

PERSONALITY

Kuala Lumpur Fashion Week has come and gone, showcasing the best in local and international ready-to-wear collections by tomorrow's up-and-coming designers. Held at Pavilion, Kuala Lumpur, the event was also graced by representatives from Singapore, Indonesia, Turkey, the UK and Australia.

This year, a fresh face from Malaysia has taken top prize in AirAsia's Runway Ready Designer Search 2015 contest, with Lee Bao En from University College Sedaya International (UCSI) outshining all the challengers with a textured, earthy ensemble inspired by the mysteries and mystique of Cambodia's elaborate Wats or temple complexes.

Rising to the top

"I've been fascinated with design since I was a child, when I used to draw figures and overlay them with dresses of different styles. I even played with towels to 'create' my own garments," says the soft-spoken 22-year-old fashion design and marketing student from Negri Sembilan.

It's no easy task to rise to the top of a generation full of promising talents, particularly for one so young. In taking home the grand prize, Lee's designs had to stand out from a crowd of such collections, which she attributes to the well-rounded approach favoured by UCSI's De Institute of Creative Arts & Design (Icad).

Eschewing the pitfalls of overspecialisation, the faculty tempers its graduates with real-world industry know-how while honing their abilities in creative expression, with Lee's particular course consisting of 75% practical work with illustration, textiles, pattern cutting and garment construction, and 25% of marketing proficiencies.

"Marketing is a critical skill in today's business environment, because you have to know how to run a company, particularly in terms of risk management. It gives you a better view of the bigger picture, and you have the option of taking a more entrepreneurial path, without just limiting yourself to design," she says.

On the shoulders of giants

Along the way, Lee learned and grew from the astute guidance and feedback of classmates and mentors, particularly UCSI lecturer Lucas Lim Boon Leong, who assisted her with problem-solving while putting together her collection for the Runway Ready Designer Search competition.

Her subsequent victory was not an isolated event, coming on the heels of previous participation in the Malaysia International Shoe Festival (MISF) competition in 2013, where her

A fashion-forward FUTURIST

UCSI student Lee Bao En does her alma mater proud with her success in AirAsia's Runway Ready Designer Search 2015

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team utilised everyday materials such as wire, tin sheets and black duct tape to create avant-garde footwear designs.

"Fashion itself has many different aspects, such as shoes and other accessories, and I think it's a good thing to touch on various areas of the field. With that said, I do prefer working with garments, particularly in how they wear on models. My MISF experience also helped me learn the ropes of the competition environment, from initial drafts to submissions," she says.

In applying her previous experiences and innate skills to AirAsia's contest, Lee drew inspiration from Angkor Wat and similar Cambodian landmarks, though she has yet to visit the sites in person. Instead, she discovered her obsession with the exotic temples through her high school studies, which motivated her to investigate them further.

A blast from the past

Lee was especially drawn to the landmarks' intricately ornate wall carvings, as well as their historical legacy and the mood their silhouettes evoke. She incorporated these elements into her three-piece ensemble, taking particular care with the textures, which she duplicated through knit work purchased wholesale and painstakingly assembled by hand.

"The white-lace piece for instance was inspired by some of the wall art I studied. The competition was

PHOTOS BY DD HOE



Lee has been fascinated by design since she was young, often drawing figures and overlaying them with dresses in different styles

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announced about three months ago, after which we had to submit our sketches, inspirations and fabrications. There were 350 designers in the first round, from which 62 were shortlisted, and in the end, 10 finalists were selected," she says.

With regards to personal inspirations, Lee cites Japanese maven Rei Kawakubo, particularly her Comme des Garçons fashion label, as a major influence. With an emphasis on distressed fabrics and sustainable practices in its designs, some of these characteristics found their way to Lee's own style, as seen in the reconstructed aesthetics of her Cambodia collection.

In developing her own unique approach, Lee also benefited from UCSI's industry-driven strategy, which includes a co-operative education programme to integrate classroom learning with workplace training. The institution also continually revamps its products to maintain their relevance in the ever-changing business landscape, enhancing graduate employability.

"ICAD's curriculums are very hands-on, in line with our philosophy of blending industry and academia. This is emphasised by our vice-chancellor and president Datuk Dr Khalid Yusof, who aims to eliminate the gap between the two," adds UCSI corporate communications assistant manager Marina Tan.

For the future, Lee is looking forward to her graduation, set to take place this month, after which she will be pursuing a one-year apprenticeship with Jovian Mandagie, an Indonesian-born designer raised in Kuala Lumpur. His creations have been worn by personalities from Erra Fazira to Ning Baizura, and Lee anticipates learning under his wing and going on to establish her own brand. ■

