

ARCHITECTURE, DESIGN, INTERIORS + PROPERTY

identity®

ISSUE 217 / FEBRUARY 2022



A MOTIVATE PUBLICATION
DHS 25.00 OR 2.70 BD 2.60
SR 25.00 KD 2.10
identity.ae
6291100741137

The Slow Living Issue

Fabricating

Iraqi designer Layth Mahdi reveals the approach
behind his increasingly popular designs

nature



WORDS BY RIMA ALSAMMARAE



Ripple vase



Path stools

UAE-based Iraqi designer Layth Mahdi has only released a few pieces, but his creative output has already spoken volumes. With *Ripple*, his debut collection of marble vases and tables released in November 2018, and his latest piece, *Path* table, which is currently exhibiting at Sharjah's 1971 design space, it would seem Mahdi takes slow but steady steps, revealing himself to the Middle East's design scene with a quiet confidence. "I'm a very slow designer," he laughs. "And I think I'm proud of that."

Mahdi has an active background – he's an architecture graduate from the American University of Sharjah and an MSc graduate in architecture and digital technologies from the University of Michigan. He has also completed fellowships at the university's Fablab and the stone factory Quarra Stone, and was awarded Best Young Designer in 2018 by *Harper's Bazaar*. In the years between, he's gone from award-winning architecture firms like Woods Bagot to his current position as a senior robotic and design researcher at the Dubai Future Foundation. So where does design fit amidst the changing currents? "I would say design is a hobby," Mahdi explains. "And technology and robotics are my profession. I think it's too boring to stick to one thing, and for me, my work and hobbies are not separate. They feed into each other very much."

One glance at Mahdi's designs is enough for observers to glean the importance of technology in his work. The pieces in *Ripple*, for example, feature contoured surfaces milled by 7-axis Kuka robots and were designed using software algorithms. Three years later, and the modular *Path* table offers a natural continuation of *Ripple*'s fluid and unexpected forms, with its soft edges and surface swells.

"People get scared of the word 'technology'," says Mahdi. "But if we really think about it, it's just another tool, like a pen or a hammer. You tell the technology what to do, so you are still the creator at the end of the day, and you can use it to push the material beyond its limits."

Until now, Mahdi has mostly worked with stone and wood, exploring the properties of each and maximising their inherent qualities. His design process is divided into two phases: he starts by creating nearly 70 digital iterations of the same object, and once he's happy with the computerised prototype, he builds the physical model several times, adjusting and finalising the size, shape and materiality.

The *Path* table, designed along with the *Path* stools by Omar Al Gurg's MODU Method as part of the Sharjah Islamic Art Festival, reflects Mahdi's approach: the solid black stain finish highlights the natural lines of the oak wood, while the organic shape of each of the four modular parts allows the surfaces to flow into one another, creating a conversation between each section of the table.

"It makes me really happy to see people come to the exhibitions and just enjoy looking at the pieces," said Mahdi. "Because I think the majority of the pieces I design are not merely objects to put in a room or to be used, but to be looked at as well. They shouldn't only be functional; they should help make a space look beautiful."