

by Cheryl Ambrose

SEATED in the midst of the boisterous crowd that is the KL Six, Eric Choong appears quite lost. Numerous conversations fly across the large table in the conference room where make-up, hairstyling and breakfast are going on simultaneously. Eric also looks like the youngest of the group, the more insecure one listening intently in the hopes of learning something new about the business. He seems to

like this perception, even though nothing could be further from the truth. Eric the man is now 42 years old and Eric Choong the label, 16.

Eric is content to play the role of observer, watching and listening, rather than offering his views - a fact that followers of the designer would have noticed given his absence from the scene for the last two years. "I am a lone

Moving on

ERIC CHOONG PLANS TO LAUNCH HIS READY-TO-WEAR COLLECTION AT THE MALAYSIAN-INTERNATIONAL FASHION WEEK (M-IFW) THIS THURSDAY

ranger," he says, quickly qualifying that with the fact that he has a team that works closely with him. "But I have been quiet for the last two years because I needed the time to gather my thoughts and work on the future. I want to be a famous fashion designer. I don't want to compete with others."

And so, after years of working to establish his label, Eric finally took some much-needed time out to focus on all the things that had originally inspired his creativity - painting and drawing - which he had left alone to

concentrate on designing.

"I've been studying Chinese painting; I went to a retreat in India; I learnt tai chi. I really enjoy my peaceful life," Eric says, smiling delicately. "It's not easy to survive in the fashion industry. When I stopped doing interviews for those two years, there were rumours that Eric Choong was dead. I was a labelled an old designer."

After all the soul searching, Eric has discovered his true motivation and the vision to propel the Eric Choong label forward.

"The Eric Choong label is already 16 years old. I feel it's time to revamp my brand. Everything will now be changed to Eric Choong Kuala Lumpur. I need to upgrade to [move forward] in this industry," he explains.

Eric's interest has always been inclined towards high fashion, with its elaborately embellished and flowing gowns. His is not the sort of clothes women would gravitate towards for everyday wear. But given the changing moods of fashion, Eric has realised that the time to alter his perspective is ripe. "I've been

doing this for 22 years," he says, adding that he had spent the first six years of his career in Hongkong. His creative inclination began when he attended his first art lesson at age seven. At the time, his mother ran a make-up and hairstyling school, and therefore kept up with the fashion of the times.

Eric loved to see her in her latest outfits, and found pleasure in flipping through her fashion magazines.

"She influenced me," he says. But more than that, she gave him passion. At a time when fashion designing was believed to be a glamorous profession, Eric's mother sent him off to Hongkong to study fashion. When he came back in 1990 with a diploma in fashion designing and some serious training in haute couture, Eric decided that the only way to make it in this country was to start his own label.

"That was my dream," he says, beaming a pleasant little-boy smile. He made that dream come true with the help of his family and went on to open his first boutique in Park Royal Hotel, focusing on made-to-measure bridal wear.

And now it's time for a change. Realising that he cannot hope to carry on his

label on his own, Eric has finally given in and teamed up with a business partner, with the intention of broadening the business.

"Eric Choong is a brand. I hope one day to open stores in London, New York, Hongkong and Shanghai," he says. To achieve his goal of franchising, Eric has decided to combine all his labels into one - Eric Choong Kuala Lumpur - with five diffusion lines under this one name.

Given his talent, the main line will be called Eric Choong Brides, supported by Eric Choong Flowers. Every bride needs her flowers! But these are existing lines.

At the Malaysia-International Fashion Week (M-IFW), he plans to launch his ready-to-wear collection.

"Actually, it's more cocktail ready-to-wear," he says. Of course, it would be. Who can imagine Eric Choong producing everyday wear minus the frills?

"I plan to produce limited-edition pieces. I will also use my haute couture workmanship in the ready-to-wear collections," he says, referring to the fine handy work that goes into made-to-order pieces.

But that is by no means the end of Eric's world domination plans. Next in line are Eric Choong Homme and something else, which he has not quite decided on.

"It's good for me," he says of setting up a full-on company to handle his business. "If in the future I decide to do something else, I can. The business will still run. I might want to paint more, or do charity work. That's the reason I want to build my name. I want to use my name to do charity work."

Well, Eric is already on his way to becoming a name to be reckoned with in Asia at least. At this year's 19th Malaysian Film Festival,

Passionate designer

by Jacqueline Toyad

TWO things drive the world of fashion: beauty and desire. Who would have thought that the son of a boxer would have an ingrained desire to create things of beauty? Michael Ong's desire to be a part of the glitz and glamour of the world of fashion was imbedded within him as early as the age of five. His mother recalls his scribbling human figures, particularly females donning fairytale gowns, on pieces of paper and on the walls of their home.

"My father never encouraged me. He wouldn't allow me because it wasn't manly and it wasn't real work as far as he was concerned," says Michael. "But my mother was very encouraging."

Encourage him she did. She would take the very young Michael with her on her trips to the tailor. She would take clippings from magazines or sketch her own designs and get clothes made almost on a weekly basis - she's the kind of lady who loves dressing up, even to this day.

Michael would watch his mother being measured with the natural curiosity of a young boy. But unlike other boys, the colours and feel of fabrics intrigued him. He would touch and play with the different materials, enjoying the feel of the textures.

On completing secondary school, Michael entered the working world. He was impatient and he didn't want to study, but he knew what he wanted to do. He found a job with a boutique called Details, where he worked for four years and

picked up whatever he could about the fashion world - everything from designing and manufacturing to merchandising.

Finally, in 1991, his perseverance paid off. Michael was invited to showcase his talent at the first-ever Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board Fashion Gala. Barely 21, the young designer was of course excited to see his work displayed beside more established names in the industry.

"The success of that event gave me enough confidence to open up my own business which I called Ong's Collection. I started out with one machine, but now I have two factories with 20 workers. I'm proof that you don't really need strong finances to back you up. You know the dilemma: you have creativity but no finances, or you have finances but no creativity. At the end of the day, what you need is just a lot of support, a good network and hard work," says Michael.

His network of friends built over the years comprises those in marketing, business and the media. Through them, he picked up plenty of advice on how to run his business and how to promote it.

"I didn't study fashion. I never went to college. I am totally creative but I think I'm not so good with business. But my friends have helped me a lot. In fact, it was from watching them make mistakes that helped me make fewer errors."

So, with no formal training, a big financier or (according to him) business sense, Michael has done something amazing to have captured the attention of so many on the scene. His high fashion