

ASIA MAJOR

With **Asian labels at centrestage at the Blueprint Trade Show** this month, Baey Shi Chen explains why the world should look East.

For years, the fashion industry had been dominated by the West, with only a handful of names such as Yohji Yamamoto, Comme des Garçons, Philip Lim and, more recently, Thakoon and Alexander Wang, to wave the banner for Asian fashion. But with the East's rising influence, there has been a growing acknowledgement that Asian labels are becoming a force to be reckoned with.

And Blueprint is set to cement this. Launched as part of the Asia Fashion Exchange, Blueprint is the first trade show of its kind in the region, and aims to make Singapore the fashion capital of the East. Lasting three days, more than 50 up-and-coming Asian labels from eight countries will display their wares in a single event, to international buyers such as Harvey Nichols, Matches, Selfridges and Opening Ceremony. It will be open to the public on the third day.

Blueprint also aims to break the tyranny of seasonal fashion. Tjin Lee, its founder, explains: "If you look at climates in places like Mumbai, Dubai, Bahrain, New Zealand and Australia, you will find that a good portion of the world does not buy clothes according to the seasons from the West. As a result, cruise collections have become very important to big fashion houses because these trans-seasonal collections often outsell their Autumn/Winter collections.

"This is because while only half the world buys winter clothing, the whole world shops for trans-seasonal fashion, and this will become a more important market as Asia rises in economic power and sophistication."

UNIQUELY ASIA

More than merely cornering the trans-seasonal market, these fledgling brands still face a huge challenge in a world where fashion houses like Louis



"Our unique selling point is the quality of our fabrics, the thought put into every design and the exclusiveness of each style." **Alica Ong, designer of Al&Alicia**

Vuitton and Chanel are still definitive tastemakers. It does not help that, other than a handful of fashion insiders, the mainstream customer will not have heard of the majority of these labels. What then, can sell these Asian labels?

It's a fact that Asian designers can create clothes that are as beautiful, creative and well-made as any others in the world — many Asian designers have trained with the best fashion and art schools in Europe, and possess conceptual and technical expertise comparable to that of Western labels.

In fact, Asian labels are proving so promising that Ann Kositchotitana, founder of indie multi-label boutique Front Row, opened a media and sales showroom in February to represent them. Called Front Row Studio, its impressive roster includes local names like antebellum, iamwhoiam and Utt'er, and Thai labels Ek Thongprasert, Frank and Sanshai, all of which will also be

showing at Blueprint.

Kositchotitana says: "Labels like antebellum, iamwhoiam and Utt'er are already selling at Front Row, so we know their vast market potential." They were selected for distinct design aesthetics and their promising production capacity. "It wasn't just a matter of representing exciting labels that made commercial sense but also to put them out there, which is where Front Row Studio comes in and also where Blueprint fits in as an initial open-trade platform."

Another asset is Asia's sheer diversity of cultures. Cat Ong, curator of Blueprint, explains: "Asia [has brought] up a myriad of original aesthetics and a varied talent pool, with a focus on craft unique to the territory — I predict that the fashion world is on the cusp of a long and fruitful relationship, excavating and enjoying the thus-far unspoiled charms of so-called 'Asian' design."

Antwerp-based Thai designer Ek Thongprasert, whose eponymous label is in Blueprint, agrees: "Asian designers should look to their heritage and try to produce an interesting product that the global market can consume. Of course, we should not include so much of it that it becomes too costume-like or too alternative, but neither should we include too little of it."

Indian designer Abhijeet Khanna, whose label is Risa, is proud to use her culture in her clothes, which she describes as "strong Indian ethnicity served on a contemporary platter". She says: "The global audience is well aware and energised by the very thought of ethnicity in art and design — hence, this market has lots to offer to the global consumer."

AFFORDABLE LUXURY

The easy access to manufacturing facilities and fabric mills in the region is another strong lure for setting up a local label. And contrary to stereotype, a lower price does not have to equate to inferior products. Alicia Ong, who designs local luxury streetwear label Al&Alicia, is all



too aware of this. Ong says: “We spend a great amount of time sourcing for the right fabrics, trims and embellishments, and we refuse to settle for poor-quality fabric even if it is cheap.”

It would seem that international buyers are taking note. Cat Ong says: “Many of the big stores are willing to come out to Blueprint this year – even on short notice – because they know that they have to be first on the curve of unveiling Asian talent.

“Also, buyers are mad for accessories and shoes because of the recession, and Asian designers, with their fresh, light-hearted talent and friendly price points, are ideal for cash-strapped shoppers looking for new pacifiers beyond lipsticks and makeup.”

CAPTURING THE WORLD

However, Kositchotitana sounds a warning note in all the hype: “The key is

to be original with a strong identity. Asia, in general, has had to deal with the issues of copying and counterfeiting. If a designer can truly break out and produce original concepts and collections, the world will certainly take notice.”

Quincy Teofisto, owner of local multi-label boutique Blackmarket, will be one of the buyers at Blueprint. He says: “Cohesiveness of the collection is very important – the idea should resonate from the pieces. It should be well thought-out, balancing play and passion.”

Douglas Benjamin, CEO of FJ Benjamin, which developed local powerhouse brand Raoul, says: “Asian labels can carve a niche for themselves in the international markets by delivering products that stay true to one’s brand ethos and do not compromise on quality.” He knows what he’s talking about: Raoul just opened in New York.

Tjin Lee says: “You should choose a label that appeals to you and not judge it [based on] where it came from – we should definitely support our young local and regional designers, so we can invest in them the resources to grow into the next Philip Lim or Jason Wu.”

And this is why Blueprint will be crucial. Josephine Xie, the designer behind local label Utt’er, says: “There’s a lot of potential in Asian labels, in terms of creativity and resources, especially in Singapore, and despite the limited resources we have, we still see young designers producing good pieces.”

Only time will tell, but there is no doubt that the Asian fashion industry is on the verge of something big. **ELLE**

Blueprint will take place at the F1 Pit Building from 29 April to 1 May. Blueprint Emporium will be open to the public on 1 May. Tickets are available at www.tdc.sg from \$28.

A SHOW OF ELEGANCE

He's kept a low profile for the last few years, but local **cheongsam couturier Lai Chan** makes a celebrated return to the fashion fold at Blueprint.

ELLE: What led you to present your comeback collection at Blueprint?

LC: The late Mrs Ong Teng Cheong and I often spoke about the local fashion scene, and we were excited about Singapore's huge potential to become the fashion hub of Asia. Things, seemed to be on the right track, and I was encouraged by the concerted effort of many to promote the fashion industry. Tjin Lee [founder of Blueprint] and Cat Ong [curator of Blueprint] came to me – I respect them and believe in their vision, and that's how I came to be here now.

ELLE: How will this collection be different from what you did before?

LC: The *qipao* [Chinese term for the *cheongsam*] has always been dear to me because I believe in our culture and heritage. I do not want to reconstruct it for no reason, but the shape and proportions of modern women have changed drastically. The cut of the *qipao* is not exactly forgiving or easy to move in, so I'm correcting the proportions.

ELLE: What was your inspiration?

LC: I had an unfortunate experience in theatre [*Zebra Crossing Production*, the theatre company that Lai Chan has a stake in, was left \$1 million in debt after a musical flopped] and strangely, that made me throw away my initial ideas for the collection. Instead of strong, dramatic images, the new designs are softer, gentler, with a more languid silhouette.



ELLE: How have local designers and consumers changed?

LC: I see many talented designers around, and I hope that they are given more chances to do well – there are too few opportunities for local designers to come together and spur each other on. I hope that the consumers see the need for them to support local fashion and talent in order for Singapore to nurture its dream of being a fashion capital.

ELLE: What differentiates Asian designers from international ones?

LC: Asian designers are definitely more affordable and we usually work much harder. In some cases, we lack the financial support so necessary to launch a new collection every season, not to mention the lack of infrastructure to deliver it.

ELLE: What changes do you hope to see after Blueprint?

LC: I hope to see renewed interest and more support in local and Asian fashion circles, and for the industry to be stronger – it should not be just one glamorous but mindless event after another. We need to put some serious planning and thought into it, and of course, I hope international buyers will keep coming back to buy from us.

Lai Chan is at #02-10 Raffles Hotel, 6338-4806.

THAILAND

EK THONGPRASERT

A trained architect-turned-fashion-designer, Antwerp-based Thai Ek Thongprasert takes a conceptual approach towards jewellery design, like in this fun jelly-coloured necklace.



FLYNOW THE LEATHER

Flynw is one of Thailand's most internationally recognised labels – it started as a small womenswear brand but has grown rapidly in acclaim, and its popular leather range will be showing at Blueprint.



FRANK

This edgy Thai accessories label features leather cuffs embellished with faux fur, studs and crystals.

SINGAPORE

VICE & VANITY

"I love it because the designers don't follow trends – they have minds of their own and are different from the others. Most importantly, every piece is hand-made by the designers." – Dolphin Yeo, fashion stylist.

72 SMALLDIVE

Founded by Szetiong Soh, this ethically conscious label aims to produce creations that inject positive reflections and joy. Its bags are handmade by artisans in Milan, while its jewellery is produced in Sardinia.

ALLDRESSEDUP

Inspired by the vibrant cultures of Asia, the label goes colour-mad this season, with quirky retro/pop-inspired necklaces as well as shiny vinyl and leather bags for eye-popping effect.

"72 Smalldive's aesthetic is minimal and functional with a dash of thought-provoking tongue-in-cheek."

Szetiong Soh, India

MARILYN TAN

"I love working and designing with precious metals like gold and silver, but they should be worked with a little irreverence – not to take away from the beauty of the metals but not to take the pieces of jewellery too seriously." – Marilyn Tan

INDIA

FLUKE DESIGN COMPANY

Designed by artist-cum-product designer Rashmi Dogra, the label's accessories display a strong Indian ethnic influence, and is all crafted by hand.

MEHER KAKALIA

Londoner Meher Kakalia has a fascination for ancient shoe-making traditions, and designs her unique shoes in her Brixton studio before sending the designs to be handmade in a workshop she set up in her home-town of Karachi.