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Museum Quality

Yeohlee Teng, Emphasizing The Design in Designer Fashion

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The fashion designer Yeohlee Teng has been in business for 24 years and in that time her clothes have hung in more museum exhibitions than department stores. Teng's most vociferous supporters are curators.

They wear her designs, attend her runway presentations and, occasionally, even serve as models.

Her aesthetic sensibility is influenced most profoundly by architecture, rather than literary figures, television characters, 1950s socialites or their spawn. Her work is spare, efficient and comforting.

Last year she won a National Design Award from the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum. Her work has been exhibited at the Hayden Gallery at MIT and it is part of the permanent collection at the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She designed uniforms for the staffs at the three restaurants in the recently renovated Museum of Modern Art. And her \$175 unisex holster-pocket apron sells briskly in the MOMA gift shop.

Teng is the darling of the art world. But her place in the fashion industry is much less clear.

"Yeohlee is rare," says Valerie Steele, director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, where Teng's work has been the subject of a one-woman show. "The genealogy she represents is more Corbusier than Dior."

Teng is not aloof, but she typically doesn't engage in fashion politics and the faux intimacy that is so prevalent among her peers. Most readers of fashion magazines probably have never heard of her because she receives little attention in their pages. Her shows are not documented on Style.com and she is not dressing Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Lopez or other tabloid regulars. Teng is not vigorously pushing fashion in any new or trendy direction. She is loath to include anything as obvious as a logo or a hailstorm of beading on her clothes.

With Teng's clothes, form and function always peacefully coexist. A woman will always breathe easy in her clothes, never worry about an unexpected rain shower, never feel that her sexuality is too obvious. Teng, who designs under her first name alone, is a consummate modernist.

"I think people who design recognize the thinking process behind the end result. They understand modernism has to do with the use of materials, with solving a problem, with the awareness of a budget," Teng says. And that's not limited to the fashion community, she adds.

Teng describes her ideal customer as an "urban nomad" -- a woman who is in constant motion and for whom clothes function as portable shelter. Teng is a problem-solver, always searching for an answer to life's inconveniences, an intellectual conundrum or an aesthetic challenge. She experiments with fabric

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technology, making waterproof blazers, wrinkle-free shirts and stain-resistant dresses coated in Teflon. Although her designs are quite attractive, she doesn't make traditionally sexy or pretty clothes -- with ruffles, lace, exuberant beadwork. She makes thoughtful attire, putting an enormous amount of brainpower into something as simple as a seam on a skirt.

"I like the details to be part of the energy and the construction of the clothes," Teng says. "If I cut a skirt on the bias, when you step forward, it catches on the hip bone. It's sexy in a subtle way. To be subtle, it's interesting and challenging."

In Teng's way of thinking, a garment is like a room. One size should fit all -- at least whenever possible. She extends the analogy to include the construction of armholes, pant legs and necklines. These openings, she says, are like windows, and when she considers their placement -- besides the most functional concerns -- she worries about framing, aesthetics and environment. She obsesses about necklines and the way they highlight the face and show off the clavicle. A jewel neckline is never just happenstance in her collection. It is considered, debated and mulled.

A Capital Investment

Teng will visit Washington this month to celebrate the opening of the Kennedy Center exhibition "The New China Chic." She is one of 13 designers whose work is represented in the show, which runs Oct. 4-16 and explores the ways in which Chinese culture has influenced fashion. (The exhibit emphasizes China as inspiration, whether the designers are Chinese or not; Teng is originally from Malaysia.) On Thursday she will speak at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, which will also mount a runway presentation of her fall and holiday collections.

When her visit was organized, no stores in Washington sold Teng's work. (With shoppers these days enamored of peasant skirts, jeweled tunics and cropped sweaters, Teng is not a hot commodity.) But two were hastily signed up for the occasion: Rizik's will take special orders for fall garments. And on Friday and Saturday, Chinoiserie in Old Town Alexandria will host trunk shows. Both points of sale were organized by tenacity and luck.

Peter Zia, born in China and trained as an architect, opened Chinoiserie about five years ago with an emphasis on architectural design elements, dinnerware and stationery. Other than a few T-shirts, he has never sold clothing. But he was intrigued by the Yeohlee collection. "A very close friend wore her clothes and I always admired what she picked up," Zia says. "Her things are understated to the nth degree." Zia's first trunk show will cater to his regular customers; the second will be for an audience of architects and interior designers.

In New York, her clothes are sold at Takashimaya, where they hang on the second floor alongside artful travel accessories, and at Lord & Taylor, where the store's fashion director has a special affection for her. "She wants to take design to the simplest form," says LaVelle Olexa. "It allows for a great deal of self-expression."

While her retail accounts are limited, Teng owns Yeohlee Inc. and it is profitable. The company does not disclose sales figures and a spokesman described an industry estimate of \$2 million in retail sales as low. There are only clothes, no fragrances. Her first real shoe collection was introduced this month. Because Teng has not hitched her wagon to a big-foot publicity machine or expensive celebrity wranglers, one could easily assume that such a designer -- particularly one with a bookish personality -- wasn't interested in expanding the scope of her business, getting involved in unabashed commercialism and becoming a brand. But intellectualism does not negate business savvy. She dabbled in menswear in

1996 and says that if the right deal could be worked out, "that's something I'd license in a nanosecond."

Keeping It Simple

Teng's work is proudly simple -- dignified and filled with a humility rarely seen on Seventh Avenue. American fashion is not known for being cerebral -- this after all is the industry that produced a glut of celebrity designers, red-carpet gawkers and the dubious fame of "Project Runway" -- but cerebral is precisely how Teng's work is best described. Her clothes never seem to relate to what the pack is doing.

"I admire her for her independence. To me she's just totally her own person," says writer Marylou Luther, a friend and contributor to Teng's book "Yeohlee: Work."

"She's an individual and therefore, to me, more interesting."

For spring 2004, for example, Teng was inspired by a simple square. "During the period of 'more is more,' I did 'less is less,'" she says.

She was challenged by Harold Koda, chief curator of the Costume Institute, to reduce her design aesthetic to the barest minimum. A simple black square of organza with a hole cut in the center became a miniskirt. Five increasingly larger squares in white silk became a long tiered skirt that fluttered with the wearer's movements.

Teng has been inspired by such brainy notions as mathematics, arches and Gothic architecture. Over the years, she has become best known for her coats. One of them -- her signature "Jesus" cloak -- is designed so that when its pattern is laid out on fabric, the yardage is fully consumed. Nothing goes to waste. That fact doesn't necessarily change the look of the garment, but the tidiness of it, the elegant efficiency, satisfies her. Teng has solved a problem, even if it was one of her own invention.

For her Gothic collection more than five years ago, she studied Roman arches and keystones. It seemed an excruciating amount of work for an aesthetic that only subtly revealed itself in the pitched seams of a skirt or in the angular shape of a bodice. A more typical designer would have showcased all that research by outlining the silhouette of Notre Dame on the back of a blazer in Swarovski crystal.

Does anyone really notice the brainpower that has gone into her designs? Does all of that hard thinking really change the ultimate product? "I think the process matters. I think it's what makes the clothes special," says retail consultant Dawn Mello. "Who knows how these things work? But somehow, it comes through."

For spring 2006, Teng had an infatuation with suspension bridges and the early-20th-century buildings of the relatively obscure modernist architect Robert Mallet-Stevens. (His work was recently celebrated in an exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris; he also designed a home for the famous French couturier Paul Poiret.)

In late August, as Teng was preparing for her show, storyboards were propped along two walls in her showroom. They were covered with pictures of bridges -- from a rustic rope version that looked like something from "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" to the most technically advanced spans that seem to extend forever as they fade into the horizon. Teng filled a sketchbook with her own detailed studies of bridges, showing their construction and points of tension. It is a bit like looking at the doodles of a civil engineer.

"I'm trying to understand buttressing, support cables and stays," Teng explains. "The clothes are not going to look like bridges but some of the concepts will work themselves in."

Yeohlee put her spring collection on the runway during fashion week. As is her tradition, she used both professional models and friends. Her show, with its vaguely New Age mournful soundtrack, was set in a loft space in the **Helen Mills Theater** not far from the Fashion Institute of Technology. All of her research on bridges and Mallet-Stevens buildings revealed itself quietly. Almost imperceptibly. How could one know that the angular seaming on the back of a white jacket came from the silhouette of a building? One would have to have been concentrating mightily to notice that her dresses were often suspended from the neckline, swaying like a bridge from its support cables.

The First Collection

Teng grew up in Malaysia and her brothers are both architects. She moved to New York and studied for two years at Parsons School of Design before leaving to found her business in 1981 with her own savings. Her first collection consisted of only five pieces, one of which essentially launched her career. A cotton poplin hooded rain cape, it captured the interest of Mello, then the fashion director for Bergdorf Goodman. She put it in the store's catalogue.

"I still have that cape -- from the first collection she ever did -- that I bought for myself. It was just one of those things that's timeless and ageless," Mello says. "There was something about it that was very modern for the time. Primarily she was doing outerwear. It looked very clean. The quality was so good and still is today. The interesting thing is her clothes are affordable."

They range from \$400 to \$3,000 -- not exactly inexpensive, but not as pricey as one might expect, given that Teng manufactures almost everything in New York.

A petite woman with shoulder-length black hair streaked with gray, Teng is 57 years old, although that is not a piece of information that will come from her. Because her clothes are so restrained and her design aesthetic so controlled, one could be forgiven for assuming that she would be a rather sober character swathed in yards of black nun's cloth, slow to smile and unlikely to laugh.

Teng is, however, just the opposite. Although she is particularly fond of black, she can often be found in jeans and a simple shirt. She is warm and attentive, reliably remembering the eccentric details of a casual conversation or thinking to telephone a friend without all the talking points of a Type-A buddy. Her interests include art and politics.

"I see her at interesting events that are usually art-related, not the mainstream fashion event. It's usually something more esoteric," says Mello, who most recently saw her at an exhibition at a Chinese art gallery, where Teng was the only designer in attendance.

Teng is not an extrovert but has enough persuasive charm that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority let her put on a fashion show in the subway station beneath the Fashion Week tents of Bryant Park last year. Teng thought the subterranean corridors would be the ideal location to emphasize her vision of commuters, wanderers and transients. She gathered her friends and acquaintances, which included former CNN fashion reporter Elsa Klensch and actress Farrah Fawcett. "I couldn't face another casting. The process is arduous and it's difficult for both the models and the casting people. I wanted to do something different," she says. "It was harder. You need more fittings and you can't make anything in multiples. So I complicated my life substantially."

For her soundtrack she enlisted the aid of some bucket drummers she'd spotted in yet another subway station. They couldn't -- or wouldn't -- tell her what they'd play for her audience, but promised that by the end of the show everyone would be dancing. The uncertainty did not seem to bother her. Neither did the fact that a subway station can be a suffocatingly hot place. Teng trusted the drummers, she handed out paper fans, and the presentation went on. "I was showing clothes that were appropriate for the environment."

"I loved being subversive, being under the tents," she says. "It was quite a moment."

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