



# Pop Up Reality

Rana Salam is a designer, art enthusiast and colourful character whose home studio is a breath of fresh air to any visitor

Wherever Rana Salam has lived, entering her home is like stepping into an alternate reality. Heavily influenced by the popular art of the Middle East, from Lebanon and Egypt, even when she lived in London – first in a cosy flat in Bayswater, then in a house with a studio up-front in the fashionable and bohemian district of Ladbroke Grove – her place has always been overflowing with her archive of inspiring designs, film posters and bright colours.

In 2010, she relocated with her husband and two children to her native Beirut and now the graphic artist and designer lives in a spacious apartment-cum-studio in the heart of the residential neighborhood of Achrafieh.

'I think the flat chose me,' she says. 'I had a dream while living in my tiny house in London that my next move would be to this big, bright and beautiful flat - and that's exactly what I found. The flat was part of the reason for my move.' The 1950s apartment on the eighth floor is a short walk away from countless shops, malls and old 19th century Lebanese villas such as Villa Sursock whose baroque architecture recalls that of Sicilian fortresses of the 17th century. 'I love the city, it's wild and wonderful,' she enthuses. 'My perception has not changed and the city still inspires me every day from its noise to its chaos.'

Salam, who has worked on design projects globally, ranging from the shop windows at Harvey Nichols department store, postcards for the opening of the Islamic Art galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Patchi's Millennium display and the Itsu restaurant chain, says her apartment is a giant

mood-board. With its bright furnishings, eclectic furniture and colourful blinds, every corner has an inspiring history. 'I wanted the flat to be a showcase of my vision and my spirit, so its neither a home nor an office, but more of a mood-board.' The 500 square-metre flat is like a blank canvas, great for any designer to play with, she says as she looks around.

Malu Halasa, editor-at-large for the new Beirut-based architectural journal, Portal 9: Stories and Critical Writing About the City has known Salam for many years. 'Walking into her deco apartment is like entering a rare museum of great design,' she enthuses. 'There is one of her Abdul Nasser coffee tables, a collection of rare Arab movie posters, her wonderful artwork, unusual trinkets and all the great publications she has designed, with the view from the windows of beautiful, teeming Beirut below.'

The women teamed up to co-edit the book, *The Secret Life of Syrian Lingerie: Intimacy and Design*, in London, in 2008, with the support of the Prince Claus Fund. Salam had been collecting exotic and imaginative examples of lingerie that she came across in markets in Syria. She was surprised to learn that daring underwear is acceptable in this conservative society. 'There are various funny and symbolic allusions present on bras and knickers,' she smiles. The book was hugely successful and it was shown as an exhibition at the Kunstalle Museum in Rotterdam in 2009. While some of the lingerie is still in boxes in London, some is framed on the walls of the apartment, for all to see.

'Although the topic is hugely humorous, we were serious

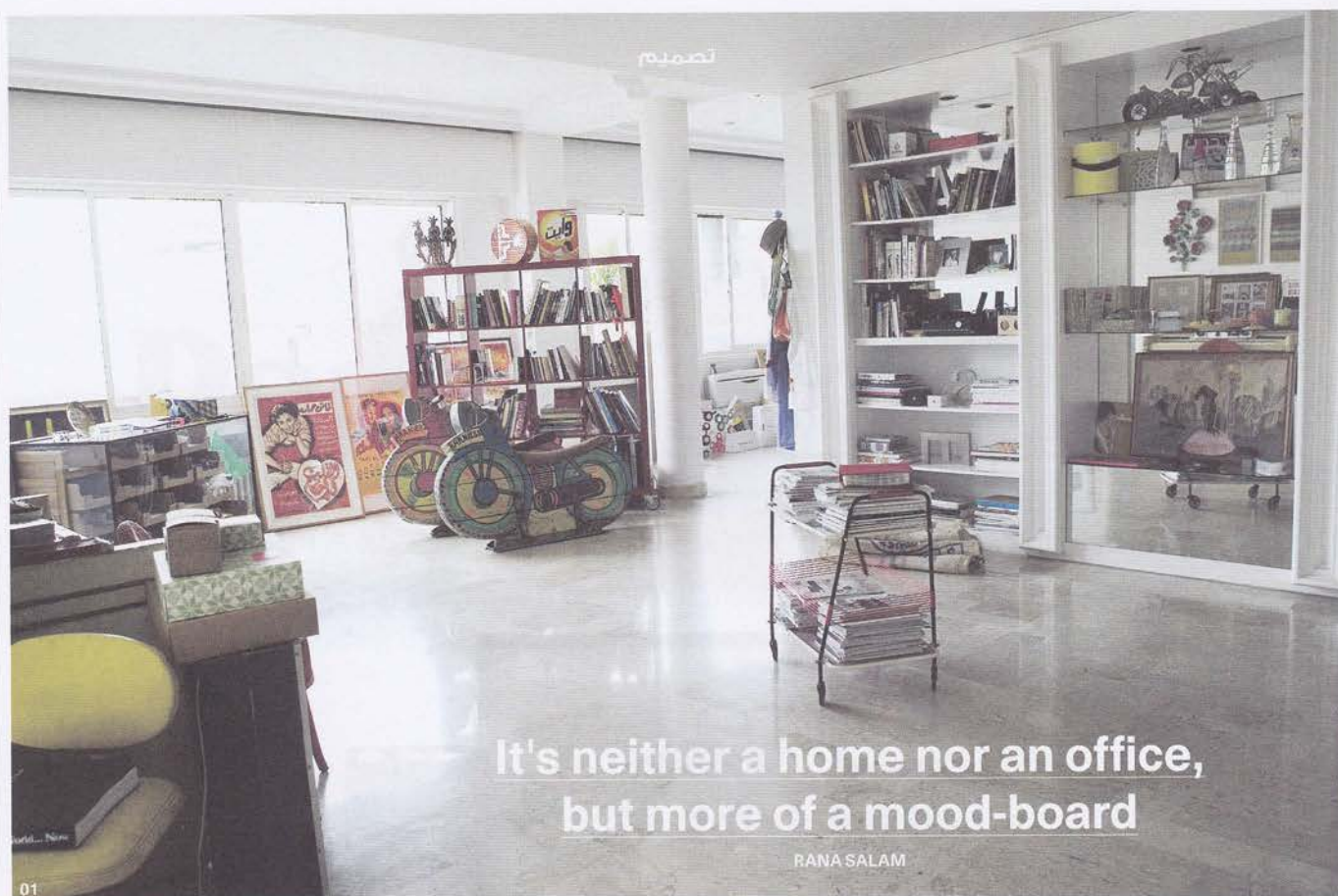


RESIDENCE  
Beirut, Lebanon



01 Rana Salam at home where she lives in what she  
calls a wow and wonderful world



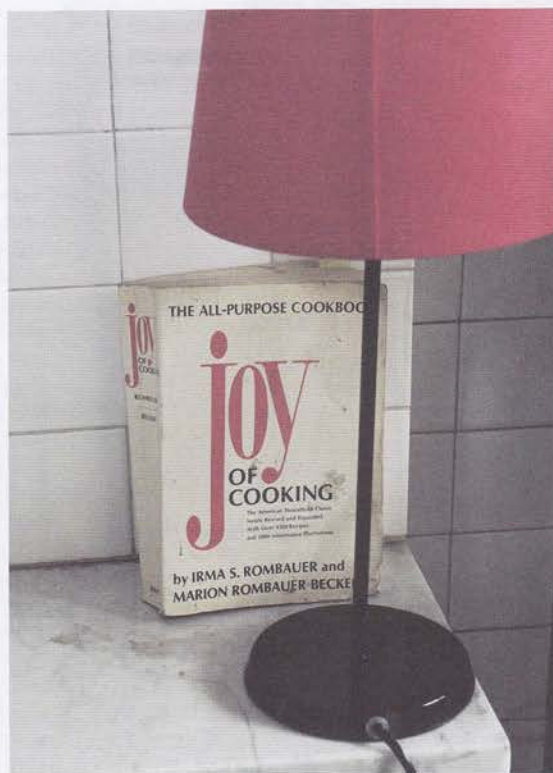


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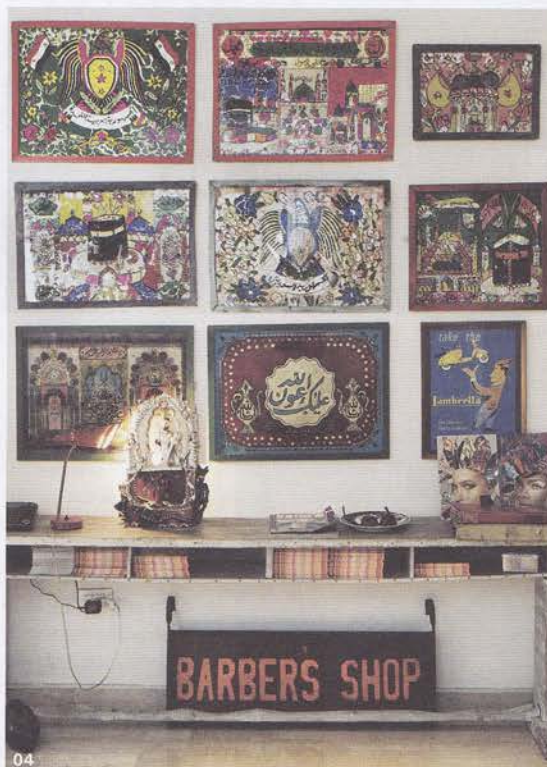
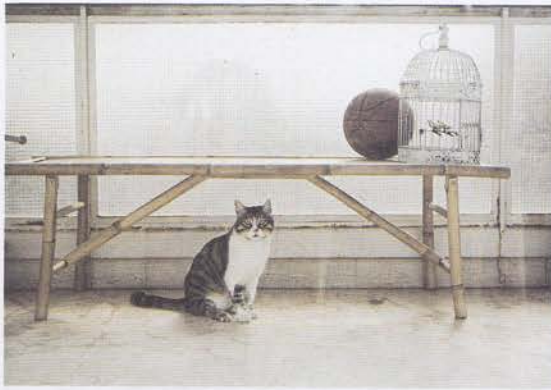
RANA SALAM

#### NUQAT

In March, in the company of other artists and designers such as Younes Duret, Alfred Tarazi, Nadine Chahine, Tarek Atrissi and Pascal Zoghbi, Salam was involved in the Nuqat Design Conference in Dubai. She ran a workshop entitled Cut & Paste: Creating Contemporary Products from Traditional Islamic Art, which was subtitled Making Islamic Art Cool. 'Nuqat has been very instrumental in supporting and promoting local talent and raising awareness towards design to the region,' says Salam with enthusiasm







#### CAPTURING CULTURE

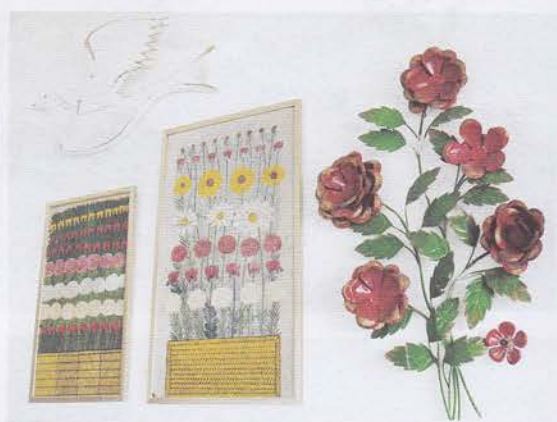
Named after a show at the Beirut Art Centre, this is the name of Salam's first book and line of products for interiors deriving from personal treasures capturing nostalgic moments. Salam's knowledge of Arab culture and its popular art stems from years of travelling and documenting. She then merges her collected ephemera and imagery with the latest technology to create a bold graphic language that is her signature style



01 Her apartment is full of items from her travels  
02 A piece of Indian art that Salam thinks is magical

03 A miniature Indian taxi, Salam bought in India  
04 Traditional popular Syrian artworks





#### EGYPTIAN CINEMA POSTERS

Salam researched Egyptian cinema posters as part of her MA thesis. She has a large collection of 1960s Egyptian posters featuring stars such as Leila Mourad, Houda Sultan and Farid Al Atrash. She exhibited the complete collection at the Institute of International Visual Arts (INIVA) in London in 1999







in our methodology and reporting of the subject matter,' explains Malu. 'Rana has a unique way of reading the Arab street in terms of design. Her knowledge and friendliness made her the darling of the racy lingerie manufacturers of Syria,' she laughs.

During her studies, Salam focused on Pop Art and while she was encouraged to return to her Middle Eastern roots in terms of inspiration, her appreciation of industrial design and the bright colours favoured by artists such as Warhol, Leichtenstain and Oldenburg is palpable - as much in her apartment as in her design work and philosophy of life.

'Sadly people only relate to Warhol, but there are many many more that were doing very cool stuff, telling stories of the consumer society of that period.'

Above her sofa hangs a painted 1960s relief of a painter in overalls hanging from a sign. 'This is Pop at its best,' she smiles. 'It's from France and it was an ad for a French paint company.' She then points out two wooden push bicycles standing in her living room - 'they are from a British fairground; totally Pop too.'

Salam always seems to be at the forefront of cutting-edge design initiatives, injecting them with fresh ideas and spontaneity. In London, she created a mail-order business, marketing her designs for iPhone covers, cushions, notebooks and jewellery through her own label mishmaoul.com.

In March, she became involved in the pop up retail wave in Beirut, where shops in the smart, downtown Beirut shopping area were taken over for a few weeks by innovative



designers, keen to show their cutting-edge designs to shoppers. For Salam, this was an extension of the traditional Arab souks and covered markets. 'The funny thing is that my work is inspired by the traditional souks, so this was the right place to be,' she says. '[In Beirut] people love the idea as it's cool and trendy, and new.'

At a time when many young Lebanese professionals have been moving back to the city, Salam's philosophy and her design ethos is consistently popular. Not only does it hark with nostalgia to Beirut's glory days, it also lends a little 1950s glamour to modern life.

From her studio home, Salam also spends a lot of time writing - she published her second book *Capturing Culture* two years ago. 'I have always worked from home,' she says. 'It inspires me - I don't see a separation between home and work. I live my work everyday; it's a very natural thing. I never say "I'm going to work now" I just do, be it designing or cooking, it's the same.'

Salam enjoys her time in the kitchen and many of her designs have found their way into restaurants, cafes and bakeries. 'I see a thin line between designing and cooking,' she says with a smile. 'You simply need great ingredients, a good recipe or idea and then bingo - you have a great piece of work.'



01 Triptych of blinds designed by Salam  
02 The entrance to Salam's Beirut apartment

03 Salam with her ten year old daughter, Ona  
04 Table from Portobello, in the kitchen



Contributors

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Maryam is a freelance photographer based in her native Tehran

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