

FRAMING *the* SULTANATE

Amr Ali, the creator of the luxury fashion house BodyAmr, takes a step away from international catwalks to focus on his first love, photography. Sophie Kazan speaks to him ahead of his debut exhibition in Dubai next month



Amr Ali, a British-born designer of Omani descent, harkens back to his heritage in his latest photographs. As one of the oldest independent countries in the region, Oman is also deeply entrenched in its own traditions and culture. Throughout his work Ali exhibits an ongoing fascination with the landscape of Oman and its people. Through his photographs he reveals his own personal visual experiences in his homeland. "I have always documented my journeys and travels there," Ali explains. "Oman is a land that I have great attachment to and feel a deep sense of belonging."

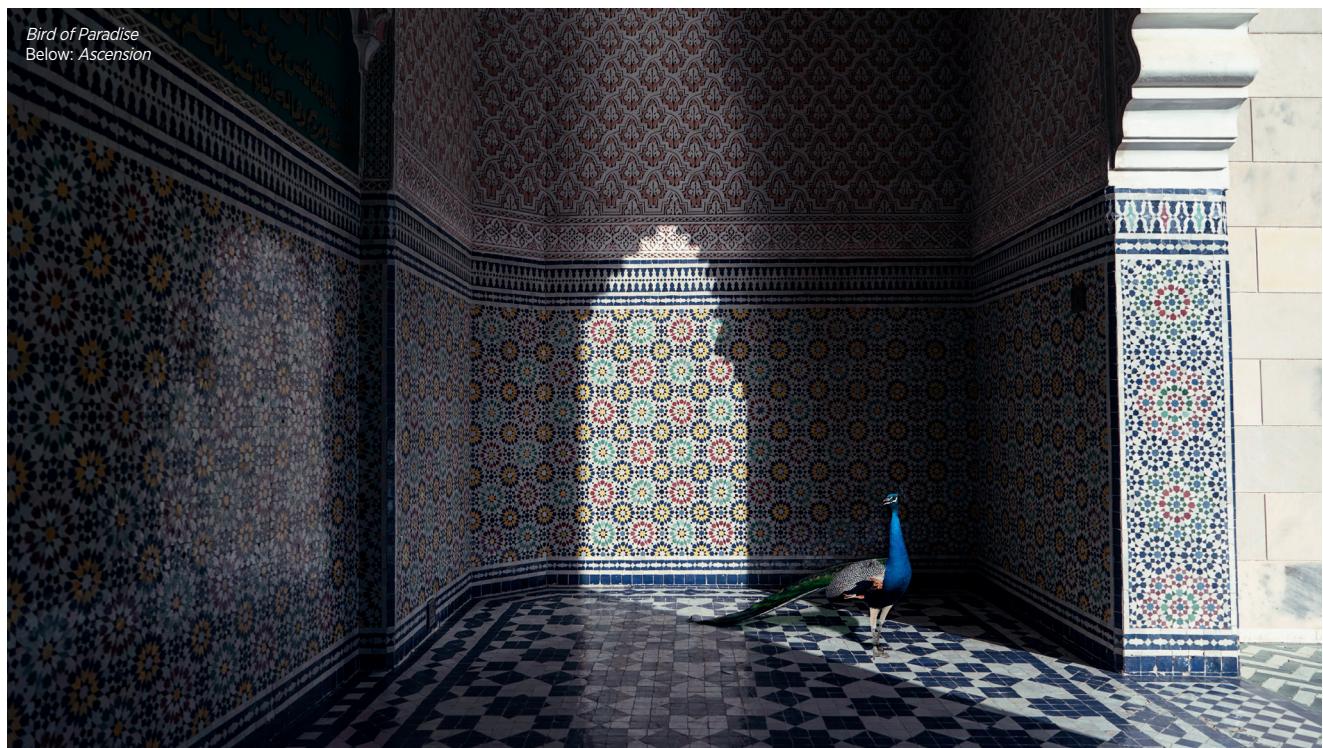
His photographs present a cinematic, almost dream-like quality. "Despite having only lived in Oman for a short time, I feel a great sense of mystery and wonder about the country and landscape, and I have tried to show that in my photographic series," he explains. "I was hypnotised by the mystical folk stories that I would listen to as a child. I was absorbed by the beautiful cultural practices, the deep intoxicating seductive smells, the customs and ancient tribal practices. The combi-

nation has been incredibly influential in all my design practices."

Ali is one of the first Gulf Arabs to found a successful, multi-national fashion career. He began his label BodyAmr at the age of 24 years old from his London atelier. An international sensation, during the 1990s and 2000s, BodyAmr designs were worn by countless celebrities, pop stars and film icons, as well as diplomatic women and royalty throughout Europe, the US and the Arab world. Singing praise of the young designer, Tom Ford was once quoted in *Vogue UK* exclaiming: "BodyAmr, Give me a job!"

"It was a fun and exciting time; I was young and had the energy then to enjoy that life," recalls Ali. Yet he insists that, "Fashion, for me, stemmed from my love of the vision that could be created through photography." But how did his fashion background influence his poignant imagery? Ali is surprisingly reflective about the response. "It is not fashion itself that seduces people but the fantasy that it represents," he states. "Through BodyAmr, I was able to create a mood with like-minded clients, who understood how my designs made them feel. The epitome of creating this world was of course through my shows where I was able to control the atmosphere and convey my ideas. I always used a mixture of great buildings and iconic spaces, with selected

Above: Minaret.



"ELEMENTS OF PROPORTION AND THE QUALITIES AND POETICS OF SPACE PLAY MAJOR ROLES IN MY OVERALL VISION AND COMPOSITION"

- Amr Ali



sounds and music and staged the runway rather like a film set. It is this same atmosphere I wish to now capture with my photography: an intense visual experience that captures a moment in a narrative."

This 'narrative' that Ali refers to seems to exist throughout his work and in various ways—his fashion brand became Ali's creative alter-ego. The name, BodyAmr was suggested to him by pop icon Annie Lennox, and it is still present in Ali's conscience and artistry. "BodyAmr still features in some of my images. In fact my friends often wear pieces from my collections. I love working with them, they understand the atmosphere I'm creating. The inclusion of my fashion work and further design collections means that I can exercise greater control in creating my mood."

Ali's work in fashion and design has meant that he has a keen and experienced eye for light and line, endowing his photographs with a tremendous sense of presence. "I've always photographed buildings and even studied Architectural Interiors at Chelsea [Chelsea College of

Art, London]," he says. "Elements of proportion and the qualities and the poetics of space play major roles in my overall vision and compositions." His creative energy is infectious. Ali's photographs are filled with a mystical beauty that brings together the enchantment of the East with the region's heritage and contemporary culture. Additionally, he continues to add to his portrait series Women of Arabia where his mise en scène cleverly reveals a world behind closed doors, a voyeuristic perspective that Ali uses to ignite the viewers' curiosity. Ali is also working on an architectural photographic series that will show next year in the Post-Soviet states. Art, design, and fashion—Ali's is a world where all of his muses merge into mesmerising pot of creative extravaganza. His photographs open the door to his startling vision. ■

