

Designer dialogue



Fashion designer Jamei Chen sees few boundaries between fine art and fashion — or the rest of everyday life

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Taiwanese designer Jamei Chen (陳季斌) enjoys blurring the lines between fashion and fine art. Since launching her eponymous label in 1987, Chen has worked with art film directors Stanley Kwan (關錦鵬) and Edward Yang (楊德昌), launched a design partnership with photographer Quo Ying Sheng (郭英聲) and opened a cafe and exhibition space for emerging artists.

Chen has collaborated with Quo on her seasonal collections since 2007, drawing inspiration from his photographs, which Chen began collecting two decades ago. Quo's work is simple but dreamily evocative. Some images, like a woman in jeans sprawled facedown in front of a bank of carefully trimmed topiaries, or a black scarf lying like a discarded shadow on stone steps in a sunny garden, quietly inject a hint of menace into that dreaminess.

Likewise, Jamei Chen's designs are deceptively plain, but rely on thoughtful draping, flowing organic fabrics and a muted but distinctive color palette for each season. Upon closer inspection, complex dressmaking details like a sparkling cascade of jet beading on black silk or the scalloped edge of a sheer white blouse reveal themselves in each outfit.

"The two of us have very good artistic chemistry," says Chen. "Our style is very clean and quiet. That quality in [Quo's] photos allows viewers the space to draw their own interpretations, and in my clothing it lets the wearer express her own sense of style."

Chen and Quo worked together on her last fashion show, which took place in Taipei Arena (台北巨蛋) and ended with real snow drifting onto models as they walked in long, ethereal gowns of tulle and silk. Chen also displays the work of emerging artists in JAMEI CHEN · Dialogue, which sits directly across the street from Taipei Spot Film House on Zhongshan North Road. Recent exhibitions showcased the work of September Leu (呂靜雯), an editor at the Chinese-language edition of *Vogue* who moonlights as a ceramic sculptor, and Free'fei-O (羅斐菁), whose handmade felt figures were displayed alongside wire sculptures by Bor Jen Liu (劉博仁).

Last week, Chen sat down with the *Taipei Times* in the cafe and discussed her brand's design philosophy, her collaboration with Quo and other artists, and her belief in the importance of individual style. The soft-spoken designer had just finished a conversation with students from National Taiwan Normal University about the relationship between fine art and fashion.

Taipei Times: Part of the Jamei Chen brand philosophy is mixing fine art with fashion, and you are known for supporting young and emerging artists in particular. Why did you start doing that?

Jamei Chen: I feel that in the design business, we should focus on art in all aspects of living. Three years ago or so, I started working with Quo Ying Sheng, but at that time we didn't necessarily think it would be a long-term collaboration. It wasn't on purpose. It just turns out it was a great fit. In fact, I feel the collaborations I've had with artists have been a matter of fate and good luck.

After I started collaborating with [Quo], I started to think about the last 25 years of my business. I thought that from what we have



Above: Dialogue near Zhongshan North Road is meant to give artists a space for exhibitions and conversations about their work.

Left and right: Models present Jamei Chen's latest fashions at her 2009 spring pre-collection show on Monday.

done already, we could develop another vision, which is to discover and find artists who have potential and cutting-edge ideas. We also hoped we could take our experience from having worked in the fashion industry for so long and help these artists by giving them a space where they could have a dialogue with one another and also hold exhibitions of their work. And in turn, we hoped that this would allow them to explore things more deeply in their artistic process, and give them an easier road by allowing them to be discovered by receptive audiences.

Both [Quo] and I are from the same generation, more or less, and we have already worked for a while, so we hope that working with young artists will help us understand what young people are thinking. It's also good for the future of our brand to see new points of view.

TT: You've used a lot of organic and environmentally friendly fibers in your clothing. Why did you become interested in doing that?

JC: I think environmentalism is something that you have to incorporate into your day-to-day life, and it is an idea that people should be brought up with from the time they are very little. I grew up in the countryside and was really energized and inspired by its beauty. My family was a bit lacking in terms of material possessions, but on the other hand my life was very carefree.

After I moved to Taipei, I realized that people hold onto dreams that they had when they were very young, as well as the ideas they developed back then of what it means to be happy and healthy.

I think everyone should think of themselves as working hand-in-hand with the earth, and that it is important for the clothing we wear to be environmentally friendly.

TT: Recently you've worked with young artists like September Leu and Free'fei-O. When you look for new artists to collaborate with, what do you keep in mind?

JC: To tell you the truth, I don't seek new artists out deliberately. For example, I met Free'fei-O in a flea market near Eslite bookstore. She had handmade felt rabbits, and I was just so excited and moved by them. People now are unwilling to spend a lot of time working on just one thing, and each rabbit takes such a long time to make. I feel that in every one, you get a sense of what the artist's aesthetic is and how she thinks. A lot of the artists I've worked with aren't professional artists, but they have been able to accomplish a lot in a very short time. In the last two or three years, for example, I think September Leu has been able to develop and express a very clear point of view in her art, on top of her achievements in her career.

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