

PROFILE

Yasmine Ghoniem

This award-winning designer uses memories of her nomadic upbringing between Australia and Kuwait as a starting point for her wildly unique interiors, where feeling and atmosphere are paramount.

By Annemarie Kiely
Photographed by Prue Ruscoe

Visit the website of YSG, the Sydney studio stamped with the initials of its principal Yasmine Saleh Ghoniem, and a lush oasis opens up in the desert of internet design. No spartan typeface attaching to image scrolls in a void of white, but a rock-and-roll assault on graphic convention and the flashing claim in bold caps declaring “The magnetism is in the mix.”

It is spicy, trippy and flagrantly flips the bird to any prescripts on the use of pattern and proportion in both the production of its content and the constructed interiors it frames, and, it sucks the viewer right into its vow of summoning all senses. But if doubt nags that it’s all just a digital mirage, a visit to the Four Pillars Laboratory in Sydney’s Surry Hills will verify the designer’s ability to magic materials into a juniper-laced taste of the gin-maker’s craft. Or a drink at Redfern’s new microbrewery Atomic Beer Project will prove that pale ale can fizz into a fit-out with the same hip hoppy bite.

Ghoniem is “totally” down with the oasis allusion to her work and its implication of relief in a desert of design repeat, but no matter how self-determining she says she tries to be, the fates conspire against her. “I mean starting up a new practice just before Covid lockdown,” she says of the random setback to her studio launch back in February 2020. “It’s like arriving in Kuwait the day the Gulf War starts.”

Is that a simile or a real-life circumstance? Ghoniem proceeds to unfurl the story of her formative years sharing that her mother is a true-blue Aussie — “red-haired, green-eyed, freckled skin, so not like me” — and her father an Egyptian chemical engineer, whose expertise in oil rigs centred the family’s life in the Persian Gulf.

“I am the second-youngest of four children, the only one born in Kuwait,” she says of the nation where expatriates count for the majority of the population. “It’s funny growing up in this transitory place that never issued me with a passport or acknowledged my existence. I am half-Australian, half-Arabic,

THESE PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT in the casual living area of Yasmine Ghoniem’s Bondi home, coffee table designed by YSG and produced by Euro Marble; rug from Cadrys. Yasmine Ghoniem in the dining area, bolster cushion from Jordan; Lampe de Marseilles light by Le Corbusier from Cult. In the main bedroom, Kartell Componibili units from Space Furniture; bolster cushion designed by YSG for NGV installation; pillows from Jordan; bed linen and throw from The DEA Store; Barrier Highway, Cobar, NSW photograph (on wall) by Robert Gray; tapestry artwork (on floor) from Rudi Rocket. Details, last pages.



but I have never felt at home in either place. I am the homeless product of a nomadic upbringing.”

Her sense of unsettlement — the endowment of a perpetual family swing between the poles of Kuwait, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Australia — amplified into anxiety with the disappearance of her father who, during a family stint in Sydney in 1991, returned to Kuwait in search of work. “He arrives on the day the Iraqi forces invade and occupy the state,” Ghoniem recalls. “All the airports and communication lines were down; he disappeared for a really long time. Mum thought he was dead, but seven months later he walks through the door and says we are all going back to Kuwait.” Explaining that he’d been putting out fires on bombed oil rigs, she adds that his skills were still required and compelled the family’s return to the Gulf for another 10 years.

Ghoniem measures a decade in that part of the world as the full extent of any expat’s endurance, saying that she compensated for “bomb scares every month” and a vegetation-free desert — “where everything was just brown as hell” — by forming a cover band with her friend Sama. Called The Expat Story, it brought colour and lyricism to her teenage life where the desert denied it and forged friendships that endured to express in such “fun projects” as the penthouse Ghoniem is currently designing for Sama, now the founder of resortwear label Dear Nin.

But more on that later as Ghoniem abridges her post-Kuwait life with a whiplash of world-hopping activity and aestheticism, starting with her win of a scholarship to SCAD (Savannah College of Art and Design) in America’s Deep South.

“I was just following my American boyfriend to the US,” she says in highlight of how serendipity pushed her towards design. “I graduated from there and worked in three different architectural practices, covering corporate and hospitality, but I was just a glorified CAD monkey and after six years in America, I vowed to toss in design.” >>



THESE PAGES in the living, dining and kitchen zone (what Ghoniem calls the 'Great Room'), custom **banquette** designed by YSG; Reeno mini **bench** from Grazia & Co, upholstered in Pierre Frey Opio bouclé in Kiwi; Sancal Pion **dining table** from Ke-Zu; Tom Dixon Opal Cone **floor lamp** and E15 Arie **shelf** from Living Edge. *Corey Worthington* artwork by Nick Santoro from Egg & Dart.





THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT in another view of the main bedroom, **stool** from Studio Henry Wilson; **runner** from Kulchi; *Mr Tallmadge* (2015) **artwork** by James King from Becker Minty; framed **scarf** by Kushana Bush from Chee Soon & Fitzgerald. In the guest bedroom, Indian **quilt** from Chee Soon & Fitzgerald; Tom Dixon Swirl **tables** from Living Edge; **Roy lamp** from VBO; **photograph** of Leonardo DiCaprio by Hugh Stewart; **artwork** by Mariusz Zdybalv from The Vault Sydney. *Details, last pages.*

“When I’m in a space that makes me feel something, I try to deconstruct its potency”

« Volunteering as an aid worker in Africa, Ghoniem next embedded deep in Maasai land in Kenya, living in a manyata hut while assisting with the building of schools. Then, came “an amazing year-long trip through Sri Lanka, Spain, Vietnam — more volunteer work — Cambodia and Laos,” she says, adding that being a long-term itinerant in unstable territories soon made Sydney seem all the more appealing. So, she returned in 2008, beginning a band with her brother Ben. “My cousin plays the violin, my best mate plays the drums and another

friend plays the keys. We became this awesome all-girl band, with Ben, called The Conversations.”

Ironically, interiors work became a way to pursue music, until one design practice boss took exception to her lyric-writing on his watch. Autonomy over her time became the determinant of setting up Amber Road, the design firm that Ghoniem cofounded in 2013 with her landscape architect sister, Katy Svalbe.

“We did that for seven years and then went our separate ways,” she says with the exasperated add that no matter how hard she tries to leave design, it always drags her back. But humility prevents her from mouthing ‘talent’ as the reason she remains tethered to a drawing board and the demands of clients so enamoured with her ‘something other’.

Hazarding a guess at what that ‘other’ might be, Ghoniem says she never looks to the work of others to help materialise her idiosyncratic schemes but sources memories of the many far-off places that have made her emotive. “I try to evoke a feeling not

a visual,” she explains with excited description of the Kuwait penthouse scheme that identifies in the office as ‘Mies and Marni’ — shorthand for Sama and her partner’s competing minimalism and maximalism.

Ghoniem continues: “When I’m in a space that makes me feel something, I try to deconstruct its potency but always come to the conclusion that it’s not designed. It has literally grown, memory upon patron memory, and that’s what I truly love about interiors, when it reflects the wonders of a world you can’t control.” **VL** ysg.studio