

Interview with Alia Al Maktoum

By Melissini Motiti

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Melissini: Alia Al Maktoum is an Emirati Interior Designer and Fine Artist with a Passionate Soul and a visionary outlook. An artist whose journey embodies a fusion of modernity and tradition, navigating the intricate tapestry of Emirati heritage and contemporary expression. Hi Alia, thrilled to speak with you today!

Alia: Thank you for having me!

Melissini: I'm super excited to dive into your creative world and gain a better understanding of you as a fellow artist seeking a spot in MA intercultural Practices! Could you describe who you are as a practitioner and your main focus?

Alia: I have been painting since I was around 12 years old and I now have a degree in interior design. Although my practice entails being an interior designer and fine artist, I would love to also pursue a career within a government entity aimed at promoting and preserving Emirati culture in depth.

Melissini: As an artist who works in both interior design and painting, do you maintain distinct aesthetic approaches for each medium? I specifically found it intriguing how your portfolio embodies an appreciation for both maximalism and minimalism.

Alia: My view on fine art and painting is completely different from interior design. With painting I maintain a sort of childlike approach, more contemporary, but with interior design my practice is more streamlined, Modern and Picturesque. I live in a house where the majority of the interior is decorated to be more maximalized, mainly due to my mother's love of oriental design, so I have come to love and appreciate both modern and traditional elements. I like to pick and choose and add my own contemporary twist to traditional design.

Melissini: So, your artwork vividly reflects and embodies your cultural influences in that regard. You are preserving the culture while adding your own identity.

Alia: Definitely, for example instead of creating a building from scratch, I like to use spaces that have already existed, and marry my style into them, rather than diminish their authenticity. My main aim is to combine my style in a way that compliments tradition.

Melissini: You mentioned your mother, who else do you look up to as an artist?

Alia: I have this tendency to alter myself in aims of become the person I idolize, so rather than picking an idol, I choose to focus and explore what I aspire to achieve. For me that goal is to make my family proud, to be able to put a big thumbprint on society, to have a clear balance between the modernity of Emirati culture, especially in Dubai, while having a balance with our traditional culture. Sadly, our traditional district in Dubai has been largely demolished and replaced with sky scrapers and malls. The essence of my ancestors way of life is slowly fading. I want to go into a field where I can educate people on our culture or create art that has these aspects embedded into it. For example, I would love to work in the government entity "The culture of art authority in Dubai" to help preserve the Emirati heritage.

Melissini: That's so interesting. More governments should invest in preservation instead of replacing traditional architecture with skyscrapers.

Alia: Yes, People are mourning our traditional areas, because yes Dubai is a big city, but each area is different and we need to preserve that individual culture.

Melissini: That brings us back to Intercultural Practices. It's quite clear that your culture is a huge part of your practice. Could you share your journey leading up to deciding on pursuing this master's course, how did you come to make interculturality your focus?"

Alia: For my senior project during my Interior Design degree, I used my grandparents' house to create an architectural incubator. "Sheikh Saeed Al Maktoum House" is a building of massive cultural significance for Emirati culture as my grandparents were leaders and royals of Dubai, so it is my heritage in more than one aspect.

My goal with that project was to basically revert the youth back to the traditional district in Dubai, that has now been overtaken by tourists. No one lives in these houses anymore. I wanted to get the youth to come back and use these spaces to do workshops in different areas of design, to evoke a sense of belonging and cultural immersion, reverting back to where the city was actually birthed and to Reclaim the grounds back from tourism.

Melissini: So, your aim with that space was to spread awareness of the importance of preserving the identity of the locals and their culture.

Alia: Yes. We have a lot of futuristic elements in Dubai now, which is great but its good to be able to rejoice and understand the culture behind what exists now. Why are we the way we are? What is our ancestry, literature, and architecture? These are the things that make us who we are, not the skyscrapers and futurism of the big city.

Melissini: Your aim to educate on Emirati culture is truly admirable Alia! What does MA intercultural practices offer as a course that made you consider it as your primary option on your way to achieving this goal?

Alia: University of the Arts London is an institution that I have always dreamed being a part of. Whenever I came to London to do short courses with the university, I always felt this authentic energy around me. The students here are unapologetically themselves.

When I graduated from my Bachelors, I realized that whenever I sit to talk to people, my first instinct is to try and be more culturally aware and to speak in a tone where I am educated and informed. After discovering this course, I had a discussion with Marsha and I felt like I had found my path, so my instinct was to I pray on it. I talked to God and I said "God, if this is my path, please let it be easy".

Thankfully so far, my time here has felt so fluid. I feel so comfortable. With each week, our readings and discussions make me feel more empowered with knowledge and understanding. I Feel more and more myself. I am more confident of what I say, and I'm surprising myself in that way. I see things in a more dimensional way. I'm able to understand at a higher level compared to before.

Melissini: I sincerely agree, being in an environment that allows us to engage in informed, culturally rich discussions definitely fosters growth and confidence. I also feel a sense of growth ever since the beginning of our studies here.

Alia: Yes, and stronger mentally as well. During covid it was very hard for me to feel happy. Especially within my own skin. Ever since I made the choice to do join this course, it has been the only time when I feel like I'm doing something that brings be genuine happiness. I am doing something within myself that's enriching not only me but also others.

Melissini: As a fellow student I feel enriched just by having this interview! Which brings me to my next question. How else do you believe your practice and personhood can contribute to the spirit and objective of our course?

Alia: Through showing the world my culture, heritage and individual identity. Slowly but surely by being able to be more culturally aware not just about my own culture but also other cultures, therefore elevating my own practice and the discussions that are had among our group.

Melissini: You seem to place an emphasis not only to culture and tradition but also to emotion. In my research of your practice, I was specifically intrigued by your perspective on the impact of designing spaces on one's mental well-being. Could you explain how you do that through your work?

Alia: Sure, take for example a space with high ceilings, bright colored walls and natural elements, you are bound to have a boosted mood in that space, therefore better mental health. If a room is created as a meditation space, I know which elements to include to promote that and make those that enter into it feel welcomed as well as comfortable. The most important thing is knowing what people want out of a space in order to cater to it.

Melissini: Do u think a space designed with the traditional interior of a culture could effectively immerse someone in that culture, thereby raising awareness?"

Alia: Totally, especially if it's an old building that has already encompassed that culture. The energy of a space or an object, for example a necklace passed down by your grandparents, it will still have that same energy and carry a part of them within itself. A building is so much larger in scale so imagine how much energy it can uphold. The older a space is, the more generations had the opportunity to input heir energy into that space. To me a traditional home can surely transport you back in time while you pertain your modern identity. I really want to be able to combine that energy through my practice and morph it into something that can cater and suit the generations to come.

Melissini: that's a truly wonderful note to end on! Thank you so much for this interview, Alia, I feel like you are a great match for our course and I cannot wait to have more cultural discussions with you, and to see your goals come to fruition!

Alia: Thank you Meli! This was a lovely discussion.

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