcends classification and crosses cultures.

After establishing his workshop in Marrakech in 2002, Yahya gained the freedom to design and create whilst maintaining a complete control over every aspect of the production process, from research and development through to the finished product. By integrating the intricate art of hand-sawn jewellery work, the fusion of art and design has sublimated the work of his artisans and elevated his objects into the realm of art.

Developing innovative sawing, mounting and welding techniques, Yahya has managed to break in his artisans the formal rigid approach of their previous training. The hand-picked artisans have been carefully selected to ensure that every aspect of the production of his designs can be completed in house. Almost every piece created requires the accumulated savoir-faire of at least 20 different departments of master-craftsmen, from conception, design and production through to finishing and lighting. Some pieces have necessitated over 100 artisans about 18 months of work to complete, which would have taken a single artisan more than a lifetime to realise.

Yahya's atelier is a laboratory of exploration, innovation and experimentation where the established rules of received wisdom are challenged, and forgotten ancestral techniques are revived, preserved and modernised in the pursuit of artistic excellence. Yahya has had to rapidly expand his production facility and has undertaken a meticulous recruitment and training process to cope with the enormous demand generated. Today he is surrounded by 200 of the most talented and gifted artisans, technicians and engineers who have been carefully chosen to accompany him on his artistic voyage.

In 2005, without fanfare or publicity, or even a sign on the shop, Yahya discreetly designed, built and opened his first gallery to the public in Marrakech. Six

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01 Private Guest House, Marrakech. Hand-made Sphere chandelier. Brass, aged bronze finish

02 A personal image of Artist Yahya

03 Private Ville, Marrakech. Hand-sawn chandelier. Brass, aged bronze finish and engraved glass

04 Hand-made flame floor lamp. Brass, aged bronze finish with wooden base

weeks later all the stock had sold out, through word of mouth alone, and visitors started arriving from all over the world to make orders, discuss projects and commission special pieces. The gallery is a showcase for Yahya's work, from Collection pieces through to limited edition Creation and one off art pieces. Many lines of lighting, furniture, decorative accessories and artwork are also presented.

In 2011, Yahya opened a design agency in the centre of Marrakech to satisfy client demand and their individual projects. Yahya also collaborates with some of the most renowned international architects and interior designers, to create larger structures that translate the intricacy and sophistication of his finely tuned work to an architectural scale. He has been commissioned to design bespoke pieces of art, furniture and lighting, and travels internationally to make exceptional pieces designed for special clients.

Yahya has been commissioned to work on some of the leading hotels in the world, including the Royal Mansour in Marrakech. He has been given the freedom to create outstanding chandeliers as well as exceptional doors, fountains, chimneys and other signature pieces that are often technically challenging and complicated to realise.

The artist is frequently commissioned to created many works of art and sculptures that are mostly one-off pieces and worked on a collection of 25 pieces with the calligrapher Mehdi Qotbi, which was exhibited in Paris at the 'Institut du Monde Arabe' in 2013. A meeting of two minds and a fusion of souls, the collection is a dialogue of peace, respect, tolerance and brotherhood between all faiths and cultures.

However different in scope or nature, all of Yahya's work possesses a particular essence that inspires a sense of meditation, reflections and wonderment, which transcends different cultures and bridges the gap between East and West, tradition and modernity, whilst bringing closer together the worlds of art and design.

www.yahya-group.com

Interview with Yahya

How did you first develop an interest in art and design?

In my youth, I was told that I was going to be a writer and I never considered I was ever going to be an artist or designer, simply because I was very poor at drawing and got thrown out of art class at school. I'm actually self-taught, and I fell into this business of art by accident.

Where do you gain most of your inspiration from?

It was on my journeys to Morocco, that I fell in love with light and metal-working and basically that is where my inspiration came from. It opened my eyes to the possibility of sawing beautiful pieces of metal and projecting wonderful shadows and patterns onto ceilings, inspired from my visits to Morocco.

How would you describe your signature style?

I would say that because I'm self-taught, it is a fusion of many different styles that doesn't actually follow one particular school. People describe it as a fusion of East and West; it can be very oriental, very contemporary, I'm not held to work in a particular style or a particular material and I do all sorts of different types of things that pushes the boundaries and blur the boundaries between art and design. My intention was to contemporize Islamic design to give it a modern sophistication and elegance that sublimates the handy craft to artwork.

What are your favourite materials to work with?

My favourite material to work with principally is metal, but I love working with glass, crystal, wood, marble – anything really that attracts me, and helps me to reach my artistic goal, whatever that might be given whatever project I'm doing. It could be that I'm doing an architectural screen where I'm using hand-cut metal, or it could be that I'm using cut marble. It could be that we are carving into wood, it could be that we doing a six meter chandelier of blown crystal and glass, which is falling down the stairway, it all depends.

Does Marrakech influence your work?

Yes. It was there that I felt in love with light and I discovered jewellery work and the metal workers, that I started designing stuff with. But now, because I'm such a mixed person in terms of my ethnic, religious and cultural background, I'm influenced so much by wherever I go. I could go to Japan, and see things that inspired me that just add to my artistic repertoire, and create a new way of looking at things. I am inspired by everything and everywhere, even if it is to know what not to do or try.

How do you main such exceptional and consistent quality in your work?

Because I'm very, very exceptionally fussy about the quality of the work that we do, and it is has to be as close to perfection as is humanly possible. I have teams of quality controllers who check every single detail that's made, every single piece along the way, and then again at the end, in order to make sure that all is absolutely of the highest quality possible.

What have been some of your favourite or most memorable projects?

There are so many that it is difficult to mention. Some of the art exhibitions that I've done or some of the exceptional chandeliers that I've made for various palaces around the world; I've worked for projects as diverse as a sprawling state of a hundred hectares in the Hamptons in America, through to palaces in the Gulf, through to exceptional projects in Beverly Hills, it all depends.

What advice would you offer young artists starting their career?

The advice that I would offer, would be don't feel held back by the rules. I didn't know the rules, so I just did what I did and people seemed to like it and it seems to have worked. Don't be afraid of trying new things, because it's through failures sometimes that you can appreciate success and also at the same time you can discover things that weren't necessarily relevant or apparent to start with. So, it is very important to always push the boundaries, try new things, and not be afraid to fail. As Albert Einstein said, "the person who has never made any mistakes is the person who has never tried anything new."

What's next for you?

Who knows? I'm always doing different things, but I think it might now be the time to start accepting design projects, where I have been asked to do the whole project, including the architecture, the interior and the landscape design. This will be where I assemble teams of professionals who can help translate my artistic vision, because my work is not limited necessarily to light, artwork or interiors. I look at everything and I see it as a whole, there are so many different parts, but I don't see the individual part, I just see how it works together like a watch to create the whole.

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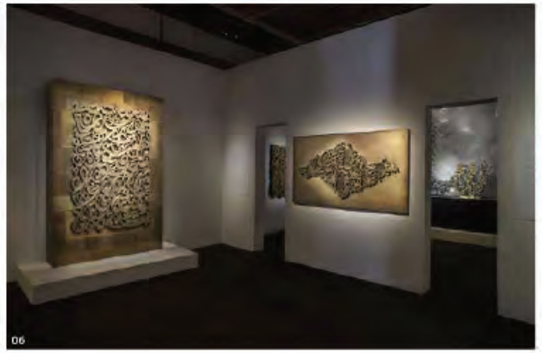

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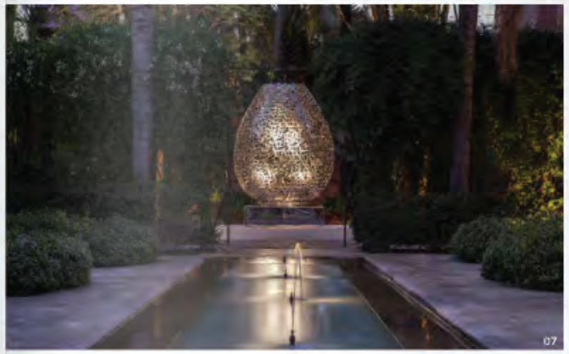

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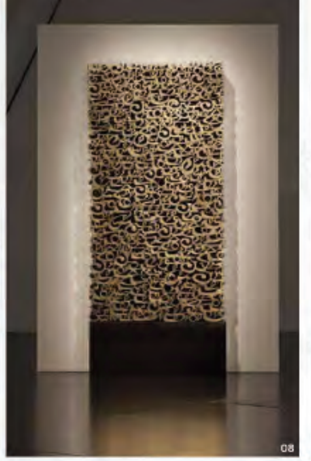

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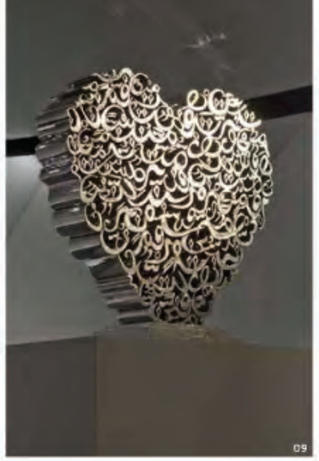

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05 From Invisible Light Exhibition – Royal Mansour Marrakech, 2014. Artwork N° 13 – SALAAH. Polished stainless steel

06 From Invisible Light Exhibition, Royal Mansour Marrakech, 2014. Left side of Artwork N° 12 – THE WALL. Brass, aged bronze finish. Right side of artwork N° 18 – EAST AND WEST. Brass, aged bronze finish

07 From Invisible Light Exhibition, Royal Mansour Marrakech, 2014. Artwork N° 25 – AMPHORA. Polished stainless steel

08 From Invisible Light Exhibition, Arab World Institute, Paris, 2013. Artwork N° 5 – STELE. Brass, aged bronze finish

09 From Invisible Light Exhibition, Arab World Institute, Paris, 2013. Artwork N° 26 – LOVE. Polished stainless steel. Marrakech 2012

10 Hand-sawn Mini Sphere Candle-Holder. Brass, aged bronze finish