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Fri, Oct 09, 2009
The Star/Asia News Network

Malaysian designers go pink for a cause

FASHION and fervent effort to fight breast cancer come together once again this month.

Five local designers have each conceived a dress for auction for the Estee Lauder Companies Breast Cancer Awareness Campaign 2009 to help raise funds and create awareness on the importance of early detection.

Eric Choong

Sourcing his inspiration from Audrey Hepburn is Eric Choong, who created a lovely one-shoulder, silk satin and tulle dress for the auction.

"Audrey is among the most admired and beloved actresses of all time. She is a timeless symbol of elegance and sophistication. My creation celebrates her grace and beauty, highlighting her memorable role as Sabrina Fairchild in the film Sabrina," says Choong, 45.

The matte pink dress also incorporates French lace and Swarovski crystals.

"There are hand-tied, baby pink silk satin ribbons together with crystalised Swarovski elements along the bustline and shoulder to accentuate the gown. The ribbons are a symbol of breast health while the crystals provide light and hope in finding a cure for breast cancer," he explains.

A graduate of the Hong Kong Institute Of Fashion Design, Choong conceived the Eric Choong label in 1990 upon his return to Kuala Lumpur. His signature work lies in wedding gowns, evening gowns and cocktail dresses.

In 2007, he won the Designer Of The Year and Best Collection Showcase Of The Year at the Malaysian International Fashion Awards (MIFA).

Choong was also named Best Costume Designer for the Malaysian movie entitled The 3rd Generation at the 19th Malaysian Film Festival 2006.

He remains a loyal supporter of the Estee Lauder Breast Cancer Awareness Campaign.

"The Estee Lauder Group has the resources to bring global awareness to this disease. Through its global initiatives, millions of women (and men) worldwide have learnt about breast cancer and been empowered with knowledge on early detection and treatment," says Choong.

"I am constantly humbled to be invited and given the opportunity to contribute to this amazing global campaign over the years. This campaign has taught me compassion, patience and determination, and more importantly, to appreciate the fragility of life."

Datuk Tom Abang Saufi

For her dress, Datuk Tom Abang Saufi created a sweet, flowy number using specially designed silk chiffon material hand-dyed in splashes of pink.

Enhancing the dress is a matching, detachable collar with encrusted stones.

"The essence of the dress is to make the wearer look elegant and feminine without sacrificing comfort and practicality. I always try to maintain the main philosophy of my design, which is minimal use of zips and buttons," says Datuk Dayang Fatimah Abang Saufi, who is better known among fashion circles as Tom.

Known for her fusion of modern and traditional ethnic designs of South-East Asia, Tom started designing soon after completing a fashion design course in London in 1986.

She won the Best Designer Of The Year award at MIFA 2004 (together with Melinda Looi).

The label prides itself in designing and creating its own fabrics, especially hand-painted batik.

"Women today want fashion to complement the way they live their lives, to be elegant, feminine and practical.

"I try to make my designs bold without being brash, traditional without being staid, but above all, fun and comfortable to wear," she says.

Taking part in the awareness campaign is something she looks forward to every year.

"We are proud to have been part of it for the last three years and to be able to contribute in some way towards the campaign.

"It is a great event, glamorous but sombre, and ultimately true to its goal of charitable contribution.

"Personally, I feel blessed as a designer to be able to be in a profession I love and be in a capacity to help others indirectly," says the 50-something Tom.

Khoo Hooi

Simple yet striking is a silk chiffon dress by Khoo Hooi inspired by Grecian Romanticism.

The gown's unique feature lies in the shimmering crystal embellishment near the bustline. A one-shoulder strap adds a touch of sophistication.

Lee Khoo Hooi, 38, studied at the Malaysian Institute Of Art from 1991 to 1993. In 1996, he was named runner-up in the Malaysian Young Designer Competition and second runner-up for the Asian Young Designer Award. In 1997, he took home the Special Prize in the Asian Young Designer Award in Japan.

Lee founded the Clothier Creation in December 1999 that produces, distributes, markets and promotes his own brand label, Khoo Hooi.

In 2008, he received the Mercedes-Benz Stylo Fashion Forward Award at the Stylo Fashion Festival.

Khoo Hooi is available in 10 retail stores throughout the United States and niche boutiques in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and Japan.

Lee has been an ardent supporter of the Estee Lauder Breast Cancer Awareness Campaign the last few years.

"This campaign greatly raises public awareness about breast cancer, and serves as a reminder to women to go for health checkups and learn how to perform self checks.

"My participation in the campaign has increased my social awareness and concern about breast cancer," he says.

Ridzuan Bohari

Combining vintage and ballroom dancing feel, Ridzuan Bohari created an interesting light pink gown, consisting chiffon material exclusively made by Ridz Collection.

Individually hand-painted appliqué roses that create a three-dimension effect is the highlight of the dress.

"Pink is also a trademark colour of the Ridz Collection and year after year, we try to create a different version of pink for this event," says Ridzuan, a self-taught designer.

Ridzuan, 41, started his career as a freelance retail executive in Singapore in 1989.

He opened Ridz Collection in Kuala Lumpur in 2004, with a design philosophy that is wearable and comfortable. The fan is his signature motif, and his batik infused into chiffon and silk beaded creations are popular among celebrities.

Ridzuan feels funds raised through the campaign is crucial in preventing breast cancer.

"This programme creates awareness to our younger generation and women in general that early detection saves life. The funds raised will also help relevant NGOs to provide support and free mammograms to those who cannot afford to pay for it," he says.

Participating in the campaign has also benefited Ridzuan.

"I have come to know a lot more people who have a mission in their life to contribute something back to society. For me, it is a good opportunity to give back as well.

"I have also met many breast cancer survivors who are still very positive in life even when they have been thrown a curve ball in life. It makes me realise that wealth and material things are not the most important in life, but health is," he says.

Carven Ong

Using a combination of vibrant magenta and pink, Carven Ong created a beautiful gown inspired by the notions of grandeur and femininity.

Pink organza is used for the bodice and chiffon for the skirt, both joined by a beaded, inverted-V panel in the middle.

"The highlight of the dress lies in the layered chiffon and sparkling Swarovski crystals, diamonds and beads," says Ong, 41.

Ong made his catwalk debut in the MODA Wanita Fashion Show in 1991. In the same year, the Taiping-born designer opened Carven Academy Of Fashion in Kuala Lumpur.

Carven Ong Couture was established in 1994 and 10 years later, Ong set up Carven Ong Couture And Wedding Specialist.

His label offers contemporary suits, pants, dresses and every day wear. Carven.Sense is Ong's party range label.

A Japan New Soen Institute graduate, Ong is also a loyal supporter of the Breast Cancer Awareness Campaign.

"My participation as a designer in the last few years has changed my perception and awareness of breast cancer in women.

"Whenever there is a need for me to assist in such campaigns, I'll be there to assist no matter what it takes," he says.

"This campaign is important because it helps open doors to those who are still unaware of how important early detection of breast cancer and regular check ups are these days," he concludes.