

# 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 that women have," she says. "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 telephone call. "It's not like our mobile phones are there."

Ms Choy is the designer behind BHG, a collective of three 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 women's wear brand for the more mature office woman; Otona Mode (\$39.90 to \$79.90), a Japanese-inspired line of oversized fits; and SBT (\$39.90 to \$69.90), a colourful collection of prints targeted at the younger crowd seeking the "weekend Singapore aesthetic".

The first two lines are designed for BHG's current demographic of shoppers - who prefer more forgiving sizes - whereas while SBT, made from deadstock fabric, 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 Textile Majoring in Textile Design 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 for the first time in BHG'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 younger generation of consumers 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 customers, 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 points, Ms Lim adds.

Having always been interested in art and design, Ms Choy'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



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, something, so everything is a bit more blingy, 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 designing a garment, you need to keep in mind the consumer 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 Bangkok 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 just about the aesthetic elements in the garment, but it's also 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 learned the "language of a 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 designers 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 are preferring to bring local designers to introducing in-house brands. Tangs, for instance, carries brands such as Gun Lee 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 School of Fashion and Retailing 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 - cashing up a few million dollars - if you're not sure if you're going to have 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 different brands sometimes rather than spend the 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 local garment industry.

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 if your exclusive designs are only in one store, it's hard for them you have to come back to."

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 adds that she often adds a few new designs 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 and global 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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