

Grand Designs

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As a newly industrialised nation, Thailand might not yet be on everyone's radar as a haute couture hub on par with Paris, London or New York, yet an ever-increasing number of Thai fashion labels are managing to break the mould and proving that the country has more to offer than OEM.



One such success story is **Wonder Anatomie**, a vibrant street wear brand characterised by splashy prints interspersed with elements of animal anatomy. The label, masterminded by Chalermkiat Khatikasemlert (nickname Pop), just presented its latest collection at the Bangkok International Fashion Week (BIFW2014), held this year from November 6 to 9 at the Siam Paragon. Pop was recently invited to showcase a collection at Seoul Fashion Week 2014 and the brand has also become a favourite for South Korean girl band, 4Minute, who all wear Wonder Anatomie on the cover of their latest mini album. In addition, he also joined MQ Vienna Fashion Week and Designer Resident, which was organised in Austria.

Starting his career as an interior designer, and after a stint in Paris to brush up on European culture and history plus receiving a scholarship to study fashion design, Pop returned to Thailand four years ago to found his own label, Wonder Anatomie. The brand was selected to be part of the Designers' Room at the Bangkok International Fashion & Leather Fair (BIFF & BIL), an initiative by the DITP to support Thai fashion designers in their quest to export as well as boost Thailand's image as a fashion leader in Asia.

It took the fashion prodigy, who has also shone in the spotlight of Paris Fashion Week, a couple of tries before his edgy designs were spotted by a Japanese agent and started attracting buyers from around the world. "Everybody came to the showroom [in Paris] and we very surprised that we got a lot of customers," Pop says.

The same agent that was instrumental in launching Pop's brand internationally is also shared by famous designing sister trio **Sretsis**, who just opened their first flagship store in Tokyo, close to the city's trendy Omotesando area. Meanwhile, Pop's colourful range of clothing is sold in Spain, Los Angeles, South Korea, Hong Kong and China, while in Bangkok Wonder Anatomie is exclusively available at Siam Centre, the mecca of Thai designer flagship stores. Pop now launches two collections a year. "Before I didn't work like this," he admits. "But when I started to sell overseas, we have to run it like a system... it's very rushed!"

Polpat Asavaprapha from fashion label **Asava** explains that in today's highly commercialised environment it's not enough to create a beautiful collection. "It's much more the marketing, the production, how to understand the buyers... you have to understand all these factors," he explains. Via the Bangkok Fashion Society, a collective of 15 major Thai brands led by him, he's on a mission to internationally promote and educate the Thai fashion and apparel industry. He believes it will take a collaborative effort of both private sector and government to reach these goals.

As Thailand is transitioning from low-cost production to original brand manufacturing and a more "creative economy", the country's fashion industry requires much effort compete on a global scale. The next challenge is strengthening's the country's image as a centre of fashion. Polpat notes that although Thailand already possesses a strong reputation for creativity and craftsmanship, "you have to position Thailand as a cool space for design... so that it's considered a hip, young and fresh brand."

Still, the success stories and creative catalysts are in evidence. Some Thai brands have managed to conquer the global market, like **Disaya** (womenswear by a London Saint Martin's graduate), **Kloset** (colourful print dresses, skirts and scarves), **Greyhound** (known for its unconventional patterns and cuts) and **FlyNow** (eclectic womenswear), among others, while up and coming talents **Ek Thongprasert** (intricately crafted jewellery made from silicon), **Dry Clean Only** (accessories) and **Nasha** (leather goods) have recently burst onto the international fashion scene.

The strong and alluring points of Thai fashion bode well for its continuing success and stitching up some new markets. As Pop gushes, "It's innovative, it's experimental... it's something different and playful, we try to put some humour in it. When you see our clothes, you can smile."

From the shops in the Land of Smiles to the catwalks and malls of the world, Thai fashion designers have something to grin about.

Words by Ellen Boonstra

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