

THUY PHAM  
AN ORAL HISTORY OF UNITED BAMBOO  
(1999 - 2012)

Nothing was planned or intentional with United Bamboo. You're making stuff for fun, and then people suddenly want to buy that, and then it's like *shit, I have to deliver it*—that's basically what happened. I don't think our journey could be repeated today, there's simply no system for it.

United Bamboo was me, Miho Aoki and Siri Kuptamethee—Siri ended up designing at Supreme. They were both interning with us at Bernadette Corporation. When I decided to part ways with Antek and Bernadette, I suddenly had our Bowery loft to myself, seeing as I was the one paying the rent. It was all set up for design work, with big tables for pattern-cutting and the like.

Miho and Siri were starting a line of their own. They had made a few pieces of clothes and tried to sell it for local stores. At that time, Bernadette Corporation only sold in a handful of stores, like Steven Alan and TG-170, so I suggested they went there to try to sell. The stores immediately asked them what their brand name was, and asked me for advice. I remembered when I was living in DC, there had been something in the news about an Asian gang war, and I remembered an article with the headline "Flying

Photo courtesy of Rosalie Knox.



Dragons vs United Bamboo.” That really stuck in my head—*United Bamboo sounds like a cool name*, I thought. It’s obviously a play on Asian-ness. I didn’t really know what it meant until some Chinese girl came up to me and explained, *it’s like if you try to break a bunch of chop sticks at the same time—it’s almost impossible*. It’s the same implication as “united we stand” or “United States” or something like that.

Even if most of us were Asian American, we didn’t really focus on Asian issues in Bernadette Corporation. When we were in school, there was a lot of post-modern theory going around, and we were all really into Baudrillard. Most of our work was about consumerism, media, the hyper-real. We also played a lot on the idea of coopting signifiers. When we were doing Bernadette Corporation, Bernadette and I talked about hip hop culture all the time. I was always very interested in gang culture. I don’t really care about their criminal enterprises, but purely on its visual and ritualistic aspects. Being around Siri and Miho, who I was dating at the time, I eventually joined them and co-founded United Bamboo. We were very lucky, and there were unique circumstances that contributed to our success. Miho was Japanese,

and I knew a lot of Japanese people through the fashion system who would frequent the Bernadette Corporation showroom. Japan goes through these trend cycles obsessing over Western cities: sometimes it’s Paris, other times New York, and it just so happened, coincidentally, that it was New York at the time when we were coming up. The Japanese fashion industry is pretty much driven by magazines and what they called “select shops”—it’s kind of like department stores, characterized by a curated selection of brands—a bit like a concept store, but much before that became common in the West. Those two parts of the industry work together as a hype machine. They collectively decided that New York was cool, so they’d send all their staffers to New York and look for the most underground shit—so underground that you’d never even heard of those brands locally. And then they’d offer them a business. I only ever met these people on a superficial level, but with Miho, they’d invite us to dinners and parties, and we became more like friends. Those people helped us promote us in Japan. We had business more or less from the beginning, propelled as an Asian brand running out of New York.

It went very fast. We had two stand-alone stores in Tokyo, and were represented in stores across Japan. When Vito Acconci suddenly decided to become an architect, we contracted him to design our store in Nakameguro, although he had never really built anything before. Our investor thought we could be a kind of American version of APC, who he had also introduced to the Japanese market.

United Bamboo wasn’t trying to be underground, but it wasn’t a commercial either. We couldn’t really place ourselves anywhere because fashion media dictates those terms. Some thought of us more as a streetwear brand. Whenever someone would write about us, they’d usually be from either the art or the downtown scene, even if we never identified with the streetwear culture that surrounded it. At that time, I didn’t want to be associated with streetwear because it was just like Supreme, or whatever. I wanted to be like Comme and Yohji, but I knew I didn’t have their skill level. Japan became a third space for us. They’ve always been like that. In the 80s, a lot of cool British designers, like Christopher Nemeth and even Vivienne Westwood, who didn’t make it to the American market, found an audience there.

It was just cool clothes for young people. I don’t know where that fits into an American paradigm.

We didn’t really have a brand story. The idea was to apply the style recontextualization of Bernadette Corporation to a more avant-garde brand like Comme des Garçon that might otherwise be out of reach for the typical consumer both in terms of price and style. We tried to be authentic: we worked with our peers in the sense that if there was any music for our fashion shows, we would use people we knew. We were in the scene around Animal Collective, Gang Gang Dance, James Iha. Karen O really liked us—I think her secret is that she likes to cosplay as an office lady. Her stage costumes and what she wore in real life was very different. United Bamboo was kind of like *normal drag*, a type of nuanced downtown prep: weird people trying to look normal.

The Japanese company produced the clothes but they also sent their staff to work with us for six weeks a time, and we also had Japanese patternmakers. Operationally, that was kind of expensive. Our studio was on Centre Street, we were about 10 people. Miho was more of a stylist, she likes to pick



up fabrics and colors, make mood boards. I've always like technical, hands-on things, so I liked working with the patternmakers and sewers. Our clothes were never as good as I wanted it to be, and I think probably, I would say my mistake was that I cared too much about the artisanship, when I should have focused more on marketing. I kept trying to be a better designer, making more complicated things, challenging staff to do more complicated things. That was our downfall. We were trying to do things but the market kept telling us something else. When you're in the industry, you're stuck in the cycle. You gotta come up with a collection, and once you're stuck, it's very hard to re-strategize. You really can't reset. You find yourselves making decisions you shouldn't have. We formally shut in 2011, after the earthquake in Japan.

I wouldn't say I miss United Bamboo, although I wish I had gone a little bit further. Towards the end, I started becoming friends with Masaya Kuroki of Kitsune, who really looked up to our brand. I think he took the best parts of United Bamboo and discarded the worst parts. Kitsune figured out a way to make their brand work in the age of streetwear.

Even at the time of operating, I knew about Instagram, I just didn't make it on there because I didn't want to spend time on it. I could see people like Alexander Wang or Humberto Leon did—they were both a little bit younger than me, and were really into it. Now, social media presence has become everything. Still, I think we're in an interesting time: when we did Bernadette Corporation, we didn't give a shit, we had this small world, and we never looked outside of it. I feel like you can do that again now. If I was starting out in fashion, I would create a little community and do my own shit, and not worry about the outside world. And if people find out about it, it's like finding a treasure.