

Options

THE EDGE
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LIFE STYLE DESIGN



The Elite Six

The Edge & theSun celebrate the country's leading designers at the Malaysia-International Fashion Week 2007

Eric Choong

The first thing that strikes you about Eric Choong is his quiet, level-headed personality. Unlike the flighty quality that a lot of people in fashion tend to have, Eric is very down-to-earth, very genuine and totally unaffected by the daily dramas that come with the kind of work he does. Simple gestures — shifting props during a photoshoot, for example — belie his laid-back, easy-going nature. But don't be fooled: he's just as particular about design and detail as any designer should be.

Of course, it's not the only quality that got him where he is today. Regarded as one of the foremost designers in the country, Eric's typical brand of ethnic-inspired fashion has become wildly popular with the well-heeled fashionistas searching for a fun twist to classic ensembles. Not only does Eric design a haute couture label, but also a bridal, prêt-à-porter and a homme label (the last two of which were launched recently). He's widely acknowledged as one of the leading authorities of bridal elegance in Malaysia.

His store in Bangsar Baru is filled with antique furniture and colourful accents that make it more like a visit to a favourite friend's wardrobe rather than to a designer's place of work. Shoes are removed at the door, exchanged for a pair of soft bedroom slippers instead. It is impossible not to feel at ease here, nor is it at all difficult to feel beautiful in any of his creations. Creativity — in more than just his clothing design — is an overriding theme for this diminutive, delicate designer, no matter what he does.

Joining the elite KL Six list for the second time, Eric has been feverishly working on his collection while tending to his other clients — with the holiday and wedding season coming up, he has more than his hands full. "I have three collections for the KL Six night. Ready to wear, demi couture and haute couture. My haute couture line is very special, I'm so excited because Swarovski has sponsored all the crystals I'm using," he smiles excitedly.

His signature layering style has been retained, using softer fabrics like chiffon and silk against stronger textures like taffeta and sequins. "Subtle, yet glam," he smiles. "It's all very classic retro. I'm trying to recreate the look from Audrey Hepburn, Jackie Onassis... they are so classically retro but so glamorous! I love that sort of sense of style." The theme he has chosen is fashion wonderland, inspired by the kinds of fantasies that little girls often have and their dreams of sparkly, pretty clothes — his collection is meant to fulfil that dream. His colour palette oozes the kind of spirit he talks about, revealing flashes of silver, gold and black as predominant shades. The twinkle of the crystals is hard to miss as well, on both the haute and demi couture lines.

But wait — demi couture? "It's a new line under my ready-to-wear stuff, actually. It's off the rack, but not quite. You see, I've been receiving feedback that a lot of people like my haute couture designs but can't afford it. So I created something that is more accessible to more people... If people feel happy in what I make, I want as many people as possible to enjoy it," he explains in earnest.



He has applied this generous principle to his bridal line as well, creating a spin-off he refers to as the second line that will debut next year. Bridal trousseaus are available at a more affordable price tag, although they come with no less attention to detail and Eric's own magic touch.

It's one of the ideas he's come up with since being involved in last year's M-IFW, the other one being the concept of a workshop for students and young people eager to get into fashion. "It's not to say I know that much or anything, but I want to share my experiences. What it is like to find your footing in this business and how to keep stable, that sort of thing. The younger generation is full of ideas and concepts, which is wonderful. But it's not enough; they must know how to survive the business in reality," he says.

As one of the judges of the Mifa8, he's had plenty of exposure to the talents and capabilities of the younger generation of designers. "It's a great thing to do this with them; it gives them a headstart in the fashion industry and is a great platform for them." It's not the only good thing Eric has to say about Mifa, as the exposure it allows local designers is exactly what the country needs to reaffirm its role as a regional fashion hub.

"No more working in silos anymore. We have to work together like this. In order to present a united front to international buyers, we need to be represented together so they can see the full extent of Malaysian fashion. Investors need to know that there is not just one good designer, but many... no one wants to bother buying stuff from one person, they buy from several at a time," he says sensibly.

It's about being international, yet retaining the personality of who you are. "As much as we need to be international, we also need to remember that international buyers like us because of our style... no point trying too hard to be like Western designers, we cannot compete with that. We should still be ourselves, and celebrate what we have."

Clearly, Eric is much more than a purveyor of beautiful dresses and lush accessories. His level-headed and grounded approach to his craft has given him valuable insights, a giving heart and made him a truly visionary designer.

