

RELOCATING ASIA:
A ROUNDTABLE ON INDEPENDENT
FASHION DESIGN

Featuring

JEPPE UGELVIG

**FEY FEY
WORLDWIDE**

(Designer, UK/China)

ICAN HAREM

(Designer, Indonesia)

CARL JAN CRUZ

(Designer, Philippines)

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JEPPE

Could each of you introduce your practice? How would you say you participate in the fashion industry?

FEYFEY

The spirit of the Feyfey WORLDWIDE is a double negation: we use stereotyped fabrics to make seemingly unfashionable clothes... I'm trying to create a new fresh feeling for wearers while using traditional silhouette and fabrics. Two years after launching my brand, I enrolled in the MA Fashion Design program at Royal College of Art where I am graduating this year. My production is fluid, and I am interested in connecting with local sewers in New York, China, and London.

ICAN

My studies actually had nothing to do with fashion: I studied Islamic history. I have been making fashion for seven years, and I guess I started my brand because I realized fashion is the way I can best express my identity. It also is a way to express my political views: if you grow up Muslim in a really conservative country, fashion can serve as a strong political statement. I didn't have any fashion skill beforehand, so I learned how to sew from my wife. I used to only use secondhand garments that I would re-paint and reconstruct because I love to change the function of clothes. More recently I've started doing original pieces.

CARL

I've had the brand Carl Jan Cruz for seven years. We do contemporary ready-to-wear design and we develop the majority of our fabrics here in the Philippines with local mills who specialize mostly in denim and jersey. We used to be a part of the international fashion system pre-pandemic-fashion week showrooms and all, but now we've begun facing inwards and concentrating on our audience back here in Manila.

JEPPE

Carl, could you elaborate on what it means to zoom back in on the local? What is the fashion scene in Manila like for someone like you?

CARL

I would say the fashion scene in the Philippines is very industrial — and when I say industrial, I mean driven by bigger brands. In terms of

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Feyfey WORLDWIDE. Image courtesy of CFDA.

heritage or independent design, it's still up-and-coming. In the last five years, there has been a growing number of options in terms of local manufacturing and, as a result, local brands. It's still nascent compared to, for example, Bali, which has a good production system and where more people are adapted to the craft as well as to producing for and with international brands. Turning towards the local has been good to us, fortunately, because we're not that big of a brand. There wasn't that much of an adjustment because we didn't have to maintain any stores or real estate contracts. We weren't contracting with a lot of outsourced workers because we do our production in-house. To us the question rather was: how do we produce things now that collections seem obsolete? We were all at home, so there really wasn't much to be dressed for. There is a market for independent fashion in the Philippines, but it's a challenge because it's still very small. Still, Manila is quite interesting because there are people

who are aware of niche brands thanks to the globalization, the internet, the digitization.

JEPPE

Ican, do some of these observations resonate with you?

ICAN

As Carl said, Bali's craft scene is big and this is very much a result of the heavy tourist industry here. My work does not come from this perspective at all. I position myself as part of a local subculture, so I don't feel qualified speaking about the fashion industry—in fact, this is the first time I'm included in such a context! My position in Indonesia has always been as a part of a subcultural movement, and that's the reason I produce my clothes. Even my distribution is not conventional fashion-like retail, shopping malls—my system is much more organic.

JEPPE

Subculture is very important in Indonesia. Does attention to clothing also play a role in that conversation?

ICAN

The fashion industry in Indonesia is growing because of globalization and the internet, and I can see it's using subcultural aesthetics as a trend in Indonesia. I think the arrival of these mega-brands from Europe and the US in the past years have injected subculture into fashion because the latter appropriate the former; and actually, this economy positively affects my work. But I don't really have a place in this mega fashion industry. My work is mostly distributed through my touring as a musician and performer. The clothes help deliver the message to my audience. I love the strategy of historical underground artists like Ramm:ell:zee in the US. To me, he's really an icon: he was never in the fashion industry, but I love how he injects his vision into every discipline, summoning everything surrounding him to capture his political statements—and doing it from the Black American ghetto. This is the way that I work. I am always capturing. That's why for me, fashion and music is synchronized. I am always standing between.

JEPPE

Feyfey, you are an enigma because you have developed your brand between China and the West. And China is such a different context in

terms of fashion as its fashion industry is at a very different place in its development. What was your experience as you were setting up your business? Where do you locate yourself?

FEYFEY

It's very difficult to locate myself. I have spent a lot of time researching the Chinese industry and traveled to a lot of different places, especially in Guangzhou, where most of the fashion factories are located. The fashion industry in China is very mature now. The country has been "the factory of the world" for a really long time, but now there are so many Chinese brands doing so many different styles. However, there is a new wave of consumerism targeting young women. It's labeled as some sort of "feminism," but really it's more of a post-feminism, encouraging women to consume more fashionable clothes to show themselves off. The fashion business is going well, but for me it's really hard because my clothes are not beautiful or stylish enough to actually sell in this environment.

ICAN

Your work is beautiful; what do you mean???

FEYFEY

Ha! Thanks. I think the consumers in China want very elegant or very professional clothes. There's a lot of pressure on Chinese girls — they need to be both elegant, sexy, and look professional — and my brand is actually an option or solution to be casual, I think. I still am figuring out how to locate myself in the Chinese market.

JEPPE

One way of locating yourself is in terms of one's production, another way is audience which globalizes more rapidly with the rise of social media. Feyfey, do you find your audience in a Western or an Asian market, or do you try to speak to both?

FEYFEY

I really want to aim at the Asian market because I think a lot of my inspiration comes from Asian cultures and aesthetic phenomena in Asia. I want to change this binary situation of "Asia is the factory and the West is the consumer."

JEPPE

Does that resonate with you, Carl?

CARL

Yes, definitely. Before COVID, our audience was 50/50. Similarly to Feyfey's situation in China, I guess, for us it's about convincing people that there's an opportunity to be sartorially different. In Manila, the way people dress is still very much conservative, and there's a big socioeconomic gap in terms of purchasing power. It's not like we could really target and grow our market here and still remain being a niche independent design brand because the majority of clothing being consumed in the Philippines has an average price tag of \$20 to \$25. As an independent brand, you might as well not operate if you're selling your things for that amount. It would



Carl Jan Cruz. Image courtesy Renzo Navarro.

never make the craft that goes into the production tenable. I think the pandemic made me re-think the balance between commerce and creativity.

JEPPE

Ican's hybrid practice between music and fashion is platformed on Instagram, where he has a huge following in both China and South East Asia. Around the world, Instagram is also allowing for new modes of fashion entrepreneurship, sometimes by cutting out middlemen such as retailers and showrooms. Is social media also an interesting model for staying small in a very global way for you, Carl? Or do you still need an engagement with the industry proper?

CARL

Actually, the reality of running a business in an industry localized in the Philippines definitely defines how social media works for us. Yes,



Ican Harem by Dea Rahajeng.

it gives us a platform for exposure and enables us to do press projects and collaborations inquiries, but it hasn't directly changed the way we do our sales. If anything, it's given us a small percentage of international consumers, but it still boils down to one thing, which is logistics. Not everyone is willing to pay \$30 or \$50 for shipping. But I find a different beauty in staying small while maintaining a globalized platform such as Instagram. I started thinking of it more as a portfolio.

FEYFEY

I do think Instagram gives more opportunity for both design and the visuals you want to create, but I also think that doing physical, offline activities is a really crucial part for reaching more customers and for understanding what people actually think about your work. Last year, I did a pop-up in China which allowed me to talk directly to customers. A lot of responses were actually quite different from what people in mainstream China think. When I did this pop up in Chengdu, which is a big fashion city, every day people came by to offer interesting thoughts. That felt inspiring. But I do think that with selling my products directly rather than opting for showrooms etc. I can lower the overall cost and ultimately affect the retail price positively as well. Today, there's a huge market in China for brands paying for PR, retail, representation—it's very common in the industry. I think this model should come to an end—at that point, small brands can develop more in the industry.

JEPPE

Carl, what are your plans for the future?

CARL

Having been in a pandemic for a year now and envisioning the future ahead, for me the idea is to stop planning too much. I know my idea of success lies in making differences in the lives of the people I work with—helping them improve how they're living their lives. That's where I get most of my drive these days. Working with a team intimately, I think about how we all work on this as a passion. I'm impressed how we can still be a team after a year, and the pandemic has made me reflect on how we can make a difference looking forward, and ultimately create a life outside of work. I was conditioned to think that it was normal to not have a life outside working, but now I'm actually learning that I could actually have that! So I think it's about finding a balance between being

aspirational and practical at the same time. I don't know where it'll take us, but I think in the long run being involved in such questions will lead to improvements—in terms of how we all live our lives.

JEPPE

Feyfey, where do you hope your brand Feyfey WORLDWIDE will go?

FEYFEY

I do have a lot of ambitions and I have so many things I want to make, so this is my immediate future. Industry-wise, I'd like to start a union or a collective with friends focusing on independent practice in Asia. The idea is to help young designers standardize their product and advise them on common early challenges, such as how to do taxes, office work, PR, etc. And I want to build this union like a labor union for small businesses and actually help each other with some work other than design. Usually there is only one person behind a small label, and people spend a huge amount of time on standardizing their businesses. A classic challenge is when stylists borrow our clothes and forget to return the garments—sometimes we have to wait for them up to a year. Hopefully, within a union framework, we could actually hire one or two people to systematize these procedures and represent us in complicated processes. This is a real dream for us.

JEPPE

In fashion cities such as London and Paris there is a system of talent competitions, fashion week sponsorship, and other forms of industry support. Some people say this is very important, other people say that it is not that helpful because this system makes people start businesses in an industry that doesn't really sustain them. Asian brands are rarely included in this context except if they follow a very particular Western model of operation. What would support for the Asian scene look like in your respective contexts?

CARL

I couldn't really compete with the industry. It is what it is, and I had to make peace with it, but creatively, I've committed to my roots in the Philippines. Prizes reward brands and businesses but not the craft or practice because they drive a certain model of brand-building—such as marketing, sales, and press—in highly saturated Western

fashion cities like New York, while manufacturing is outsourced to elsewhere. I recognize that because these are my direct conversations when, say, holding an independent showroom in Paris during fashion week. It's refreshing for the people to meet a brand that conceptualizes and produces from one place. I'm not saying it's the right way, but it's refreshing in an otherwise outsourced industry. I think it's always up to the individual person to decide how to retain their integrity. There are older brands, like BLESS, who have been around for more than two decades and have been uncompromising in their approach throughout. Catapulting yourself into fame doesn't guarantee longevity. Do you even know your products anymore? Do you know where your distribution is at? I started making clothes because I wanted to wear them myself. And from that instinct alone, I want to know how they were made—knowing that I could intervene at any moment if need be.

JEPPE

What I'm hearing all three of you express is a desire to retain intimacy with your practice, product, audience, and craft but also to find a way to make that go around on a long-term. That's always been a problem in fashion and it's becoming a bigger challenge because the bigger players are getting bigger and smaller initiatives are getting smaller. The global fashion world is shrinking because there is more power in fewer hands, and then there are all the young people who want to make something that feels authentic and original. And sometimes I guess it means leaving the industry behind, or leaving it partially behind, and finding your own path. Ican, what does success and growth look like for you?

ICAN

I always define my success in fashion as a language. I love how you can connect people by way of fashion—that dressing a certain way can make you feel comfortable to connect with a stranger. To me, success is if my work becomes that language. I love that there is a guy in Uganda who has found and decided to wear my products, to celebrate this identity in Kampala, Uganda, with something that is coming from far away, from Indonesia. We may not understand each other's language, but he understands and even presents my work with his dialect and identity, which for me is good communication. It's a language—a future language for me.