



ZONA BAARI

A STUDIO MAKING JEWELRY, HOMEWARE AND GRILLS PROVES THAT IN THE NEW WORLD OF RETAIL, YOU CAN MAKE – AS WELL AS SELL – FROM YOUR HOME.

Ruqayyah Alzona Al-Baari is at her Detroit studio early in the morning. Already she's burned frankincense and myrrh, picked an atmospheric playlist and is contemplating a wall covered in design sketches. 'You have to have your rituals before the work begins,' she says, while examining the wall and deciding what she'll make today. 'Probably a ceramic vessel.'

The 29-year-old, who goes by Ru for short, is behind Zona Baari – a multimedia arts studio specializing in various forms, from ceramic homeware and metal jewelry to textiles, leisurewear and grills (custom-made jewelry worn over the teeth). Explaining the diverse array of products, Ru says, 'I just wasn't seeing stuff that I wanted to spend money on.'

What unifies Zona Baari products is that they're all made by Ru using natural and high-end materials. She carries out all the stages of production herself and hand-carves everything. 'The presence of the human hand has to be noticeable in everything I make,' she says. 'I'm not looking for a machine-quality finish – I want the perfect imperfections.'

She continues: 'I wasn't interested in becoming a ceramics expert and showing my work. I want each piece to have a little bit of myself – at whatever level I'm at.' The world is full of 'people chasing perfection', she says, before they allow themselves 'to do something'. Early on, she started selling hand-dyed shirts and colored silk scarfs working with the motto: 'If I'd buy it, then it's good enough.'

Ru runs Zona Baari primarily via Instagram. Here, you can find her eclectic products, but she uses the platform as much to document the making process. There are photos of Ru in a mask and goggles buffing gold grills and videos of her shaping clay. Ru has decided to grow her following organically rather than chasing follows for the sake of it and spending large sums on marketing like some brands. 'Whatever the algorithm is, the people who've found me are on the same wavelength,'

she says. 'They're very supportive and get what I'm doing. I don't feel the need to do much marketing.'

Zona Baari began in 2018, when Ru returned to her home in Miami, Florida, after studying filmmaking in New York City. 'I fell out of love with how expensive it was to pursue film, so I came home and felt the call to use my hands and create something I could share with others,' she says. Initially, this meant making grills. This type of mouth jewelry initially gained popularity in the eighties hip-hop scene in New York City and, more often than not, grills were worn by men – but a new generation of female makers is redefining the art form.

'Grills were my gateway to making jewelry,' says Ru, who asked for an apprenticeship with a local maker, who she then worked under, and hasn't looked back since. 'I love making them. I grew up in Florida where people often rocked gold teeth,' she says.

Ru says she thinks of herself as an artist first – businesswoman comes further down the list. Every day, she explains, she simply creates whatever she's in the mood to make – from soft pillows that wouldn't look out of place at a spiritual retreat to gold grills worn on the streets of Miami. Usually, a creation starts in her head and appears in her sketchbook before being molded, cast or sewn into existence. When asked about her influences, Ru says: 'It's a confluence of my experiences and interests. I draw on hip-hop culture and the natural world. I'm fascinated by the movement and shapes of the human body and I'm deep into plant-based healing.'

In her 20s, Ru lived in a few different places: New York City, Los Angeles, Miami and Detroit. All the moving around partly explains why she hasn't been interested in bricks-and-mortar stores. 'I've been a nomadic soul,' she says. But, in her airy studio space, it seems like