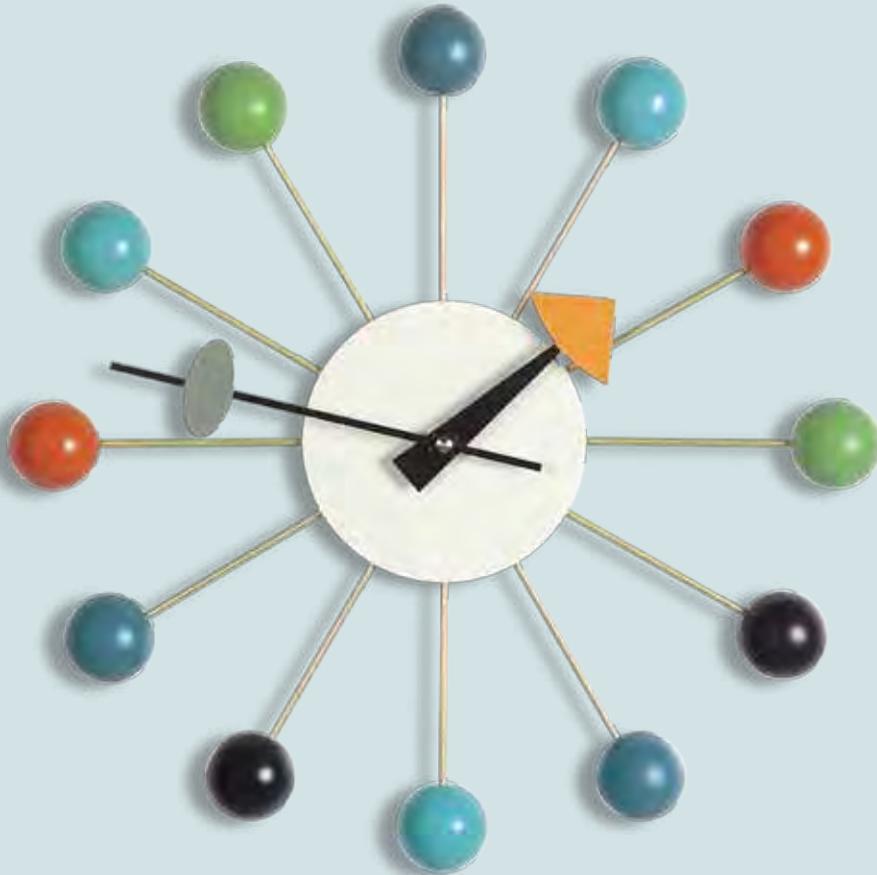


THE MAGAZINE OF THE HONG KONG DESIGN INSTITUTE

SIGNED

ISSUE SEVEN 2013



MODERNIST MASTERMIND

THE TRANSCENDENT WORK OF GEORGE NELSON
IS COMING TO HONG KONG

PERPETUAL EMOTION
RE-BIRTH BY DESIGN
WITH CHARLES KAISIN

SYMBOLIC STYLE
THE SOARING CREATIVITY
OF BELGIAN FASHION



ISSUE SEVEN

EDITOR'S LETTER

«FICTION IS OBLIGED TO STICK TO POSSIBILITIES BUT THE TRUTH ISN'T.»

MARK TWAIN

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY American designer Charles Eames once wrote, "It is almost impossible to reconcile self-expression with the creative act." For a man who (with his partner Ray Eames) had such a creative life and was possessed of such a forceful personality this seems a strange thing to say. There are many who would claim that the work of Charles and Ray Eames is a perfect example of creativity and self-expression combined in perfect harmony and yet Charles Eames would almost certainly disagree. For him a designer had to lose himself in his work and allow the creative act to overcome self-expression in order for the results to be authentic. His point was that self-expression is an artefact of the ego and where a designer's ego dominates his or her creativity there will always be false notes. And so for this seventh edition of SIGNED magazine we have chosen Truth as our theme. The famous American literary agent and poet Matt Bialer, giving advice to an aspiring novelist, once said that "a writer cannot write fiction based on what he thinks will be popular or commercially successful, he can only write fiction that is authentic and comes from his inner truth." His point was that a writer (or any kind of creative person) has to get out of the way of his or her own work for it to come through as honest and truthful. All of the design work featured in this edition has some element of this kind of truth.

The work of designers from Belgium featured in the stories *Symbolic Style* and *Perpetual Emotion* reveals the extent to which Belgian design has a special kind of truth that forces authenticity and avant-garde creativity to the forefront in fashion, architecture and product innovation. A similar spirit is found in *Dead Reckoning*, *Mythic Moments* and *Making an Impression*, three stories that draw from design principles to reveal powerful truths about our attitude toward death, the family and ancient means of symbolic communication. George Nelson, another iconic American designer who worked in the same era as Eames and is featured on our cover said, "Good design, like good painting, cooking, architecture or whatever you like, is a manifestation of the capacity of the human spirit to transcend its limitations." One of those limitations is our capacity to be honest about our talents and desires. When a designer with true talent closes down the filter that prevents his or her true spirit from coming to the forefront the results can be truly remarkable. That is the benefit truth bestows upon us – it may cost us all our pretensions but the reward is often an act of creativity that is made timeless by its authenticity.

DANIEL JEFFREYS
Editor-In-Chief

CONTENTS

06 FEATURE
FULL STRETCH
 BoDW with a Belgian accent



08 FEATURE
PERPETUAL EMOTION
 Charles Kaisin's road to renewal



12 FEATURE
SYMBOLIC STYLE
 The timeless elegance of Belgian Fashion



18 PEOPLE
WATER BORN
 Sheila Levrant de Bretteville goes coastal

22 PEOPLE
CREATIVE REVIVAL
 Animating traditional Chinese painting



24 FEATURE
ELECTRON RISING
 Amber lights up contemporary jewellery design



26 EVENT
MYTHIC MOMENTS
 Capturing the simple complexity of modern families



32 FEATURE
MAKING AN IMPRESSION
 The artful possibilities of printing



36 FEATURE
DEAD RECKONING
 Re-designing death



44 FEATURE
MODERNIST MASTERMIND
 George Nelson



48 EVENTS
WORKING MODELS
 Four award-winning designers bring magic to the mundane



COVER IMAGE
 GEORGE NELSON'S
 MULTI-COLOURED
 BALL CLOCK
 (COURTESY OF VITRA
 DESIGN MUSEUM)

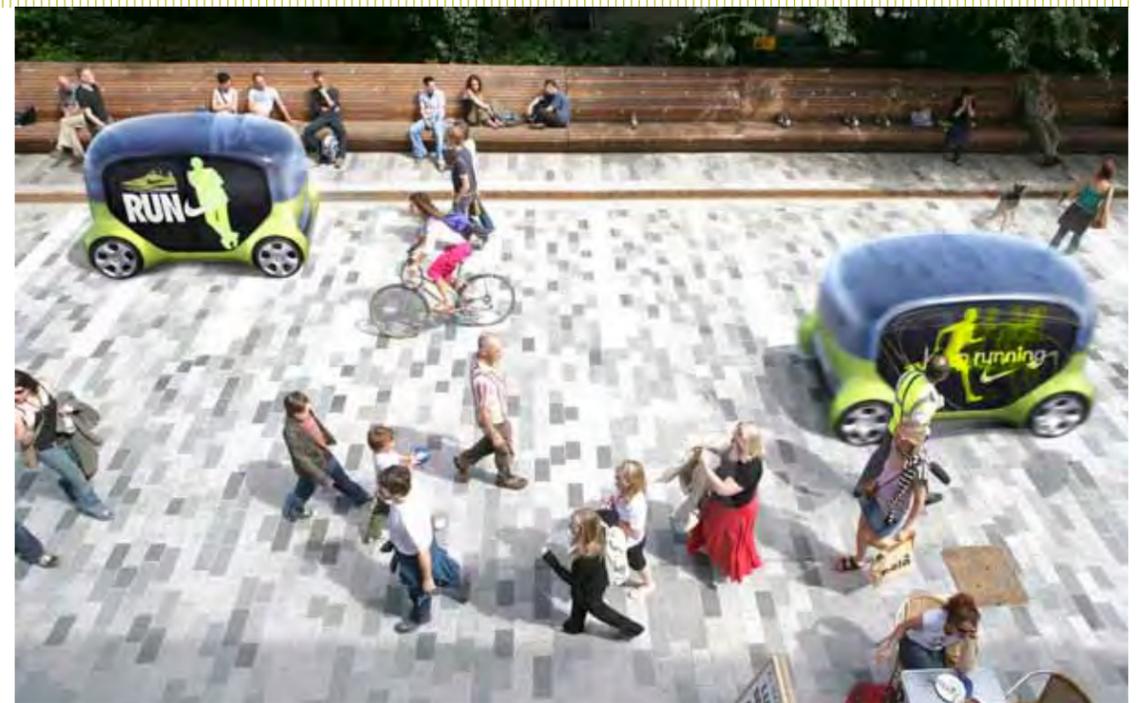
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FULL STRETCH

Hong Kong's Business of Design Week had Belgium as its partner country this year, which gave Asia insights into the creative culture of a diminutive nation that has a huge reputation for innovation. SUMMER CAO reports.



W The Belgians are very understated," says William To, the project director at the Hong Kong Design Centre who organises the BoDW programme. "But their contributions to the design world are substantial, and they deserve more attention." From December 2nd to 7th, the 2014 BoDW featured Belgian Spirit, an initiative to promote Belgium's creative industries in Asia, and provided the Belgian design community with a platform to share their insights, giving Asia a unique opportunity to have intimate contact with one of the most innovative and prolific countries in the design world. What To calls the understated nature of Belgian designers might just be the key value that has endowed the country with a diversified range of sources for innovation, and provided an ideal condition for them to bear fruit. Unlike BoDW's previous partner countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Japan and Germany, whose strengths and character in terms of design are easily

recognised, Belgian design cannot be represented by any one collection of work or confined to a single combination of styles. The reason for such a special trait can be partly explained by the country's history. The land that is now known as Belgium has been frequently occupied by foreign powers over the past 2,000 years including the Romans, Spanish, Austrians, French, Dutch and Germans. As a result, the Belgians are generally critical of any form of authority, and the individualistic and anti-authoritarian mindset has percolated into the design world, generating unconventional creations in almost all streams of design. "They have an innate sense of design style in their culture," To observes. "Belgian spirit is about proactively seeking out new ideas, being flexible and truly creative. I think there's a lot for us to learn from them." Belgium's history also bestows the country a "peaceful anarchistic" element, which characterises the modern architecture of Brussels,

the nation's capital city. Besides multilingual, multicultural Brussels, the country and its design community draw upon two distinct areas – Dutch speaking Flanders in the north, and French speaking Wallonia in the south, and each of these three was represented in Belgian Spirit, which was set up in 2011 to promote Belgian architecture, design and fashion in Asia through events like BoDW. The variety of demographics that contribute to Belgium's design culture helped bring more than 230 designers and design students to BoDW. The attendees did much to teach Asia about Belgian design but the encounter between the two cultures was a two way street. "One of the missions of Belgian Spirit was to create awareness within the Belgian design world of the importance of Asia as an up-and-coming region for design, with Hong Kong as its hub and gateway to other countries," says Siegfried Verheijke, leader of Belgian Spirit. This year's BoDW is the event's 11th edition, and to start its second

decade, its influence has risen to new heights. To explains, "We have received a huge amount of support from the Belgian government. We have seen a shift in the kind of support from BoDW. In the past we often got support from design associations and groups. These days, especially since last year's co-operation with Denmark, we have been getting governmental support." To mark that change Belgium's Queen Mathilde showed her support to BoDW by attending this year's opening ceremony. "This signals a coming of age, as

governments are finally realising the importance of design to an economy and society as a whole," To says, "Also, it is proof that BoDW has become so successful that governments are taking us seriously now. They know the benefits that such an event will reap." To says the increased quality of support for BoDW is a factor that over time will raise design standards on a global scale. "BoDW in HK wishes to be a bridge that ties Asian designers with their Western counterparts; also linking the design world with the

business community. Hong Kong and China, along with the rest of Asia will greatly benefit from this exchange of ideas; foreign designers and businesspeople will get a fantastic insight into Asia through design from BoDW, too. Everybody is a winner."

OPPOSITE PAGE TURNER CANDLE HOLDER DESIGNED BY XAVIER LUST FOR DRADE KOSMO
ABOVE A LOOK FROM BARS DESIGNED BY GRANSTUDIO, A DESIGN COMPANY FOUNDED BY LOWIE VERMEERSCH
BELOW THE PININFARINA'S NIDO ULTRA COMPACT CAR DESIGNED BY LOWIE VERMEERSCH FOR PININFARINA



PERPETUAL MOTION

CHARLES KAISIN is a designer who wears his heart and intellect on both sleeves, embracing the world with passionate enthusiasm and challenging ideas. His role as the co-curator of the Dress Code and Design in Motion exhibitions that will be at HKDI through the spring proves that one man can be in several places at once, so long as he has enough imagination. DANIEL JEFFREYS reports.

The *Design in Motion* exhibition of Charles Kaisin's work at HKDI derives its title from the Belgian's devotion to innovation and recycling, but it could equally be a name inspired by a sixty-second conversation with the man himself.

One minute with Kaisin is enough to conclude that the forty-one year old savant rarely stops moving or thinking and often does both simultaneously, with the kind

of kinetic energy normally associated with a high-speed rollercoaster. It's a state of agitated consciousness that Kaisin freely accepts as his. "I regard my own journey as that of a ball that rebounds from one cell to another, absorbing and accumulating the experiences of that very journey," he writes on the landing page of www.charleskaisin.com. "My deepest wish is to keep that ball endlessly rolling."

For now, there seems no risk of Kaisin slowing down – either creatively or in terms of the pace that he moves from one project to another. Most of the designers who attended this year's Business of Design Week (BoDW)

would have been content to curate one exhibition on behalf of Belgium, this year's host country, but Kaisin has curated two and just to put the cherry on his busy cake he also created the Surreal Dinner, the most coveted ticket of this year's design season. The Surreal Dinner was one of the highlights of the prestigious Belgian Spirit project, an initiative of the three Belgian regions, Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia, to promote Belgium's creative industries in Asia.

Kaisin was the scenographer of the dinner, which represented six months of work. The dinner's centrepiece was a 30 metre long table that "transported invitees to a unique experience between *Alice in Wonderland* and Belgian Surrealism" according to Kaisin. The setting was inspired by the paintings of René Magritte and James Ensor and offered a culinary journey through Belgian cuisine, with Chef Pascal Devalkeneer (the 2 Michelin Star-chef at Le Chalet de la Forêt in Brussels) leading the kitchen team.

The Surreal Dinner, designed like a daydream, was created to challenge all the senses of each guest with each dish staged separately and using Belgian designs as part of the scenery. It was a concept that draws heavily on Kaisin's own approach to inspiration, which consists of leaving his senses open to everything that comes his way.

"Personally I'm nourished and inspired by travelling, reading and meeting people of all kinds," says Kaisin, who was educated at the Royal College of Art in London, Kyoto University of Art in Japan, Institut Supérieur d'Architecture Saint-Luc de Wallonie in Belgium and Ron Arad's studio. "It's clear

ABOVE CHARLES
KAISIN'S K-BENCH

I absorb all these impulses to find them unconsciously in my new work. The process of making objects, from low tech to high tech is very interesting to me. Low tech for example is the Pingolingo bags, whereas high tech is the ultrasonic melting used for the K-Bench.”

Both the K-Bench and the Pingolingo bags are featured in *Design in Motion* and each in their own way are iconic representations of Kaisin’s work. The K-bench mixes the poetry of origami with modern materials to create what the Belgian design company Vange, which manufactures the piece, calls the “perfect mix of tradition and modernity”. The beehive structured extendable seating can be shaped to meet many different needs.

The Pingolingo bags were made using randomly superimposed

« I’M NOURISHED AND INSPIRED BY TRAVELLING, READING AND MEETING PEOPLE OF ALL KINDS »

layers of used plastic shopping bags with their different logos and slogans. Kaisin says the bags symbolise the “intermingling of today’s cross cultures” and give back life to the “residues of consumption”, something Kaisin believes is a responsibility of any designer. In both these works the designer is showing an exceptional devotion to the poetry of rebirth and the epistemology of recreation, both of which are key aspects of his practice.

“I’m fully aware of the delicate state of the world today,” says Kaisin who has been featured in five major exhibitions since 2000 while working as



a designer, educator and consultant. “It’s only natural but not an obsession to explore this in my work, and sometimes that results in recycling into new forms. It makes me happy to transform and rethink the obvious. My latest artwork is made of old books, folded into a long line of poetic text.”

In one sense Kaisin’s work seems to be an embodiment of Leibniz’s and Galileo’s law of the conservation of energy, which states that energy can be neither created nor destroyed, but can only change form. As a designer and an architect his work seems to be devoted to looking at materials to see their potential for renaissance as something that is either more useful or more beautiful and preferably both.

“Motion is movement, movement is life,” says Kaisin. “Life is about sustainability and my research is directed to find solutions for the way things can be improved or at least embellished. Ecological issues are important but they are not the only reasons for doing this – there is also the search to find beauty and poetry in what are at first sight common things.”

This evocation of the sublime from the mundane – or better still the marriage of the ordinary with the transcendent – found one of its most famous and profound expressions in *Pneuma*, Kaisin’s installation in the Brussels Courthouse lobby to celebrate the 2011 bicentenary of the Brussels Bar. The work consisted of 10,000 origami, folded with the help of Saint-Gilles Prison’s inmates to form a gigantic wave in the centre of the space. The origami were made with paper from books of old codes provided by the Bar.

“Pneuma” means “breath” in Greek and the creation was a perfect example of Kaisin’s belief that the best design consists of giving oxygen to old or discarded materials so that they might experience a life-affirming metamorphosis. It’s maybe no surprise to learn that Kaisin was trained as a piano and organ master. Every great musician knows that each time they play a piece of music is like a form of rebirth and Kaisin’s work in *Design in Motion* shows the power of that idea when it is applied to the creation of useful and beautiful objects. ☺

The exhibition Design in Motion will be at HKDI until 14 February 2014.

LEFT PINGOLINGO BAGS BY CHARLES KAISIN
ABOVE CHOCOLATE SCULPTURES BY CHARLES KAISIN
BELOW A DELVAUX BAG DESIGNED BY CHARLES KAISIN



SYMBOLIC



STYLE

The tide of fashion ebbs and flows but designers from Belgium have a knack of creating work that is both timeless and innovative, as revealed in *Dress Code*, a compelling new exhibition of Belgian fashion curated by Charles Kaisin and the Hong Kong Design Institute. HELEN LIU reports.



When talking about trends, it's usually the fashion "capitals" of Paris, Milan, London and New York that attract the most attention as their new collections elbow "old" work aside with such dizzying speed that the traditional concept of a "season" has ceased to have any meaning. But the designers from one Northern European country are increasingly ready to challenge this traditional concept with "fashion that never goes out of fashion" or as Charles Kaisin, curator of the exhibition *Dress Code* (at HKDI until March 2014) puts it, "Belgian fashion is never about trends, but always about the search for highly individual and often avant-garde and unique creations."

Dress Code is part of the Belgian Spirit project, an initiative of the three Belgian regions, Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia, to promote Belgium's creative industries in Asia. The originality of Belgian fashion has its roots in Antwerp, which has been a fashion centre for over 500 years since the late 1500s, when it produced the chemicals used to dye the black cloth that was essential to the style statements of the Hapsburgs and their Imperial Spanish court.

However, it was the 1980s, when the renowned "Antwerp Six" - Dirk Bikkembergs, Ann Demeulemeester, Walter Van Beirendonck, Dries Van Noten, Dirk Van Saene, and Marina Yee - graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp and hit the international fashion scene that the city's importance to the contemporary fashion world became dramatically apparent.

Among the Six we find the sport and leisure aesthetics of Dirk Bikkembergs, the fragile toughness of Ann Demeulemeester, the colourful exuberance of Walter Van Beirendonck, the poetic aesthetics of Dries Van Noten, the hand-painted features of Dirk Van Saene, and the recycling beauty of Marina Yee. Their unusual designs, combined with exquisite fabrics cut with sculptural precision and a touch of whimsy have helped to build a reputation for Belgian fashion design that is hard to beat but the nation's reputation does not rest on the Six alone. Indeed the group's deconstructionism could be seen as an evolution from 1900s when the House of Norine emerged as a significant centre for couture.

Founded by Paul-Gustave Van Hecke and Honorine (Norine) Deschrijver, the house rose to rival fashion

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP LEFT A LOOK FROM THE AUTUMN/WINTER 2014 COLLECTION BY TOM VAN DER BORGH
OPPOSITE MAIN A LOOK FROM THE SPRING/SUMMER 2014 COLLECTION "READY-TO-WEAR" BY A.F.VANDEVORST
THIS PAGE A LOOK FROM THE SPRING 2014 RAF SIMONS COLLECTION BY RAF SIMONS





houses of Paris, although Norine's pieces were much more advanced, incorporating artists' works from the Modernist, Surrealist and Expressionist styles.

Charles Kaisin's *Dress Code* exhibition, shown alongside *Design in Motion*, a retrospective of his recent work, provides a scan of contemporary Belgian fashion.

The exhibition's title refers to the way we wear clothes for specific situations such as cocktail parties or at work. Four types of dress code are introduced in the exhibition (casual, schools, black tie, and uniform) with pieces from over 50 Belgian designers including the sharp tailoring of Raf Simons (now creative director at Dior), the flowing draperies of Jean-Paul Knott, the surreal creations of Jean-Paul Lespagnard, the arty passion of AF Vandevorst, the conceptual witticisms of Martin Margiela, the beautiful knits of Christian Wijnants, and the ephemeral girl-like silhouettes of Veronique Branquinho.

Whilst marked by their respective unique characteristics, inspirations, materials and techniques all these designers share a special know-how, a common craftsmanship and a pursuit of excellence. Kaisin says they are bound together by a strong signature that consists of "research, timelessness, innovation, individuality and great quality".

Research is a key element in achieving the best quality. As with any experiment, Belgian designers have a laboratory for their research. The most satisfactory designs can be obtained by theoretical studies and practical experiments. Bruno Pieters' new avant-garde brand "Honest by" is a perfect example. It was launched in order to create an organic and transparent brand after one year's research vetting the suppliers.

Belgian design is so coherent and ahead of its time that dresses created two decades ago can still be considered fashionable and thus it's not surprising that bags from Brussels based Delvaux, the oldest luxury leather house in Europe, are possessed by almost every elegant Belgian woman, with many inherited from mothers or grandmothers.

This doesn't mean that Belgian fashion is static. Emerging young designers have instilled the Belgian fashion world with countless innovations. Fresh elements, including not only the colour of the dresses but also what's behind them (a vision of life and what goes with it) have been introduced to make the country's fashion

TOP LEFT A LOOK FROM THE FALL 2013 COLLECTION BY HAIDER ACKERMANN
 LEFT A LOOK FROM THE FALL 2013 COLLECTION "UHURU SASA" BY JAN JAN VAN ESSCHE
 OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT A LOOK FROM THE SPRING/SUMMER 2014 COLLECTION BY VERONIQUE BRANQUINHO; A LOOK FROM ANNEMIE VERBEKE'S COLLECTION; A LOOK FROM 2014 SPRING/SUMMER COLLECTION "READY-TO-WEAR" BY CHRISTIAN WIJNANTS

« BELGIAN FASHION IS NEVER ABOUT TRENDS, BUT ALWAYS ABOUT THE SEARCH FOR HIGHLY INDIVIDUAL AND OFTEN AVANT-GARDE AND UNIQUE CREATIONS. »



« IN BELGIUM WE ARE GIFTED WITH VERY TALENTED FASHION DESIGNERS WHO ARE IN MANY CASES TRUE ARTISTS »



more innovative, making change and invention the lifeblood of Belgian designers. As Bruno Pieters puts it "I was inspired by this huge billboard of Gandhi I saw in Delhi, saying 'Be the change you want to see in the world'. I realised I should adopt this attitude."

Bearing the hallmarks of highly individualised designers, Belgian apparel is unique and often in limited editions but it rarely loses sight of the fact that form, however avant-garde, must still have function. "For me, Belgian style is a kind of realism," Hirofumi Kurino of Tokyo's United Arrows retail group said in an interview with *The New York Times*. "There are many strong ideas, but most of the clothes on the runway are wearable – and that is a strong part of the vision. The way they are teaching and guiding is excellent, respecting freedom and individuality, but with each student really thinking about the market."

With realism comes responsibility and Kaisin is quick to point out that environmental consciousness has long been an aspect of Belgian design. "Long before vintage and customising was fashionable, one of the Antwerp Six, Marina Yee, was already recycling old fabrics and clothes into amazing unique creations," he says. "Today, we see the very successful project of Les Petits Riens [the little nothings], an organisation that sells old clothes. Every year they organise the 'Second Hand Second Life' fashion show with the help of the Belgian designers to create new creations with old clothes from their stock."

But to insist on sustainability is to turn back the cultural tide that disposable fashion represents, especially in today's popular "fast fashion". It is a challenging task that requires awareness and co-operation from both designers and the consumers. "In fashion, as in any form of consumption it is clear," says



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE A LOOK FROM THE 2013 COLLECTION "A PINK O'CLOCK SHADOW" BY LUCAS STRAETMANS; A LOOK FROM TIM VAN STEENBERGEN'S COLLECTION; A LOOK FROM MAISON MARTIN MARGIELA'S COLLECTION; A LOOK FROM THE SPRING/SUMMER 2014 COLLECTION BY KRJST

Kaisin. "Designers and customers have to think about the way we live our lives, about ecology and the future of a healthy world and mind."

Some of Belgium's new generation of designers are also included in the HKDI show. Whilst inheriting the coherency of Belgian fashion these new voices speak from fresh points of view. They incorporate elements of other creative endeavours such as painting, photography and architecture, and this crossover trend is more prevalent in Belgium than any design centre. With so much new talent in the pipeline Kaisin is confident that Belgium will continue to be a source of fashion creativity for the whole world. "In Belgium we are gifted with very talented fashion designers who are in many cases true artists," he says, pointing to five aspects of the country's design community that many find surprising: "a great number of very talented designers in a very small country, the humour of many designs, the innovative way of rethinking clothes, the surprising accessories and the open-minded fantasies of the designers which they use as a laboratory for the future". With such qualities it's likely that Belgium will continue to captivate the fashion world for another 500 years. ☺

The exhibition Dress Code will be at HKDI until 31 March 2014



SHEILA LEVRANT DE BRETTEVILLE caused ecstasy and outrage in 1990 when she became director of the Yale University Graduate Program in Graphic Design and the first woman to receive tenure at the Yale University School of Art. It was not the first time she made waves and certainly not the last. For the last six months she has brought her exceptional talent to HKDI where she led a student-based project designed to help Hong Kong appreciate its unique environment. **DANIEL JEFFREYS** reports.

In the science fiction novel *The Hydrogen Sonata* by Iain M. Banks, set thousands of years from now, 300-kilometre long ships consisting of pure intellect move like huge drops of water across galaxies under the control of “minds”, which are descendents of today’s human beings.

There is something about Yale University Graphic Design professor Sheila Levrant de Bretteville that reminds me of these spacecraft.

To begin with, her polymath intelligence and insatiable curiosity strike one as being made of just the kind of DNA that might help humanity evolve from earth-bound beings into a dewy star-hopping consciousness.

And then there’s her planet-sized imagination that seems to never stop coming up with new ideas and fresh

variations of something she mentioned five minutes ago.

A conversation with de Bretteville is exhilarating and exhausting, making lesser mortals feel like their minds have become conceptual hockey pucks hurtling around an ice-rink, with each of her insights being like a slap shot that sends another earth-bound brain hurtling toward the boards.

Apart from capturing de Bretteville’s unique presence there is a method in all these similes for one of America’s foremost graphic artists. Each one has something to do with water - or moisture (huge drops, dewy, ice); and these are the elements that have been the focus of the artist and designer’s sojourn at HKDI during the second-half of 2013.

“Hong Kong has such a profound relationship with water, through the sea, and moisture, through its tropical humidity,” she says. “I find that inspiring and I wanted to create a multidisciplinary project that addresses the presence and absence of water.”

The school’s principal Leslie Lu, who did his Masters at Yale, invited de Bretteville to HKDI. During her tenure she held a public seminar that attracted 600 people.

“My being here represents Leslie’s desire that I enhance the design programs by opening the minds of students, by using prompts to their imagination, instead of setting problems to be solved,” she says. “The students were asked to go to places where water and land overlap and look, listen, touch, smell and see what catches their attention - and then start a visual project that represented the inspiration that occurred to them.”

The locations chosen by de Bretteville for the student’s work were Tolo Harbour, Victoria Harbour, Junk Bay and Tai O. Her husband, Peter de Bretteville, an architect who has also been teaching at HKDI this autumn, informed her choices. He suggested selecting sites at the cardinal points of the globe and at each of these the profile of where the earth meets water is different, which has a profound effect on the potential for inundation and flooding. Junk Bay was appealing because of its proximity to HKDI and Lu encouraged her to consider Victoria Harbor because it’s so well known. De Bretteville refers to the margin where the land and water meet and interact as places that have “always been a source of creativity” and she encouraged students to approach the sites with their minds open and ready to be inspired.

“I shared with them a quote from Susan Sontag,” she says. “It goes, ‘Do stuff. Be clenched, curious. Not waiting for inspiration’s shove or society’s kiss on your forehead. . . . Pay attention. It’s all about paying attention. It’s all about taking in as much of what’s out there as you can, and not letting the excuses and the dreariness of some of the obligations you’ll soon be incurring narrow your lives. Attention is vitality. It connects you with others. It makes you eager. Stay eager.’”



PREVIOUS PAGE WAVES IN VICTORIA HARBOUR
LEFT SHEILA LEVRANT DE BRETTEVILLE SPEAKING AT HKDI
BELOW HKDI STUDENT KK WORKING ON HIS WAVE-INSPIRED MAKEUP PROJECT

« ONE STUDENT NOTICED THAT JUNK BAY LOOKS LIKE A HUMAN LUNG AND THAT HER BREATHING IS A METAPHOR FOR THE TIDES COMING IN AND GOING OUT. »



of one another as it appears to be right now.”

De Bretteville says she stands by everything in her statement, and especially the last of the three propositions. Her work with HKDI has been fiercely devoted to breaking down barriers, escaping from the “silos” that educationalists are fond of and which separate disciplines (and people), stirring students to look beyond the functional aspects of their work to reach for authentic sources of inspiration. All these efforts are designed to engender creative conversations that accept the strengths and limitations of those around us.

Driven by de Bretteville’s energy, 32 students from a variety of disciplines have been involved with the 海角天涯 (border of the sky/corner of the ocean) project. Victor So has been designing a 100 metre long bridge for Junk Bay that would give people a chance to linger and experience the flow of water between sea and land. Marco Leung has worked on a partially submerged floating room that would be open to the sky and with a view under water. Billy Chan has been working at Victoria Harbour to create a film that captures the way water calls to us all, even if we are too busy and preoccupied to hear and his images capture the water’s

That de Bretteville should cite Sontag is not surprising - the American writer and filmmaker was an inspiration to a generation who battled for women’s rights during the 1960s and 70s and de Bretteville was among those fighting for the cause.

In an Artist’s statement for the Brooklyn Museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: Feminist Art Base she wrote, “I am a feminist who believes there are many more ways to be a woman and to make feminist art than have been acknowledged. I believe that we should still be questioning the category named woman much like the way I questioned the meaning of the color pink... I continue to feel a nourishing pleasure when among those gutsy women who came to make artwork at the Los Angeles Woman’s Building, publish in the early issues of our feminist journal Chrysalis... if that equal balancing of contributions I found in those conversations were the model for relationships in the world we live in, perhaps our world would not be so lacking in acceptance

anger at our indifference. Freda Chung has focused on debris in the water of Victoria Harbour to use typography to create Chinese characters against the backdrop of the water and high rise buildings. At Tai O Molly Chan has been developing typography derived from Periophthalmus Cantonensis, a local mudfish.

Recently the Fashion and Image Design department has engaged with the project with KK using innovative make up techniques to create wave forms in hair and upon the face, Joby exploring ways to use fabric to show how a sea nymph is pulled between calm and dangerous waters and Sumo creating a photo shoot that depicts an aquatic fantasy.

The students were given November 27 as the deadline for completing their work but the evolution of the project is set to continue. Not least because de Bretteville has seen her commitment to the issues raised by the 海角天涯 project become more intense. To raise awareness of the challenges posed by global weather patterns de Bretteville invited Professor Emeritus Wwys Yim to give a talk at HKDI last October. In December 2012 she had read Yim’s article “Future sea level rise in Hong Kong and possible Environmental Effects” in a book called Climate and Sea Level Change that she found at the Yale University Library. Yim’s work focused on Junk Bay and in his talk he provided an informed understanding of what causes sea surges and contributes to inundation - and what does not. This kind of myth-bunking, let’s-sort-the-truth from the tittle-tattle is typical of de Bretteville’s approach and helped students to pay attention to aspects of their environment that they had missed.

“What has been most remarkable and unexpected is that so many of the students identify with the water and personify it’s feeling of being disregarded and dismissed,” she says. “One noticed that Junk Bay looks like a human lung and that her breathing is a metaphor for the tides coming in and going out. The video she created as a result pairs that similarity between her and the water with the

replacement of water by land reclamation with endless numbers of residential towers and new towns. Another student realized that people walking the promenade pay no attention to the water even though there are sturdy stone steps down to its surface. He sat on those steps for quite awhile videotaping and did not notice a ship passing by and became drenched by its wash. He thought about that disregard and his video embodies the anger the waves must feel.”

The students who worked on 海角天涯 are between 17 and 19 and they took on the project voluntarily, in addition to their programme work. Their dedication to de Bretteville’s venture - despite their heavy course-load - has impressed her.

“Even though almost everything about the way they are working is new to them they have chosen to be inspired by 海角天涯,” she says. “Those students whom we meet regularly have been disarmingly candid, receptive and open. Little by little they are each developing their own idea, translating into visual terms a new relationship to water and its value”

And that’s as much a summary of de Bretteville’s career ambitions as of the project’s goals - to translate new relationships into visual terms has been a driving force for her and the creativity that engenders has brought a fresh perspective to the HKDI students she worked with that few of them will forget. 



ABOVE SHEILA LEVRANT DE BRETTEVILLE’S WORK ‘STEP (PE)’ 2006, YEKATERINBERG, SIBERIA
LEFT DE BRETTEVILLE’S WORK BIDDY MASON-TIME & PLACE 1989, LOS ANGELES

CREATIVE REVIVAL

Differences in time and space can distance us from the great art of the past but the Hong Kong Museum of Art has used animation and e-books to bring a collection of ancient Chinese painting back to life. DAISY ZHONG reports.

Szeto Yuen-kit, the Curator of Hong Kong Museum of Art, recalls that when producing the e-book *Imperishable Affection: The Art of Feng Zi Kai* – a 2012 collaboration between the museum and HKDI – many participating students could not pronounce the “Kai” character in the cartoonist’s name correctly.

“This is not uncommon among today’s Hong Kong youngsters,” he says. “As a former teacher of art, I totally understand the situation – how can we expect the young generation to know anything about Wen Zhengming’s literati painting in the first place?”

Szeto believes that this is the greatest challenge for art education in Hong Kong. “Ordinary Hong Kong citizens are far from possessing a

comprehensive understanding of art. There is a lack of serious art courses that introduce the foundation, history and appreciation of art.”

But the same group of HKDI students who did not know anything about Wen Zhengming’s painting have now become a crucial creative force in helping the Hong Kong Museum of Art with art education among the general public in Hong Kong. Co-operating with the Museum, 19 students from the programmes of Printing and Publishing, and Digital Music and Media created an e-book entitled *A Journey into Chinese Painting*, and an animated short film to introduce works of the Xubaizhai Collection of traditional Chinese paintings.

The interactive e-book, consists of

eight chapters connected through *Fifteen Views of the Garden*, an important painting by Wen Boren representing the Wu School, a leading school of literati painting in mid-Ming that was located in what is modern day Suzhou.

According to Szeto, Chinese painting is one of the most difficult themes to curate. “Hong Kong citizens are particularly unfamiliar with this genre, which is closely related to culture and history. So how can we present such a refined culture in an engaging way, and change the popular view that Chinese paintings are ‘stuffy’? That is really challenging.”

Appreciation of traditional Chinese landscape paintings puts an emphasis on creative imagination, which requires the viewer to go beyond the imagery of the objects

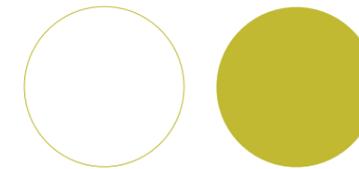


ABOVE A STUDENT FROM HKDI SHOWING VISITORS THE E-BOOK. OPPOSITE PAGE SCREENSHOTS OF THE E-BOOK.

in the painting and capture the “spirit” of the scene depicted. “It is about spiritual engagement with the painter, just like taking a journey in the landscape. That’s very much in line with the approach that HKDI students used in *A Journey into Chinese Painting*.”

To help modern viewers release the power of their imagination, HKDI students participated in the production, art direction, and illustration of the design, animation, publishing and accompany music for the e-book. Eve Tam, Chief Curator of the museum, says, “New trans-media storytelling technology was employed to illuminate the oldest art form. We use technologies that viewers have daily access to, which bring them closer to our exhibited items.”

Tam adds that the museum has two types of visitors, experts who already have in-depth knowledge about exhibited art; and the others being general visitors who are driven by curiosity for major events in the city. “There is a wide gap between these two categories in terms of demands and expectations, and it is very challenging for the museum to cater for both at the same time.



We need to provide sophisticated materials for the experts, but control the length of text explanation so that we do not frighten away ordinary viewers.”

Promoting art education among ordinary citizens, however, is at the core of the museum’s mission. Szeto says, “Low Chuck Tiew [the late Singaporean banker and art collector] donated his Xubaizhai collection to the Hong Kong Museum of Art in 1989 because he wanted to maximise its education value for the public. In these 20 years we have been continuously holding exhibitions, based on this collection, and helping with academic research. In recent years, we have been putting more emphasis on promoting the collection among ordinary citizens using a more engaging approach.”

Szeto notes that despite the use of popular elements in promotion, the ultimate purpose is to be able to appreciate the treasure

of traditional Chinese art. “We always face the risk of lowering the level of sophistication by accommodating popular culture. Therefore we always remind ourselves that we are ‘aiming low in order to ultimately elevate the level of the audience’. We wish viewers to discover a whole fantastic new world after that journey.”

And for HKDI students, there are endless possibilities in recreating traditional Chinese art in the future. “I think Feng Zikai and Xubaizhai are just the start of this ‘journey’.” He adds that next time students can try and explore caricatures made by the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, a group of Chinese painters known in the Qing dynasty for their individualistic styles and rejection of orthodox ideas about art.

“We are very delighted to see Hong Kong’s local creativity playing an important role in art education here.”



ELECTRON RISING

A source of wonder since the dawn of civilisation, amber seems to have lost its lustre. But as **DAISY ZHONG** discovers, a group of contemporary Polish artists are bringing fresh vibrancy to amber design

Around 600 BC the man often cited as the first Greek philosopher, Thales of Miletus, noted that amber rubbed with fur attracted objects such as feathers and hair. The Greeks were in awe of amber's apparent magical powers and gave it the name *ēlektron*, which means flashing or glittering and later becomes the root of the word electricity.

For at least 15,000 years, amber has inspired admiration, wonder and scholarly curiosity. It has been widely used as ornaments, amulets, and medication in both the East and the West. Zhao Feiyan (32BC-1BC), a legendary Han dynasty beauty, owned an amber pillow in order to absorb its scent. In Europe, amber was greatly admired by the Romans, and later in the 18th century used to decorate the astonishing Amber Room, a complete chamber of baroque-style amber panels backed with gold in the Catherine Palace near St Petersburg.

Yet despite all these, it seems amber somehow lost its importance

in modern design. "In the 1980s and early 1990s amber design was not of very high quality, mainly due to a strong attachment to the historical tradition," says professor Sławomir Fijałkowski, Dean of the Faculty of Architecture and Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk. "For decades the most popular products were just unsophisticated amber beads. We can observe similar situations experienced by other organic materials, such pearls."

But Fijałkowski believes that change has already taken place. Part of the evidence for this was recently brought to Hong Kong in the exhibition *A Kaleidoscope of Amber Art and Designer Jewellery from Poland* held during Baltic Amber Festival (Hong Kong) this September, showcasing the best of amber design in its contemporary expression. The Baltic Amber Festival, which was organised by Amberozia, a local company specialising in Baltic amber products, also included a public lecture at HKDI with design masters explaining contemporary amber use.

The exhibition featured creations by six amber designers and four leading amber design companies from Poland. Exhibited items ranged from caskets exemplifying the skills of the celebrated amber guild masters of the 17th century, to avant-garde collections themed around concepts such as illusion and movement. Fijałkowski notes that "courage for experiment" characterises the latest trend in amber design among Baltic designers.

"Compared to the fashion world, they are a kind of haute couture," he says. "Most of them were unique pieces designed with the intention not to be sold, but to



FROM LEFT THE BRUGGE COLLECTION DESIGNED BY ART7; THE VENUS COLLECTION DESIGNED BY MARIUSZ GLUMINSKI; THE BRUGGE COLLECTION DESIGNED BY ART7



show mastery of every single designer, a pure art work, and an object of contemplation."

Fijałkowski is himself a prominent award-winning designer known for cutting-edge creations. For him, finding the right balance between the need to preserve timeless stylistic canons and the author's prerogative for reinterpretation is the most difficult and inspiring task for a modern designer.

He explains the reasons behind the revival of amber design. "There appeared a lot of young designers and new companies, for whom design was a primary development strategy. Education has played an important role, too. On the other hand, raw amber is more and more expensive so that it's a pity to just make it into beads. These factors mean that Baltic amber is – like in the Roman Empire – exclusive again. Good design and innovation are the keywords today."

And this recent restoration of confidence has its roots in Poland's heritage for being the cradle of amber designs of the top quality and craftsmanship in the world.

Speaking at a public lecture at HKDI, Michal Kosior, deputy president of the International Amber Association, said: "The southern Baltic has been the centre of production of amber jewellery since the 17th century, and Gdańsk is the capital of amber."

As the majority of the world's amber deposits lie along the Baltic coast, amber processing has always been an important part of the local economy. Baltic amber varies from transparent through translucent to opaque with a multitude of hues of yellow, red, brown, beige and white, as well as bluish and greenish tints. Historically

Gdańsk amber craftsmen formed their own school of amber processing, making the quality of their products unrivalled globally.

Kosior noted that amber also played an important role in international trade and communication. As a precious jewel depicted in *Homer's Odyssey*, amber has been the goal of expeditions undertaken by Roman legions and Greek and Levant merchants. It was transported along the "Amber Route" from Northern Europe to the Mediterranean and Black Sea countries, and finally along the Silk Road to Asia.

Amber has once again become the bridge of cultural exchange between the East and the West; September's Amber Festival marked the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between HKDI and the Gdańsk Academy of Fine Arts. The memorandum aims at facilitating exchange in academic areas such as jewellery design, product design, basic and elementary design, architecture and cultural identity.

Fijałkowski draws comparison with the Erasmus European student exchange programme, saying such schemes can be highly effective in building connections among universities in Europe to learn from each other and exchange experiences.

"I believe that the MOU with HKDI can provide us with new possibilities to develop and support our school's international cooperation with Asia, an increasingly important region, not only from the economical point of view but also – and perhaps even more importantly – from cultural reasons, which are very relevant for us." 

MYTHIC MOMENTS

An exhibition at HKDI this autumn aimed to introduce the power of photography through a series of family portraits that combined simplicity and emotional depth. *SUMMER CAO reports.*

We want photography to be unmythic, full of concrete information. We are more comfortable with photographs that are ironic, unidealising... We expect the photographer to be bold, even insolent. We hope that subjects will be candid, or naively revealing," the late literary icon Susan Sontag wrote in *A Photograph Is Not an Opinion. Or is it?*, an essay written in 1999, two decades after the publication of her widely acclaimed book *On Photography*.

Sontag's standards of what defines a good photograph reveal the expectations of a deeply critical eye, yet the *300 Families* exhibition held at HKDI from September 28th to November 3rd seems to have met them all. The show was organised by Hong Kong International Photo Festival in partnership with HKDI and showcased images of 300 Hong Kong families shot by 14 professional local photographers, revealing the fundamental units that are the foundation blocks of this diversified modern city. The portraits are highly individual and yet have a universal voice, addressing issues faced by many with a mythic intensity that is one of photography's unique qualities.

The family has long been an important subject matter for artists, from the early murals and sculptures



depicting Christ's family and the Tree of Jesse listing his ancestors, to the family portraits commissioned by royal and eminent families. Here in the East, mountains and rivers were the staple subject matter for artists during the imperial era, but more recently many modern artists have explored the meaning of family, such as Zhang Xiaogang whose works set records at auctions.

However, few art forms inspired by the idea of family are more readily appreciated than ordinary family pictures that are always revealing or "unmythic" and "full of concrete information", to use Sontag's specifications. Each of

ABOVE FATHER AND SON: CHUI LING CHI AND HIS FATHER BY TSE MING CHONG
LEFT AU'S FAMILY IN THEIR FARMLAND AT MASHI PO HONG KONG BY TSE CHITAK

BELOW TOP A HOMELESS MAN CALLED KI WITH HIS DRAWINGS OF HIS FAVORITE PLACES TO SLEEP BY CHAN HAU CHUN
 BOTTOM A TAI SING PAP KAR MOON KUNG FU MASTER AND HIS DISCIPLES BY VINCENT YU

the images in *300 Families* is uncomplicated but full of impact.

The number and variety of photographs in the exhibition create an experience that is seasoned by a wide range of feelings. *300 Families*' diversity proves that photography excels at exploring the subject of family, whose meaning is both universal and infinitely variable.

"We started to focus on curating photos of underprivileged families," says Siu Heng, Executive

Director of the Hong Kong International Photo Festival. "But as the project went on, we decided to push the boundaries of what 'family' means, and attribute an artistic and intellectual dimension to what could have been a mere community project."

The result of the endeavour is an



« WE DECIDED TO ATTRIBUTE AN ARTISTIC AND INTELLECTUAL DIMENSION TO WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN A MERE COMMUNITY PROJECT. »



exploration of the concept of family in 12 directions, falling into three general categories based on the lifestyle of those being photographed – Andante/Adagio, Staccato/Allegro and Forte/Fortissimo, creatively using musical tempo as metaphor.

Andante and Adagio generally have smooth flowing notes, like listening to a story told with calm precision. Photographs in this category feature families who live in a restricted and fixed space and have to deal with a range of private challenges, including people living alone, the homeless, families with members released from prison or with terminal illness.

Each piece in this category serves as an emotional timebomb, able to create a sudden and profound response and the images narrate their stories andante, without fluctuation or over-emphasis. They range from treasured relics of elderly home-alones, to the doodles of the homeless that explain how they ended up living

on the street, to the family support of the terminally ill or a released wrong-doer, to the banality of life and estranged relationships among family members. The images are not easily forgotten – and this might be the highest accolade for any work of photography. The Staccato and Allegro category has jumpy notes that tend to be more lively and light-hearted, allowing visitors to explore the lives of families with interesting and alternative lifestyles, such as designer, IT, musician or green-living families and families that choose to live at some distance from the city's bustle on the beautifully vibrant Lamma Island.

ABOVE JOY IN STRINGS FAMILY BY RAMBO LAI AND LORRAINE CULTRISH



《 WE HOPE THE AUDIENCE WOULD START TO QUESTION THE MEANING OF FAMILY IN OUR SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT. 》

RIGHT ARTIST TO WUN AND HIS FAMILY BY ROY LEE
BELOW TOP FAMILY-RUN RESTAURANT YIU SHING KEE BY BOBBY SHAM
BOTTOM YIU SHING KEE'S OWNER AND HER TWO SONS SHORTLY BEFORE CLOSURE OF THEIR RESTAURANT BY AUMERAU



The Forte and Fortissimo category grabs attention and radiates energy with strong notes. Photographs in this category feature families and lifestyles that are unique or special to Hong Kong, infused with historical roots, local heritage and ethnic culture, the photos feature the family-like relationships in the traditional Kung Fu schools, family-run businesses and traditional Chinese extended families.

“While the community service element is still there, we have enriched the project with some new and thought-provoking aspects,” says Siu. “We hope to promote photography as a powerful artistic expression to explore, if not to the extent of intervening in, our society. In this case, we hope the audience would start to reflect upon their own relationships with family, and to question the meaning of family in our socio-cultural context.”

The *300 Families* exhibition was part of the bigger Hong Kong International Photo Festival Flare, which took place this year at the HKDI. It featured workshops, seminars, portfolio review sessions, photography book recommendations and two experimental exhibitions, one welcoming all to show their own works and the other showcasing young artists' works with audience participation.

Siu hopes that through the photo festival, and especially through the high quality exhibitions such



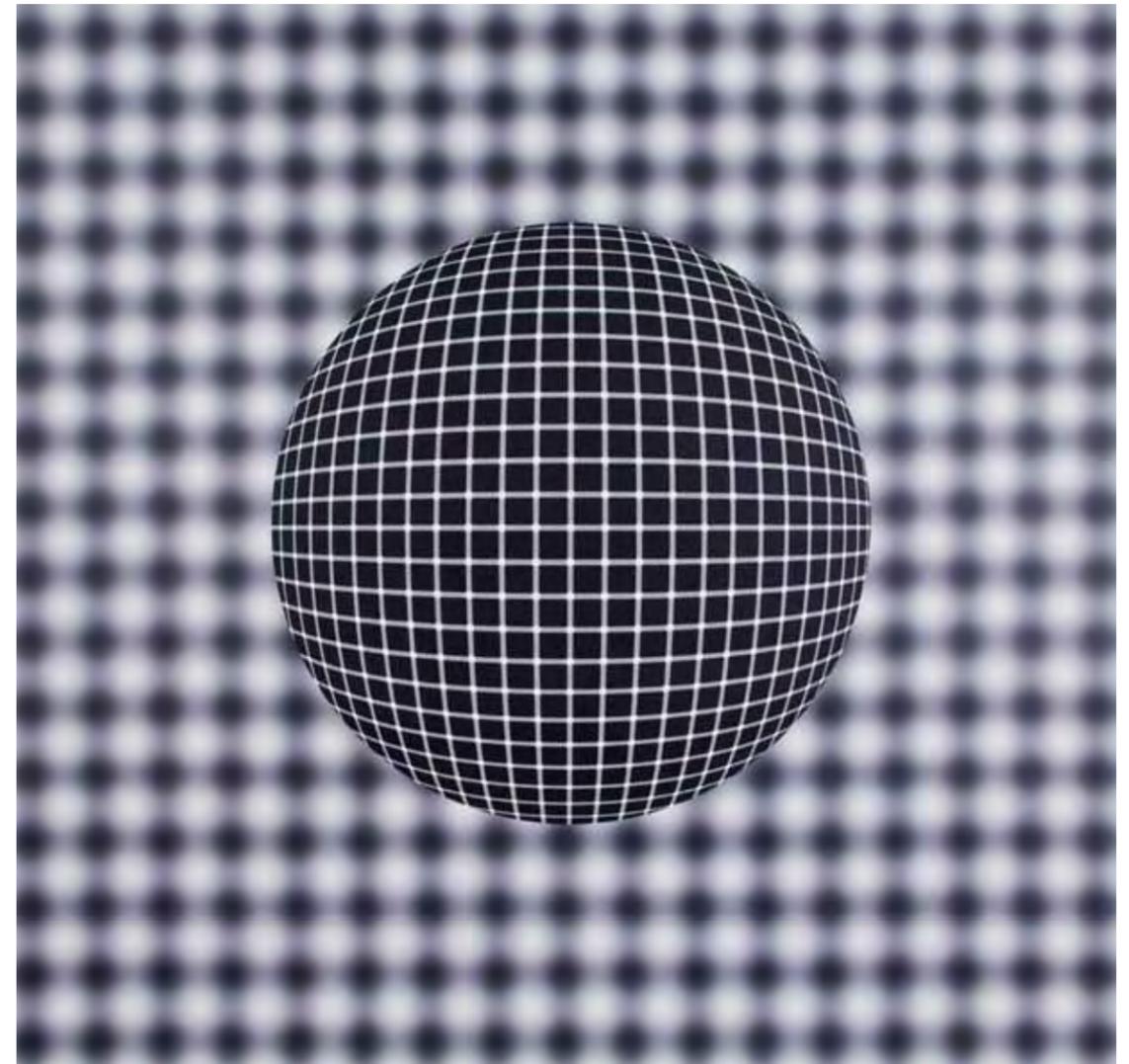
LEFT FROM TOP TO BOTTOM COSPLAY FAMILY: SING WAN, CHERRY AND ZOE BY VINCENT MAK; MR. AND MRS. YU BY THOMAS LIN; CATHLEEN AND RAPHAEL BY WEI LENG TAY; 78-YEAR-OLD CHAN SIUY IN BY ANOTHER MOUNTAIN MAN
BELOW FOUR GENERATIONS BY LEONG KATAI

as *300 Families*, HKDI students and the community at large can experience the power of photography.

“We believe students will benefit from the exposure to creative photography works, especially those who are interested in using photography in their design.”

For those who were unable to attend the *300 Families* exhibition or who wish to revisit the images the Hong Kong International Photo Festival Flare website (www.hkipf.org.hk) is currently carrying some of the works from the exhibition. The site offers the chance to review images in detail and to rediscover the venerable truth that a picture is worth a thousand words, especially when the image has the universal emotional power of a family portrait. 





MAKING **AN** IMPRESSION

The craftsmanship and ingenuity associated with printmaking, a technique used as a tool for cultural exchange since the Tang dynasty, has come to HKDI in an exhibition showcasing 149 artworks from print shops around the world. DAISY ZHONG reports.

In 868AD, during the Tang dynasty, the Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, or Diamond Sutra, was printed using woodblocks, which was state-of-the-art technology in the ninth century. The Sutra, discovered in the Mogao Grottoes of Dunhuang as the earliest surviving dated printed book, is testimony in the history of not only relief printing but also international cultural exchange.

Today the newest and most sophisticated technologies such as 3D printing and laser engraving continue to open up endless possibilities for creativity in the art of printmaking, as shown in the exhibition *Confront/Conform – An International Print Exchange Exhibition* which ran through October and November at HKDI.

“Compared to other forms of art, printmaking is distinctively diversified in the technologies adopted,” says Yung Sau-mui, the curator of the exhibition and a co-founder of Hong Kong Open Printshop, a charity organisation run by artists. “For centuries, oil painting hasn’t changed much

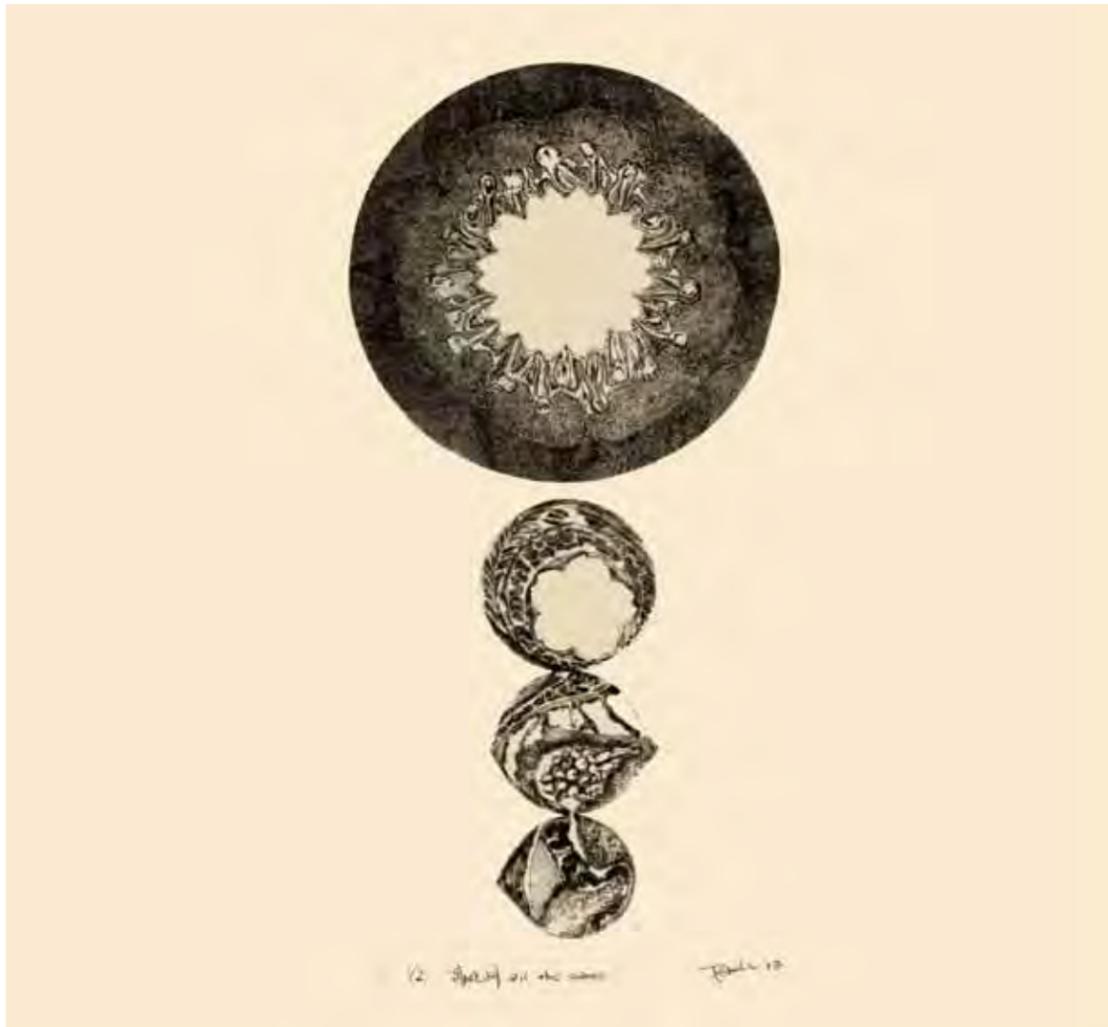
in its tools and techniques, but printmaking has progressed dramatically since the Tang dynasty – it has always been associated with groundbreaking technologies that help the dissemination of popular culture, such as letterpress, etching, mezzotint, aquatint, lithography, offset printing and screen printing.”

The result is an astonishingly wide range of modes of artistic expression based on different media and techniques. The 149 graphic prints exhibited at *Confront/Conform* encompassed woodblock printing, the oldest form of printmaking, cyanotypes, lithographs and laser engravings by established and emerging artists.

OPPOSITE: *EVOLUTIONARY LANDSCAPE* BY EVE STOCKTON, RELIEF PRINT, WOODCUT
ABOVE: *UNIVERSAL NOISE* BY ROBERT PETERS, 2012, DIGITAL IMAGE

“Images created on different media and through different technologies of printmaking can have hugely different visual effects, so artists can choose the approach that best suits their individual style and theme.”

The exhibition, presented as part of the Hong Kong Graphic Art Fiesta 2013, was a platform that congregated such works from 20 studios from nine countries and regions. This was the fourth time Yung has organised the print exhibition, and Yung says she is



« PRINT MAKING IS INHERENTLY COLLABORATIVE AND OPEN TO SHARING »

delighted to have found a common trend among artists around the world.

“Apart from the eternal topic of the inner self, artists seem to have simultaneously explored the blurring of boundaries brought about by rapid globalisation and urbanisation. Artwork from Hong Kong includes concerns about restoration of heritage buildings, and Australia has seen a surge of participation of indigenous artists whose work reveals the conflicts of culture. They are consciously reflecting on people

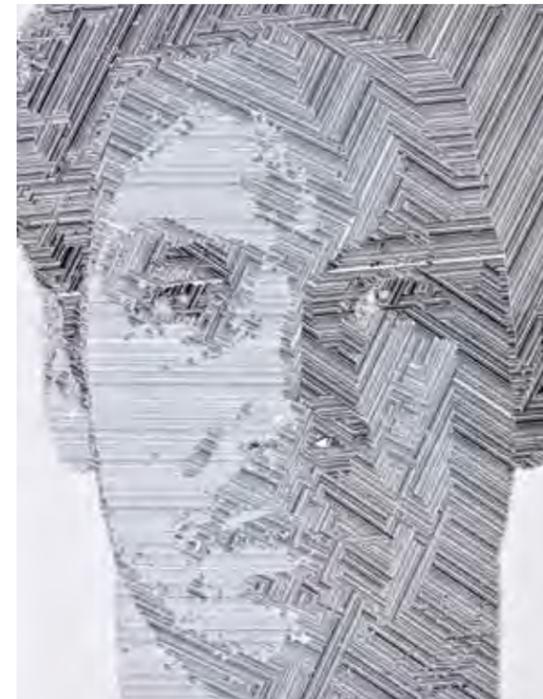
and their connections to the land and community, and social and political issues.”

Yung says the exhibition was held also to celebrate the culture of sharing, another distinctive feature of print art. She notes that whereas photography or sculpture is a solo work and done in one’s own studio, print artists always share machines in a print shop. “This space then becomes another source of artistic inspiration because artists exchange their experiences and learn from each other’s technological skills.

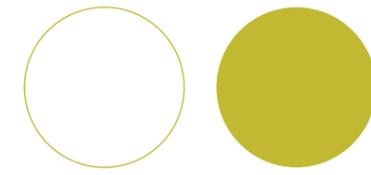
Therefore printmaking is inherently collaborative and open to sharing.”

This year the exhibition acted as a “mega” print shop connecting print studios around the world. “Cultural exchange has always been the main theme of our exhibitions,” says Yung. “Both the Tang dynasty Buddhist text and the hippest of contemporary 3D prints have played an integral part in the communication of cultures.”

Printmaking was transformed from a means of reproduction to a mode of art in 17th century Europe,



LEFT *ALL THE SAME* BY PAULINE CHAN SO-YEE, 2013, *ITAGLIO*, DRYPOINT
 ABOVE *UNTITLED (SELF PORTRAIT)* BY BEN PAK, 2010, SILKSCREEN, ACRYLIC
 ABOVE RIGHT THE PRINT SHOP INKMASTERS CAIRNS INC. IN AUSTRALIA



ABOVE *GLIMPS OF A DISTANT DISTANT PAST* BY GABRIEL VIEIRA, 2012, RELIEF PRINT, WOODCUT

exemplified by the wondrous etchings of Rembrandt (32 of his signature self-portraits are etchings).

Artists took charge of the whole process of drawing, engraving and printing, so that originality could be incorporated into every step.

All this means appreciating print art requires understanding not only composition, colour and content, but also craftsmanship. Wood engraving requires a magnifier to help create the detailed carving; in traditional Chinese woodblock engraving, sophistication comes from the use of “knife strokes”, similar to the use of strokes in calligraphy, which accurately conveys the style and craftsmanship of the creator.

Hand-made printing processes also require expertise and ingenuity. “For instance, the moisture level of the print paper, a key factor in determining printing effects, is controlled by how much

water we put on the paper,” Yung says. “The printing pressure is judged by hand. Even for today’s computer-based printmaking, you also need to get to know the machines and do numerous tests to achieve the best effect.”

In China, one of the country’s greatest modern writer and critics, Lu Xun, led the New Woodcut Movement in the 1930s, a central part of the New Culture Movement. Although not an artist himself, Lu was nonetheless the driving force behind the movement. Developed by German Expressionists, woodblock print characterised by strong contrast and sharp strokes became the favourite form of art for revolutionary forerunners, who used text and images in the woodcuts to expose the social ills of China. Printmaking artists in that era were often also influential front-line thinkers.

HKDI principal Leslie

Lu believes this social conscientiousness as well as critical thinking is still relevant in today’s world and is precisely what design students should inherit. “It is our aspiration that, in addition to the appreciation of the art of printmaking, the exhibition will help to shape the hearts and minds of a new generation of design students, who dare to confront things intelligently at a time when conformity rules.”



A brave man's unflinching attitude to his own mortality swept through the HKDI this autumn, and could have far-reaching influence on the community's attitude toward death. *SUMMER CAO reports.*

DEAD RECKONING

WIf you only have five years to live, what are you going to do?" asks William Outcast Chan, who was born with a rare form of skin cancer and was not expected to live past his 11th birthday. Chan, who is best known to students as "the God of Death", does not expect a definitive answer but poses this question to make people confront their fears. Earlier

this year Chan collaborated with the newly established HKDI DESIS Lab for Social Design Research to conduct a design feasibility study and present a participatory showcase focused on death that encouraged students to accept their mortality as a positive aspect of life. The 31-year-old author, death educator and anti-cancer campaigner has boyish looks and took the name William Outcast because his condition, which

has dotted his body with painful dark moles, made him feel like an outsider. But he is more of a maverick than a pariah, and rather than turning his back on society he has confronted its neuroses. In July 2012, he held an irony-laden living funeral service at the International Funeral Parlour in Hung Hom to celebrate his 30th birthday and the launch of his autobiography "My Will". Surprisingly, despite having refused chemotherapy and

conventional medical treatment, his condition has not deteriorated, although he has no idea how long he will stay healthy. Birth, life and death are the three acts that define everybody's personal drama and few want the curtain to fall when the second act is still unfolding; even fewer are ready when the curtain inevitably comes down. Chan has wasted no time prepping for death and enjoys every second of his life. Besides holding

All images: Meng Lau HKDI DESIS Lab and Black Sheep Production



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT WILLIAM OUTCAST CHAN AT HKDI; BONE ASH CONTAINERS MADE BY HKDI STUDENTS; COFFINS ON DISPLAY AT THE HALLOWEEN PARTY HELD BY CHAN AT HKDI ON OCTOBER 31TH





CLOCKWISE
OBITUARIES DESIGNED
BY HKDI STUDENTS

« I WANT PEOPLE TO HAVE NO REGRET WHEN THEY FACE DEATH BECAUSE THEY HAVE FULLY ENJOYED EVERY MOMENT OF THEIR LIFE. »

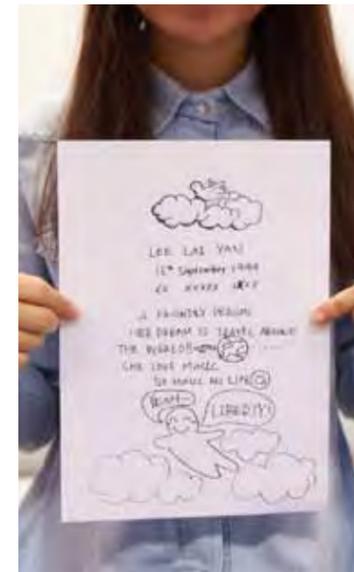


“There are too many people leading a life planned by others,” he says. “They study hard, find a stable job, get married and have children... they don't have a goal or passion for life.”

Having dedicated himself to life and death education, Chan finds much of it futile and has been seeking ways to teach people more effectively. “The so-called ‘life and death education’ that has become popular is largely passive and conducted through lectures,” says Chan. “The coolest approach might be to lie in a coffin to feel death. But the time allowed by most education courses that offer this service – usually two to three minutes in the box – is not enough, given the importance of the topic.”

Earlier this year Chan decided to create an enveloping environment where students could be involved in meaningful discussions about death. Dr Yanki Lee, the director of HKDI DESIS Lab, which is part of the Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability International Network, was among the first who saw the importance of the idea, and she won support from the institute's management. Before long, the idea of making students think about death through what they know best – design – was approved by the school, and the project got under way.

The first phase of the “Design.



his own funeral and refusing medical treatment, the iconoclast quit school, denouncing the “rapacious nature” of formal education and pretended to be a beggar in order to observe passers-by.

“Until the last second we tend to be dishonest with the world and with ourselves, thus missing opportunities to do the things we want to do most,” says Chan, having found his life's passion in embracing mortality and living in the moment.



Living & Dying” study has lasted four months (July – October 2013) and gathered about 300 students from seven departments. Chan is grateful to HKDI for taking up the project. “There are few, if any educational institutions in the world that have involved the whole school in an examination of death,” he says. “Death is a taboo around the globe and in most cultures. It needs courage to face up to this challenge and prejudices about death that are

nourished by the mass media, our families and the conventional death-related industry.”

As might be expected, the project faced obstacles. “The challenges came from everyday life,” says Lee. “Some colleagues worried that the topic was beyond what students could bear. And the two coffins we placed in our office were disturbing to many. I had to explain that death is a very ordinary thing that everybody has to go through,

and there was no dead body in the coffins. This kind of conversation and communication is very necessary, especially in a design institute.”

The conversation and challenges that the project unleashed are exactly what Chan wanted to achieve. “When I came to HKDI, I could hear students call me ‘the God of Death,’” he recalls. “I don't know whether the term is derogative or complimentary, but I am sure that I have made them think and my

《DEATH CAN BE A NORMAL SUBJECT FOR CONVERSATION AND TALKING ABOUT IT CAN BRING PEOPLE CLOSER.》



OPPOSITE FAR LEFT HKDI STUDENTS INTERVIEWING THE ELDERLY FOR 'LIFE HISTORY BOOKS'
 OPPOSITE BELOW AN IMAGE FROM THE PHOTO SHOOT OF THE ELDERLY BY PHOTOGRAPHER ROBERT TRAN AND STUDENTS FROM HKDI'S FASHION AND IMAGE DESIGN DEPARTMENT
 MAIN A SENIOR GUEST AT THE HALLOWEEN PARTY VIEWING HIS FASHION SHOOT PHOTO

presence has made death a part of their lives, creating a less undesirable environment to talk about it.”

Part of the study involved creating “Life History Books” for the elderly from the local community. The books are biographies that complete and embrace their lives – one of the key goals of the project. “You can be irresponsible to yourselves, but not to the elderly,” Lee once told the students. “The books represent

them, and in a way the books are them. They will take the books out to tell their life stories. Imagine how upset they will feel if the name is spelt wrong, or a picture is mistakenly placed in the book.”

To her delight, as students overcame the initial uneasiness and grew more attached to the project, they became more dedicated, coming up with the idea to design the “Life History Books” in the form of a calendar, which is more

convenient for the elderly to show to friends and neighbours.

“I am happy to see that students were also inspired to promote the ‘Life History Books’ project to the Hong Kong public,” Lee says. “The ordinary lives appear to consist of small trivialities – eat, sleep, work – but by writing one’s life down, it becomes more meaningful and distinctive.”

Ten elders were also invited to take part in photo shoots

in collaboration with Fashion and Image Design Department students who chose clothing and accessories based on their life stories and preferences. The images are in hippie style, some in futuristic style, and some in Manchu princess style – an eclectic dream-weaving approach developed with the elders, photographer Robert Tran and HKDI visiting fellow Lampros Faslis that reflect the elders’ perspectives on style and image, a

concept that is mostly absent from their real lives.

Creativity was also seen in graveyard and funeral designs, such as a contraption for sea-burials during which ashes are sprinkled into the ocean by the deceased’s relatives. “The students, after considering the tides, timing, the overall experience and the environment, designed a lotus-flower like device made from paper that decomposes rapidly and disperses the ashes into the water little by little, over five hours. For the family-oriented Chinese, the students have also explored the possibility of family joint burials by designing the Family Tree, a tree cinerarium where ashes of family members could be placed in the “tree branches” that are communicable with each other once occupied.

The public’s first encounter with the study’s work was at a showcase called “Fine Dying: Design. Living & Dying” and a Halloween party held by Chan at the HKDI on October 31st to make the showcase’s opening. “I invited DJs to remix sounds extracted from different funerals and dancers to imitate the moves of the Daoist ‘back from hell’ ceremony”, says Chan. “After seven weeks of designing for death, the party enabled students to think about death as something to be celebrated.”

However, while first design experiment of the study may have ended, its influences have not. Besides creating a less disagreeable atmosphere for students to reflect about death and making innovative contributions to the community, another long-term ambition of the study is to change the practices of the funeral industry. “Current industry



« THE TWO COFFINS WE PLACED IN OUR OFFICE WERE DISTURBING TO MANY. »



practices radiate a depressing atmosphere," says Chan. "That's the reason a lot of people don't like to talk about death. I want people to have no regret when they face death because they have fully enjoyed every moment of their life." According to Chan and Lee, some changes are already under way. "I have seen people change their views about death as the project went on," says Lee. "The more people talk about it, the less of a taboo it becomes.

Death can be a normal subject for conversation and talking about it can bring people closer. The ideal would be like in countries such as Japan, where funeral businesses are located in the high street next to the shops selling daily necessities. That is a healthier ambience we should strive for which shows death is as normal as any other activities of life." According to the project's industry partner, SAGE International Group Limited, a

company specialised in deathcare and funeral service which provided students with real-world knowledge, there are a lot of new inventions and technologies available in the industry but people are not willing to use them, thinking them not pretty, traditional or respectable enough. Lee agrees. "Donating one's body to the hospital is the best way, because it contributes to medical research and advance, but few sons or daughters would send

their parents' body to be dissected – innovation and understanding is needed to encourage that decision. "Another example is a newly invented technology to turn bone ashes into gemstones or even decorative man-made diamonds that can be placed at home, but the Chinese don't accept the idea of putting the ashes at home or the idea that somebody they used to know has become a stone." Much needs to be done to make

people accept new ideas but SAGE believes that with better design, the Hong Kong funeral industry can be overhauled, becoming more environmentally friendly and causing less stress. Designs with potential will be helped into reality, and internship opportunities given to students who are interested in designing a better way of death. After seeing "an outcast's" maverick idea changed attitude towards death, it is tempting to imagine a society in

OPPOSITE ABOVE VISITORS AT THE "FINE DYING" EXHIBITION
OPPOSITE BELOW A CEMETERY MODEL DESIGNED BY HKDI STUDENTS
THIS PAGE PARTICIPANTS LYING IN COFFINS TO EXPERIENCE DEATH AT FINE DYING HALLOWEEN PARTY

which death becomes an advert for life rather than cause for despondency. If that happens, Chan might consider dropping Outcast from his name. ©



MODERNIST MASTERMIND

Hong Kongers will get a rare insight into the life and works of trailblazing designer **GEORGE NELSON** when an exhibition of his work arrives in March. **ALEX PRICE** looks at what all the fuss is about.



George Nelson is without doubt one of the towering figures of post-war design. From the 1940s until the 70s, he helped shape the way Americans led their lives, having a profound influence on furniture, clocks, buildings – even the modern pedestrian shopping mall.

Hong Kong is in the lucky position of hosting an exhibition showcasing Nelson's work in March 2014, offering us the chance to see a range of his designs and insights, from iconic spindly-legged furniture and colourful ball-clocks to his writings and company brochures.

Jochen Eisenbrand, chief curator of the exhibition's home at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, explains why Nelson and the collection are so important.

"What really sets George Nelson apart from his contemporaries and secures his unique position and importance is the fact that, in addition to his own design work, he wrote about design and architecture very intelligently and reflected upon the role of design in society."

Before becoming a designer Nelson was a journalist in the 1940s for design magazines, introducing the European avant-garde to American readers, and he used this journalism skill to promote the influential creative values he developed.

"There is no other designer who had so much to say about design in such a thoughtful, well written and critical manner," says Eisenbrand. "Nelson was also a design manager, who, particularly in the case of [furniture company] Herman Miller, brought other designers into the game, even though that might have meant more competition for him, because he put the benefit of the company before his own ego. And lastly, Nelson is exceptional, because he was an author designer as well as an industrial designer. While his signature pieces such as furniture and lamps were always marketed under his own name, some



TOP: GEORGE NELSON, LATE 1940'S
ABOVE: MARSHMALLOW SOFA, 1956



Vitra Design Museum

of his other designs just served their purpose without George Nelson even being mentioned in marketing, such as the packaging designs for the Abbott company created in the late 1950s. Usually designers do not work in both signature design and anonymous design, but Nelson did both."

Nelson was a pioneer of modernism and driver of the holistic, ergonomic school of design that places human needs and behaviour at its centre. He believed designers should concern themselves with people's real needs, both functionally and aesthetically, and so should have a wide understanding of the world around them, rather than be too specialised. Nelson famously

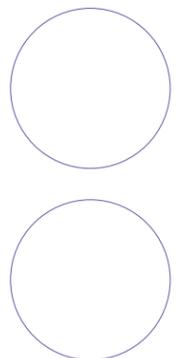
noted that, "total design is nothing more or less than a process of relating everything to everything".

Nelson's wide-ranging concept meant that his design related to the whole cultural landscape, the entire increasingly urbanised "man-made environment". In order to achieve this, he believed designers should be active and critical in their perception of the everyday environment surrounding them; to consider the human and social effect of their work and what they wanted to achieve.

Along with this grand theme, Nelson's own designs were sometimes derived from what he called creative "zaps" – moments when a dazzling insight leaps out of the brain from nowhere. Examples of these "zaps" can be seen in his Storgewall designs (which made use of the "lost" space between internal walls) and his plans for outdoor pedestrian shopping malls (the idea for which came when looking at aerial photos of run-down city regions).

So, what intellectual zaps can we expect to get from the exhibition coming to Hong Kong?

ABOVE: A SHOT FROM THE EXHIBITION GEORGE NELSON AT THE VITRA DESIGN MUSEUM IN 2008-09





«TOTAL DESIGN IS NOTHING MORE OR LESS THAN A PROCESS OF RELATING EVERYTHING TO EVERYTHING.»

GEORGE NELSON

ABOVE A SHOT FROM THE EXHIBITION GEORGE NELSON AT THE VITRA DESIGN MUSEUM IN 2008-09

“The exhibition presents all the Nelson classics such as his Coconut Chair, the Marshmallow Sofa, the Pretzel Chair, the Bubble Lamps and a variety of his wall clocks,” says Eisenbrand. “But it also widens the picture by including lesser known pieces such as rare wall clocks, a record player or tableware. When researching for the exhibition the quality of the graphic design that originates from the Nelson office was a great surprise to me, so we are of course also showing examples of brochures and other printed matter he created. Lastly, we are presenting some wonderful films created by Nelson or documenting his work.”

An obvious question springs to mind – a question it is tempting to ask any curator about any large collection: how did you get the pieces?

“Vitra has been manufacturing Nelson pieces for many years, first as a licensee of Herman Miller, then as a direct licensee of the designer. The Vitra Design Museum holds a large collection of Nelson pieces and was entrusted with the Nelson estate by Nelson’s widow Jacqueline Nelson in the 1990s because Rolf Fehlbaum, as head of the board of Vitra, was a close friend of George and Jacqueline.”

Queenie Lau, curator at HKDI, explains how the city came to host the exhibition:

“We are very grateful to get this exhibition, the Asian tour of which is sponsored by Herman Miller. Last year we met some people from the Vitra Design Museum at the Asian



LEFT
BUBBLE
LAMPS CA.
1952

Museum Conference and were able to make good contacts with them.

“Since the exhibition space at different venues varies, HKDI is currently working with the technical team of Vitra Design Museum to adapt the exhibition layout to fit the 600 square metres HKDI Gallery.”

Eisenbrand continues the story. “During the whole preparation of the exhibition we had already been in close exchange with Herman Miller because the story of George Nelson is of course, to a degree, also the story of Herman Miller and because the company archive provided much valuable information,” he says. “Herman Miller also kindly supported the American tour of the exhibition and brought us in touch with HKDI that then hosted the annual Asian Museum Conference that we initiated. Then one thing just led to

another and we are very happy that our exhibition will be presented in Hong Kong.”

For Nelson, reflecting and writing about design and the societal role of the designer often preceded or accompanied the actual design task.

And while many of his designs were sleek and unfussy – in the true modernist style – he was nonetheless adamant about the rationale. Function, in terms of serving the user(s) as a whole, was foremost. This philosophy led to his unambiguous dissatisfaction with one of his company’s most profitable and enduring products, the Action Office II, a modular form of desk and forerunner of the ubiquitous workstation seen in any modern open-plan office.

“One does not have to be an especially perceptive critic to realise that Action Office II is definitely

not a system which produces an environment gratifying for people in general. But it is admirable for planners looking for ways of cramming in a maximum number of bodies, for ‘employees’ (as against individuals), for ‘personnel’, corporate zombies, the walking dead, the silent majority. A large market.”

Nelson’s comments were bold in their derision and insight; there was indeed a larger market. By 2005 sales for Action Office II had reached US\$5 billion.

An exhibition of work by someone who gave the world so much elegant design, and who was so scathing of something that generated his company so much cash? That has to be worth a look. 



WORKING MODEL

HKDI student Tristan Yeung was one of this year's Hong Kong Design Centre Award winners, sharing the spotlight with some of Asia's most successful creative talents. As **DANIEL JEFFREYS** reports the annual event shows that awards raise awareness of design and promote creativity.

Horst Pudwill, winner of this year's HKDC Design Leadership Award is a good example of why prizes for creativity and innovation are important. His company, Hong Kong-based Techtronic Industries (TTI), does not make the kind of products that appear in *Vogue* magazine but its success, like that of any high-fashion house, has been based on the brilliance and innovation of its designs.

TTI specialises in making cordless electrical appliances such as drills, vacuum cleaners and hedge trimmers. The company's brand names (such as Ryobi, Milwaukee, AEG power equipment and Hoover, Dirt Devil and Vax floor care products) are most readily associated with the United States but for Pudwill Hong Kong was - and is - the best place to base their design driven company.

"Hong Kong people are creative and very flexible, and they respond well to the international climate," says Pudwill. "The design community is quite sophisticated, and these are features that are difficult to replicate elsewhere."

Pudwill's award is based on his company's use of design to drive its success in a highly competitive and globalised market and it takes into account the fact that "design has emerged as a key differentiator in producing sustainable results."

Pudwill acknowledges that it has

increasingly been design and innovation as much as price that has made his company successful. When he started out cordless technology was in its infancy and the batteries used for hand held power tools were of poor quality. A considerable part of TTI's success has been based on developing high performance patented battery technology which powers wide ranges of high performance portable power equipment devices, many of which have led to break through innovations in the industries TTI serves. His experience leaves him with high regard for Hong Kong's design industry.

"Hong Kong is justified in its claim to be the design hub of Asia but not just because of the money that flows here for investment, but also because of the city's heart," he says. "There is an inspiring passion for creativity in Hong Kong."

Pudwill acknowledges that Hong Kong's pre-eminence in design is not immutable. The rise of the creative industries on the mainland, as China shifts from a low-cost manufacturing economy, poses a significant threat, as well as offering new opportunities.

Yao Yingjia, the winner of this year's World's Outstanding Chinese Designer Award, has a deep understanding of both the risks and rewards that China's rise poses for Hong Kong.

Yao's award is for his "outstanding achievements" and dedication "to furthering design through social commitment." Since 1996 he has worked for Chinese computer giant Lenovo, blending culture with high technology, seeking for ways to inject ethereal Chinese ideas about harmony into plastic and silicon. His work recently won a prestigious red dot award to compliment the prize he has been given by HKDC.

"China has such a storied history of design including the compass and paper making," he says. "What I have been doing at Lenovo is in some ways the paradox of going forward by looking back, finding ways to inject ancient ideas about harmony and simplicity into high-tech products."



Yao says harmony is the key element of Chinese craftsmanship and the element that distinguishes Chinese designers from their European counterparts. At Lenovo he has injected his aesthetic into the company's products by working with an international team that can provide a creative counterpart to his ideas. He recently began collaborating with Giovanni Alessi Anghini from the Italian-based Alessi family that is to kitchenware what Ferrari is to cars.

"The world is getting smaller," says Yao. "We should be

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: YAO YINGJIA; TRISTAN YEUNG; JOHN HESKETT; HORST PUDWILL

《 I HAVE BEEN GOING FORWARD BY LOOKING BACK... INJECTING ANCIENT IDEAS ABOUT HARMONY AND SIMPLICITY INTO HIGH TECH PRODUCTS 》

designers for the world. Culturally, the east and west look at things very differently, but in the end all roads lead to Rome. Design is akin to yeast in the fermentation process. It is not the main factor but you need to produce chemical effects, to set off interconnected results.”

Yao was an Olympic torchbearer for Shandong province in 2008 and his work has lit the path for many young designers at Lenovo. He is the kind of man who may one day become as influential a mentor as John Heskett, this year’s HKDC Design for Asia Lifetime Achievement Award. Heskett spent fifteen years as Professor of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology’s Institute of Design in Chicago before becoming the Chair Professor of Design at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University’s School of Design. He is the author of the iconic Industrial Design (1980) and his most recent book was Toothpicks and Logos: Design in Everyday Life, published in 2002.

Yao’s view that China is building a new capability in integrating design and decision making is shared by Heskett (Deng Xiao-Ping, regarded as the architect of China’s economic renaissance, is called “the great designer” by Yao) and he warns that Hong Kong needs to have a carefully calibrated response in two areas.

“The English language skills among design students are not good enough for them to establish an international connection,” says Heskett. “Secondly students lack

a general, structural knowledge of economics, values and ideologies.”

Heskett’s point is a vital one and worthy of a prize in its own right. Designers need a deep source of references consisting of different languages, codes and symbols in order to feed innovation.

“Design students should have a much broader view of the context of design, one that questions its cultural relevance in the wider world, is more systematic in thinking, and embraces socio-economic issues and business,” says Heskett.

Heskett has always emphasised the need for design to be focused on the end user and “the extent to which it satisfies their needs or gives meaning to their lives”. That’s a view shared by Tristan Yeung, a HKDI Fashion and Image Design department student who won this year’s HKDC Young Design Talent Award.

“My design was humanised,” says

Yeung. “There are side panels where the wearer can attach accessories and that can be used to attach bags and other items. It’s about giving the client a wide range of choices.”

Yeung’s award was based on his innovative use of materials, his creative application of hand-drawing and laser cuts and the couture details he worked into his pieces. His prize includes financing to help him develop his career by gaining experience overseas.

“I want to learn from Jean-Paul Lespagnard, a Belgian designer,” he says. “I will also learn systems and production line techniques from foreign companies and attend overseas fashion week shows to build more connections.”

All of Yeung’s fellow award winners agree that exposure to different cultures is a key ingredient for Hong Kong to maintain its excellence in design. The HKDC’s Business of Design Week has been tremendously successful in bringing overseas design talents to Hong Kong but there is no substitute for being submerged in a foreign culture. The HKDC’s goal of promoting creativity is served by all its prizes, but above all by the opportunities it provides for talented young people to travel. ☪

BELOW AWARD WINNING WORKS OF TRISTANYEUNG



《 TELLING THE TRUTH IS A REVOLUTIONARY ACT 》
GEORGE ORWELL





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DESIGN
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設計學院

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《EVERYTHING WE SEE IS A
PERSPECTIVE, NOT THE TRUTH.》

MARCUS AURELIUS