

FROM THE INSIDE OUT...



Amanda Chai

People take pocket construction for granted, quips 27-year-old Esther Choy. Especially men.

"It's such a shame that men get to experience all these nice functions they don't even think about, but women are complaining about how pockets aren't big enough or clothes don't fit as they should," the designer and product developer at BHG tells The Straits Times in a tele-conference call. "It's not like our mobile phones are smaller."

Ms Choy is the designer behind BHG's first three in-house fashion brands, which are launching in phases from today, beginning with the Bugis Junction outlet.

The brands are Societe (\$39.90 to \$129.90), a workwear brand for the more mature office woman; Otona Mode (\$39.90 to \$79.90), a Japanese-inspired line of oversized fits and natural fabrics; and SBT (\$29.90 to \$69.90), a colourful collection of prints targeted at the younger crowd seeking the "week-end Singapore aesthetic".

The first two lines are designed for BHG's current demographic of shoppers – who prefer more forgiving silhouettes – while SBT, made from deadstock fabrics, hopes to capture "the customers we want to have", explains the designer.

And yes, expect to find pockets in most of her dresses.

Ms Choy, who graduated from Lasalle College of the Arts with a degree in Fashion Design and Textiles (majoring in womenswear) in 2016, was headhunted last August and joined the company in October.

She oversees designs from the drawing board to when they hit the five BHG stores.

Head of merchandising Vivien Lim, 50, says hiring an in-house designer – a first in the company's 26-year history – was part of BHG's reinvention strategy planned since the middle of last year.

"We wanted to attract a new crowd of younger shoppers who may be price-sensitive but are also looking out for quality," she says.

"We wanted to be more relatable to a new generation of customers and we recognise their appreciation for authenticity and genuine intentions. It is only apt that we approach this by listening to them, with a designer who intuitively knows what this new generation wants and needs."

Young designers, she says, "bring new ideas and energy".

Of the 12 candidates interviewed, Ms Choy was selected for her positive attitude and energy, openness to commercial inputs and willingness to learn and exchange pointers, Ms Lim adds.

Having always been interested in art and design, the designer's first brush with fashion was when she was gifted a yarn set with children's knitting needles at seven years old.

She asked her grandmother to teach her to knit, creating squares of cloth and, later, a scarf.

Knitting would eventually find its way into her graduating collection at Lasalle, which featured



womenswear-inspired womenswear.

Her parents took some convincing to agree to fashion school. Their compromise was that she completed junior college first.

At Serangoon Junior College, Ms Choy took H2 Art as one of her subjects, which cemented her decision to pursue fashion as a career.

"I wanted to do art, but art in a gallery can be enjoyed only by those who go to the gallery. I thought: How can I make it more relatable to people? Clothes," says the eldest of four to a homemaker mother and engineer father.

"It took a while for my parents to come around. But once they did, I had their full support."

At Lasalle, she interned with local and international designers. In her second year, an internship in London with British designer Ada Zanditon proved a turning point.

She was asked to help out with the menswear line, which helped her discover what kind of a designer she wanted to be, she says.

"I think it informed my design aesthetic. A lot of appreciation for menswear detailing or functions is lost in womenswear, like adjustable waistbands or pockets."

These influenced my graduating collection heavily. I took menswear elements and made them usable in womenswear designs."

Her time in London also gave her perspective on the local scene.

"One of my main worries was that Singapore is so small, and what we learn here might not be the standard across the world," says Ms Choy, who later interned with local fashion label Ong Shunmugam.

"The exposure made me realise that what we're learning in Lasalle is industry-standard – if you pay attention in school and practise what your teachers teach, it works."



Ms Esther Choy (above) with her collections at the BHG Bugis Junction store. Among her designs are the Otona Mode dress (\$69.90, left), Societe top and skirt (both \$69.90, below, left) and SBT top (\$39.90) and skirts (\$49.90, both below). PHOTOS: SHINTARO TAY, BHG SINGAPORE



PAVING THE WAY FOR THE FUTURE

One challenge she faced heading design at BHG was toning down the runway-appropriate looks she was taught for the commercial shopper.

"For the runway you need to make a visual impact immediately, so everything is a bit more blown-up. Runway shows were made for photos – but you don't see people wearing these clothes in everyday life," says Ms Choy, who will also design the upcoming in-house menswear and athleisure brands.

"When doing an actual job, you need to keep in mind the customer you're dressing and what they want."

After graduating but before joining BHG, Ms Choy piloted her own label, Esh by Esther, which is now on hiatus. By invitation, she showcased the label at fashion weeks in Singapore, Vietnam, Laos and Busan in South Korea.

She recalls early feedback from women who said they loved her designs but "could never" wear them. "That was a lesson (for me) – people like the garment, but will they want it in their wardrobe? It's not to say we lose all the design elements in the garment, but it's about making it commercial enough so they're not intimidated to wear it."

"And I don't think I sacrificed my style. I still managed to slide in all my pockets and small functional details," she adds with a grin.

Just shy of a year at BHG, she has learnt a lot from the department store's years of operational knowledge and picked up industry know-how, from working out production costs to liaising with factories and sourcing fabrics.

When asked if she ever saw herself designing for a department store, she says: "It's not something (my peers and I) considered a job –

just because the job wasn't there for us to consider."

"But now that it is, it's a great opportunity for the industry and future designers. BHG has literally created a pool of jobs for future local players where previously there was none."

Most of her classmates went on to jobs in designing or operations in the fashion industry, though none to her knowledge are at department stores like herself.

She sees herself as paving the way for more local designers to take on full-time roles in department stores.

UPSIDE AND RISKS

It is currently a mixed bag in the local retail scene. Players such as Metro and OG have in-house fashion brands – the former carries private labels like M.Maison and Kurt Woods – while others like Tangs and Robinsons prefer stocking local designers to introducing in-house brands. Tangs, for instance, carries brands such as Ginlee Studio, Weekend Sundries and Elohim by Sabrina Goh.

There are pros and cons to either strategy. Professor Kapil R. Tuli of Singapore Management University's Retail Centre of Excellence says: "Having in-house brands is a simple business decision based on your risk preference."

Costs can add up, he says. "You have to create an in-house design team, find your own sources and keep investing in designs. It can be expensive – easily up to a few million dollars a year if you want to create a line-up of design options."

He adds: "The risk is that consumers' preferences, especially for fashion, change very quickly. Curating brands has flexibility, where retailers can follow the trends and stock a hot new brand; some would rather spend their money there."

The upside is that "it's your brand and you get more margins from that comparatively", as well as control over production, pricing and marketing, he says.

In Ms Choy's opinion, having original designs could lead to a reinvention of the retail genre.

Department stores have always been a gathering of other brands, she observes, but these brands are often available elsewhere, sometimes at a better deal.

"So you are never able to build department store loyalty," she says. "But our exclusive designs are only in our stores – if you like them you have to come back to us."

There have indeed been a few repeat customers. The three brands had a soft launch in January, with smaller collections hitting the stores. Tourists liked her bodycon dresses while local women fancy her tops, says Ms Choy, who sheepishly admits she has been lurking around the shopfloor observing how customers react to her designs.

She is optimistic about the road ahead. The pandemic has changed buying preferences, with a lot more people looking to buy locally these days to avoid international shipping, she adds.

"It's been great, having full control as a designer at such a young age. Never would I have thought that at 27, I would have my own designs on the floor of a department store."

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