

Tokyo Tropical

by Ellen Boonstra

Thai designers are putting their colorful mark on the city's fashion scene, and the world is taking note

While some countries have yet to discover Thailand as a hotbed of fashion-forward design, in Japan it's a different story. A new breed of young Thai fashion designers has been steadily conquering the racks of Japanese stores, gracing prestigious magazine covers like *Women's Wear Daily Japan* and styling a nation of fashionable citizens in the process. One Thai brand, Sretsis, even chose Tokyo as the location for its first-ever worldwide standalone store.

Breaking into the Japanese market is no mean feat and if there's one man who's been instrumental in opening department store doors for Thai fashion designers in Japan, it's Jason Lee Coates from fashion bureau H3O. Speaking to him at his Tokyo showroom shortly before the December holidays with the sounds of RuPaul's Christmas carols cheerfully crooning away in the background, he explains how it all came about.

A former stylist who's been part of the global fashion scene spanning Singapore, Dubai as well as his homeland of Australia, Jason set up the agency after relocating to Tokyo some nine years ago. Together with his partner Hirohito Suzuki, a whizz in all things financial, they found their niche after frequently being queried by overseas brands. "How do we get into this market?" They initially focused on Australian brands but soon discovered their first Thai brand, Sretsis, at a tradeshow in New York.

CHERRY PICKING

The first season Jason showed the line to fashion buyers was a resounding success. "They were shocked," he says. "They had no idea what to expect." In no time Jason was able to triple the amount of stockists and the brand has been enjoying exponential growth in Japan ever since, currently selling at nearly 80 outlets around the country.

Buoyed by this positive response, Jason and his team quickly hopped on a plane to Bangkok in search of more Thai brands, and were introduced to a slew of young and upcoming labels including DrycleanOnly, Wonder Anatomie, Ek Thongprasert (intricately crafted jewelry made from silicon) and Curated, Ek Thongprasert's fashion line.

"We picked up quite a few brands," Jason says. They decided to concentrate their next efforts on the designer they thought would do best – DrycleanOnly. Founded by Patipat Chaipukdee, who started his clothing line out of the back of a car at Chatuchak Market in Bangkok, DrycleanOnly specializes in one-off creations blending vintage Adidas tees with sequins and feathers. As the name implies, it's best to handle

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the garments with care because of the couture-like work involved. Patipat's t-shirts were an instant hit, selling like hot cakes not only in Japan but also in Korea, France and Italy.

"It went into I don't know how many stores, it was insane," he adds. It didn't hurt sales that R&B temptress Rihanna was spotted wearing an intricately detailed t-shirt from DrycleanOnly's latest collection. The label has continued to bloom and Jason now sells it, along with other young Asian brands as well as European designers like Vivetta from Italy, at his showrooms in Tokyo and Paris.

WUNDERKIND

Wonder Anatomie was a different story. "Wonder Anatomie is still our little baby," Jason says. It took two years before the agency took them on, Jason recalls of this vibrant street wear brand, readily recognizable by splashy prints and parts of animal anatomy. After mentoring and grooming the brand to ready it for Japan's stringent market requirements, it was picked up by Isetan.

"To get into Isetan is the dream of any brand here. It's not that easy," Jason notes. In Thailand, the label masterminded by fashion prodigy Chalermkiat Khatikasemlert, showcased its edgy design collection at Bangkok International Fashion Week 2014 and Seoul Fashion Week 2014. Like DrycleanOnly, the brand has become a pop-star favorite, in this case for South Korean girl band 4Minute, who all wear Wonder Anatomie on the cover of their latest mini album.

Jason found working with Asian brands a breath of fresh air. Un-diva-like, "they're hard-working, very receptive to comments and that's something that other designers aren't necessarily open to," he says. "The fact that I can go out to dinner with any of my Thai designers and have a conversation... they're not sitting up on a high horse. We're able to come up with a solution together." It also helps that the sizing is appropriate for the Japanese market and



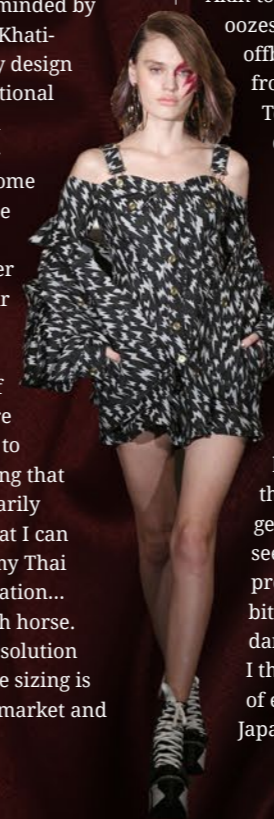
that "there's something a little bit quirky about the way they approach design."

DESIGNING SISTERS

Sretsis, 'sisters' spelled backwards, was already present in a handful of stores but collaborating with Jason from H3O heralded their big break into the Japanese market. Made up of three highly enterprising sisters, the fashion-forward powerhouse first burst onto Thailand's thriving fashion scene some 11 years ago. The trio consists of middle sister Pimdao (Pim) as chief designer, with oldest sister Kly ("the sane one", according to Pim) in charge of marketing and business planning, and youngest Matina Sukhahuta designing the jewelry and accessories.

Self-described by Pim as "classic elements with a whimsical, unexpected twist", their store at Central Embassy in Bangkok couldn't reflect their signature style more. Akin to entering a fairytale world, the store oozes glamorous girl's boudoir, with an offbeat sense of humor. While sipping from a water bottle labeled "Unicorn Tears. No unicorns were harmed during drink production," handed to me by her assistant, Pim surmises why Sretsis and other Thai brands have become so popular in Japan.

While Japan has a longstanding fashion industry with illustrious brands like Issey Miyake, Rie Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto, as a newly developed nation the industry in Thailand has only begun flourishing over the past decade. "With the young generation of Japanese brands, I don't see as much excitement as with their predecessors," Pim says. "Thais are a bit crazy, the new generation is more daring and very fashion-conscious... I think that kind of energy and level of excitement is what appeals to the Japanese." Besides looking to Thailand



as a country with fresh ideas, clothing from Thailand is relatively price-friendly, especially when compared to luxury brands from Europe and the US – not to forget the country's strong reputation for its fine craftsmanship and handiwork.

Last October, Sretsis opened their first flagship store in Tokyo, in the city's trendy Omotesando area. Called Sretsis Inn, a nod to the Victorian era, the store features Sincerely Yours, a new line of luxurious lounge wear, and their Spring/Summer collection *The Runaway Rum*, as well as jewelry designed by youngest sister Matina Amanita.

Pim believes the Tokyo store in Harajuku will act as a gateway to the global market and acceptance as an international brand although the media doesn't always get it right. "When we were featured on the cover of *Women's Wear Daily*, the US version, they thought we were a Japanese brand because we showed in Tokyo Fashion Week," Pim says. Sretsis also graced the cover of *Women's Wear Daily Japan*. "But if we had stayed in Thailand, I don't think we ever would have gotten that kind of recognition."

ON TREND

At the start of each season, buyers in Tokyo make it a point to stop at H3O first on their rounds of showrooms. "Every first of February at 10am, the fashion buyers from Isetan are on our doorstep," Jason says. "They come here first because they know we've got the crazy stuff. Buyers know that they can pick up on trends and see what's new." He hastily adds that although H3O has a reputation for a type, "to say 'crazy' is not doing quite justice to the designers. The brands that we carry have personality. I think that's very important. They have a certain exuberance and avant-garde spirit. They're really all amazing, the brands from Thailand."