

Title: Karim Rashid

By Amy Mowafi

Karim Rashid counts Kevin Spacey, Francis Ford Coppola, Missy Elliot, Patricia Arquette and Kelly Osborne amongst his die-hard fans. His commercial client list reads like a who's who of the international fashion and design world. From Armani to Prada, from Magis to Mikasa, Rashid is an 'internationally acclaimed award winning' industrial designer.

Though big words such as these are too often undeservedly bandied about, when it comes to Rashid even the description pales in comparison to the reality. Rashid, who has created just about everything from products, interiors, fashion, furniture, lighting, art, music to installations, is the eccentric tour de force of the global design world. Born in Cairo in 1960, half Egyptian, half English, raised in Canada, Rashid has designed and produced over 2000 products during his career. In the process he's been drowned in a tsunami of awards including ID Magazine's Annual Design Review Award for Design Distinction (four times), the International Interior Design Association Star Award, the Brooklyn Museum of Art Designer Award, the Philadelphia Museum of Art Collab Award, the Daimler Chrysler Award and 13 Chicago Athenaeum Good Design Awards, to literally name but a few.

Rashid's works are in the permanent collections of 14 Museums, and he exhibits art at Sandra Gering Gallery, Elga Wimmer Gallery and Deitch Projects in New York. With a BA in industrial design from Canada and an MA from Italy, Rashid also writes for leading design publications, and lectures globally. Best of all, as the title of his first book explains, Karim Rashid wants to "change the world".

Based in New York where he set up his studio over a decade ago, Rashid agreed to a rendezvous with Enigma. Like the man himself, the interview was intriguing. Rashid takes a simple question, and turns it inside out, to give you an utterly absorbing response that's always full of creative twists and imaginative turns, and more often than not, a viewpoint that is miles left of the middle...

Let's start with your background, you're half Egyptian but were brought up in Canada, how strong is your relationship with the Arab world?

I am a quarter Irish, quarter English, quarter Algerian, quarter Egyptian and I speak several languages. I'm trying to learn Japanese in my spare time (but I have no spare time!). We left Egypt for Rome when I was two, then went to Paris then London, then

Montreal, then Toronto. My only childhood memories are really only of London, although I must admit I never really think about my childhood, or even yesterday. My mind is always on now. So I don't really have any relationship with the Middle East today, although I wish I did. I may be designing a small boutique hotel in Cairo and a project in Dubai.

What about your upbringing, in terms of parental influences, was it more Arab or Western?

I went sketching with my father in England, drawing churches. He taught me to 'see'. He taught me perspective at that age. He taught me that I could design anything and touch all aspects of our physical landscape. He taught me that all humans are virtually the same and that beauty is in everything. I remember drawing a cathedral facade and deciding I did not like the shape of the windows, so I redesigned them. I also remember winning a drawing competition for children; I drew luggage based my own ideas of how to travel. I read books from artists all over the world. Since my parents were quite cosmopolitan I was exposed to every culture and creed. I even went to both the mosque and Catholic church just to be exposed to my parents' religious upbringing. I was obsessed with drawing eyeglasses, shoes, radios, luggage, televisions, throughout my childhood, and I remember reading about Raymond Lowey when I was 11 years of age. I also admired so many artists from all the books scattered in the house. I loved Andy Warhol, Rodchenko, Picasso, Calder, Corbusier, De Chirico, Eames, Miro, YSL, Halston, Cardin, Panton, and so many other artists that were pluralists. Design, art, architecture, fashion, film, it was all the same to me.

So how would you define yourself then?

I think that as an American designer my cultural significance and contribution is 'casualisation': democratic design, mobility and ease. The European influence from my upbringing is the more romantic and poetic side of me, and the Middle Eastern side is probably the more passionate and artistic side. The British part of me is the pragmatic and business side. I realised my life's mission at age five in London. But I am very concerned about this question. I do not like the idea of stereotyping, and I really dislike the conscious discrimination and cliché of race, creed, religion and culture. I am such a believer in one world, and one human race. Yes of course there are cultural differences and traditions, but they are all breaking down. They are all blurring and the world is shrinking very rapidly. I will say that there is a great deal of racial discrimination in Europe that is 'unspoken', whereas although the world believes that America has a great deal of racism, it is in the open and this 'freedom of speech' and openness is positive because the problems can be heard and dealt with. Awareness is the key to solving problems. In Europe there is perpetual racism behind closed doors. I hope all this is changing and I think nationalities and races are not so important anymore. The new world is one world.

Have you ever drawn inspiration for your work from your Arab roots?

Recently I have for the first time seen something Egyptian in my work, like the iconography I have created, the 'karimagologos', which are like contemporary hieroglyphics. Also there is a proportion, symmetry and geometric sensibility in my work that may have some roots in my DNA.

Well more generally, what, whom or where inspires and influences you?

Inspiration is accumulative. I am inspired by my childhood, my education, by all the teachers I have ever had, by every project I have worked on, by every city I have travelled to, by every book I have read, by every art show I have seen, by every song I have heard, by every smell, every taste, sight, sound and feeling. I always feel very worldly, in fact sometimes I feel like I am not from this planet, in the sense that I can observe human cultures, human behaviour and see all the nuances. Highly creative people in the world inspire me.

You create for a diverse range of fields but where does your real passion lie? Does the idea of a 'jack of all trades, master of none' ever worry you?

Every part of this profession is challenging. It is a very complex field. We are like jack of all trades, part creator, part engineer, part stylist, part editor and part marketer, from business to production, from human anthropological dissection to liaison with brands. I do not believe in specialisation, I believe in pluralism.

Which of your creations and awards are you most proud of?

I am proud of the Morimoto restaurant in Philadelphia, which I designed 3 years ago. It was my first restaurant design and I am also proud of how successful it is. It's always booked 3 months in advance and has won so many awards. I'm proud of the 'OH' chair that I designed and the 'Garbo' can for Umbra because they have sold in the millions in the US, and proved to me that Americans want design at an affordable price. Then there are recent cosmetic designs such as the Davidoff and Miyake projects, and the Prada skincare line. I'm proud of the dish soap bottle that is presently selling in the US at about one million every six months! There's also the new jewellery collection for Golay in Switzerland released this month, and the butterfly chair for Magis in Italy, a recent watch for Acme and the Semiramis hotel which is a four year project and my first building. But honestly, as an artist I am generally obsessed with my latest piece of work. So once objects see the world (one of every 50 things I design get to that stage), I am onto something completely new and try not to think of the past.

How about the 'design industry' in the Middle East?

I know so little about that, but I am working with a large German manufacturer now who produces in Egypt. I will learn more eventually.

What haven't you designed that you'd like to have a go at? What everyday object, in your opinion, could do with a design makeover?

Everything needs a design makeover. There is so much to do. When you go into a typical store it is difficult to find a beautiful well-designed interesting commodity. Even though, we collectively as designers have worked for a century, the built environment is really awful and so little of the great designers' works become part of everyday life. This is why I believe design should focus on the everyday so that everyone can embrace and engage good design.

Unlike many 'artists' you seem to be more focused on the commercial viability of your work...

I try to imbue poetics and meaning into the object for everyday life. When I was young I imagined a world that is robotic, where all our objects and products would be produced without laborious hand labour. I also saw a world that would be seamless with technology, a place where we could communicate audibly, visually, in real time everywhere, anywhere, and I saw our environments as intelligent, energetic, hyper aesthetic places. I also believed that new visions of building, cars, products, furniture, clothing, art, would be really inspiring, digital and 'infosthetic'. It was a world that I was hoping I would grow up into. And that world is here, and even more beautiful, more digital, more visceral, more behavioural, more communicative, more phantasmal than ever. And I want to continue that mission, so that we all can embrace and engage with our contemporary world.

OK, let's get a bit personal. You're covered in tattoos, tell us about them...

I will answer you literally. I have developed 55 symbols (marks) over the last 13 years. Each has meaning. I call them 'Karimagologos'. My new book, released in October, is called 'Evolution' and will explain their meanings. I never try to intentionally use them but they come into the work subconsciously at the most incidental times. I have 12 tattoos on me, one from each different city in the world; from Tokyo to San Francisco to New York to London, to Chicago, like a stamped passport or stickers on luggage. They are my personal modern hieroglyphics. The Semiramis hotel I designed in Greece has these symbols to identify rooms instead of numbers. I think that 'expression' covers the issue of emotion but I will expand. The emotive is a psychologically driven need, a desirous attachment to a thing. As designers we inject these objects with our abstract emotion, with our desire, seduction, passion, love and spirit in order to touch others. I create, therefore I am. I engage therefore I project emotion and meaning onto the object and personalise it.

How about your own personal style...

Sensual minimalism. All objects have semantic language. They speak to us. Certain forms, lines, colours, textures, functions, all touch and communicate to our senses and our daily experiences. It is important to not necessarily over-embellish objects, to keep a certain truth to a product, but objects need to touch our sensual side, they need to elevate a certain experience, and they need to be human. Love and desire are part of my interests in 'sensualising' our physical material world.

What keeps you up at night?

Sex, bad movies and strong coffee.

You wrote a book about wanting to change the world, and from what I gather the world-changing thing is a big obsession. How do you plan to go about doing that, and more generically how does a designer change the world exactly?

I learned that the world is a vast complex farrago of beauty and the idea of an international style is an antiquated modernist idea or utopia. The world has layers and layers of styles taking place simultaneously; there are hybrids of cultures, races, creeds and values. But at the same time there is no more 'local' and we should all think globally. I was brought up globally and I see the world as if I came from another planet, observing, perceiving, engaging, contributing. I am working in 26 countries right now, and since I can choose my projects and I have clients that come to me. I find that every project I am doing and every one of these cultures is evenly inspiring. When I go to a place I must immediately work there, produce something as my message or comment or contribution to that place. I get so overwhelmingly inspired and I cannot stop thinking of what I could do in that place! I love the world, I love diversity, and I love the desirous need by everyone to create, to contribute and to project energy into this world. At the same time I love the shrinking unification of the world because it affords all the opportunity to be inspired by every culture, by everyone, everywhere and anytime. This is the omnipresent new age in which we live. More choice, more exposure, more information, more exchange, perpetual communication, so that we become an ever-vast inspiring single world. Hopefully one day we will have one peaceful place, one religion (the religion of respect and love for each other), and a positive creative intellectual future. A 'nutopia!'

Everyday I live I believe that we could be living in an entirely different world. One that is full of real contemporary inspiring objects, spaces, places, worlds, spirits and experiences. Design has been the cultural shaper of our world from the start. We have designed systems, cities and industrialisation. We designed everything. My real desire is to see people live in the modus of our time, to participate in contemporary world, and to release themselves from nostalgia, antiquated traditions, old rituals, kitsch meaningless. We should be conscious and sensorially attune with this world in this moment. If human nature is to live in the past, to change the world is to change human nature.

Most articles paint you as being quite egotistical and rather arrogant. Is that a fair assumption?

Only the British paint that picture. They have said the nastiest things about me (and racist ones I might add), even though I am half British. People who meet me and know me find me much more humble, more giving and generous and not at all arrogant. The media takes my words and because I have a lot to say creates a mythological arrogant character.

So what would the title of your biography be?

'Essensualism and Nutopia'.

All creative 'geniuses' have a few screws loose...discuss...

Everyone has a few loose screws, some more than others. I think creative people are actually the together ones and 'so-called normalcy' is actually the odd characters in life. Sadly, a straightforward banal conservative life is not living, it exists only. To question existence, being, contribution, accomplishment, creativity, risk, experimentation and your role in life makes you really together as a person. Living like this is having your screws tight.