

Cultural collage

September 09. 2008



Nadine Kanso says she wanted her sitting room to feel homely and welcoming. It contains a number of pieces by Arab designers.

"It's old but I love it," says **Nadine Kanso** of the villa in Jumeirah that has been her home since she arrived in Dubai eight years ago. "There's always something to add or fix, but that doesn't bother me," she adds. The Lebanese photographer and jewellery designer has kept any sign of decrepitude remarkably well-hidden beneath a bright, contemporary interior and her collection of offbeat pieces. The open-plan ground floor is split between a bright turquoise sitting room and fuchsia dining room. "I like changing the colour of the walls every few years," she says. "They used to be orange and yellow."

Despite the avant-garde colour scheme, the room has a warm, welcoming feel. "Since this is our only living space," she says, "I wanted it to feel homely. I want people to come in and feel comfortable instead of thinking, 'I can't touch that'."

Muted, dark brown sofas and a low, wooden coffee table soften the brightness of the sitting-room walls. "I had the sofas made from scratch in Dubai and bought the fabric in Beirut. I needed something hard-wearing to withstand the boys clambering on them," she says, referring to her two young sons, ages nine and 10, who have been rushing in and out from the swimming pool.

Scattered on the sofas and chairs is a collection of decorative cushions, designed by Kanso, emblazoned with Arabic script and piped with the red and white checked fabric of the ghutra. "They say 'Why' in Arabic," she tells me. "I'm interested in calligraphy and often use Arabic words and lettering in my work," referring to her recent photography exhibition at B21 gallery in Dubai, titled *Rewind*, which juxtaposed modern elements of Middle Eastern life with images from the Arab nationalist period of the Forties, Fifties and Sixties. "There used to be a lot of emphasis on being a proud Arab, but since 9/11, things have changed and people in the media often portray this part of the world as being full of terrorists and Muslim extremists." "**Bil Arabi**", Kanso's range of jewellery, meaning "in Arabic", also features Arabic lettering. "Anything I create needs to relate to where I'm from, and promoting this part of the world in a funky way is always a priority," she says. "We have a tendency to forget our heritage and a lot of young people have no clue who many of the pioneers from the past were, like poets, politicians, writers and painters. Through my work, I want to make people think," she adds. "If it makes one person pick up a book by the poet Nizar Kabani, I'll be more than happy."

Having lived in Beirut, Montreal and Prague before Dubai, Kanso has acquired an eclectic range of antique and modern pieces. She found the round wooden dining table in an antiques shop in Montreal, and an old sewing

machine table, which she now uses as a butler's tray, turned up under her house in Prague. "It was sitting next to the rubbish," she says. "During communist rule, they had nothing new for so long, but once everything opened up, they started getting rid of all the old stuff. You used to be able to find these things on the street."

A giant wooden "1" stands waist-high to the side of the dining table, dominating the small space. "That's by Mohammed Kanoo, a really funky artist based in Abu Dhabi," she says. "He did it for the first anniversary of a magazine and I bought it in an auction." Painted teak chairs lean against the fuchsia walls. "I didn't want too many bulky Indian things; you find them everywhere here, so I decided to paint them bright red." Surfaces are covered with huge, bright pink and green candles, stuffed red velvet hearts that her sons made at school, and a broken lamp, all of which give Kanso's home a lived-in, family feel. "When people come around for dinner, I light all the candles on the sideboard in front of the mirror and the light reflects beautifully around the room," she says.

In the living area, a telephone box is used as a cabinet to house books and china. "Most of my things are by Arab designers," she tells me. "I think we have real talent." Two perspex stools with bright citrus fruit print seats by the Lebanese designer Nada Debs provide extra seating, while the main wall of the sitting room is a patchwork of contemporary Arab art that she has collected over the years. "This one by the French artist Francoise Nielly is the only exception," she says, showing me an oil portrait of a woman's face in close-up. "I love her brush strokes. She usually does bigger pieces, but this was the only one I could afford at the time."

A photograph of the Egyptian diva Umm Kulthum in her heyday hangs next to it in a bright purple, rococo frame. "It was given to me by a friend and I found the frame in Montreal for \$10," she says, before pointing out other works by the Lebanese artist Hussein Madi and the Egyptian artists Karem Mahrous and Chant Avedissian.

"My home is like a collage of everything I like," she says. "I get things from wherever I go. It's not planned or anything, but at the same time, you can see there's harmony."

Kanso's mix of modern and traditional elements has created a functional family space, with her emphasis on Arab design resulting in a look that is contemporary yet true to her culture. "I think it's important to support designers from the region, but I wanted to do something different," she says, "to show that there are many elements of Arab culture that we can use to express ourselves. A modern Arab home doesn't need to be full of mosaics and chandeliers."