



Johan Ku's collection Emotional Sculpture is a unique blend of sculpture and haute couture. PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOHAN KU

mentioned that Taiwan's fashion and textile industry has changed considerably over the past few decades.

Johan Ku: That's true. Local companies have closed their factories in Taiwan and moved them to China and Vietnam because our labor costs are too high. This has caused serious changes in our [textile] industry. And until now [we] don't know how to deal with it appropriately because [our] knowledge base is all about manufacturing.

TT: Could you please elaborate a little?

JK: Twenty or 30 years ago, Taiwan was the factory of the world. Today it is China. You can see some older Hollywood movies talking about Taiwan's products: "Oh, this umbrella is broken. It must be from Taiwan." As a designer, I am a little embarrassed by this because I don't want to do that kind of design. But our industry [model] forces us to do that kind of thing.

Also, 20 years ago, Taiwanese couldn't afford to buy high-end clothing. But teenagers nowadays don't have a tough time like their parents — they don't have to work in the factories. So as they are growing up their parents might buy a Chanel bag and this changes their attitude to clothing. They might even have a dream to be a designer and not just run a factory, like their parents.

TT: What do you mean by the industry "forces us to do that kind of thing?"

JK: Because the [textile] industry in Taiwan is still pretty much focused on manufacturing and production. They just ask you to come up with a design that can produce 100,000 items. This results in low quality and not a real design. If you want to be an independent designer it is really tough because our fashion industry is not really well developed.

Japan, for example, already has a well developed fashion week and their buyers appreciate their designers and they will buy their designs a half year before the season begins. So they can have great planning to produce their products without stock.

TT: So Taiwan doesn't currently have a fashion week?

JK: We do, but our fashion week takes place once a year, not every season. So people don't know that we have a fashion week. Also, the buyers are not doing the same thing as the Japanese. They won't buy your products six months in advance.

TT: So in Taiwan, fashion week is actually an annual thing.

JK: Yes, we have a festival called Taipei IN Style (www.taipeiinstyle.com). You can call it a fashion week, but there are only a few

designers there.

(In its fourth year, Taipei IN Style is an annual event that promotes Taiwan's fashion and textile industry. This year's fashion week begins on Aug. 28 at Taipei World Trade Center, Hall 1 (台北世貿中心展覽大樓一館). Last year, 149 designers from 17 countries attended the exhibition. For further details visit www.taipeiinstyle.com, available in English, Chinese and Japanese.)

TT: Have you ever participated in Taipei IN Style?

JK: Yes, I participated in the first year.

TT: Does it work to promote Taiwan's fashion industry?

JK: Let me put it this way. If our industry can't be developed well like Japan, if we can't have a system where buyers order our products six months in advance, I don't think the fashion week can work.

For example, Japan's press is very interested in their fashion designers — not just foreign designers, but their own designers. So Tokyo fashion week becomes a place that can feed many designers and when they have a large enough budget they can fly to Paris or London or New York. And that's the real design world.

TT: Let's talk about your design Emotional Sculpture for Gen Arts Style International Design Competition. What was the inspiration for it?

JK: Sculpture. It's one kind of sculpture and I wanted to apply this concept in fashion because I think my needlework can be a kind of sculpture.

TT: How did you arrive at wool as a material to use rather than, say, cotton?

JK: Actually I've used a lot of different materials. I've used a knife to cut fabric and I have even used some materials that were never used in needle wear before, such as rubber. I think those materials are

interesting, but in the end, if I need to be delicate, they are not the best choice.

I use knitwear because it is a material used for high-end fashion. On the other hand, this kind of material is raw, so I can form it however I want: huge knits or smaller knits — I can separate them to the right size that I want.

TT: Your creations are not really the functional, ready-to-wear designs that can be worn to a basketball game or to a night out at the theater.

JK: High fashion and runway fashion — the stuff that I do — is focused on being the leader of the fashion trend. So they promote their concept in front of an audience and try to influence them. And manufacturers — the general clothing makers — follow those trends. So that's why you see so much un-wearable clothing during fashion week.

But these designs lead the fashion world forward. I think that that's the difference. Even for mass production, they need to consider the high fashion because they can get inspiration from that and apply that to their product.

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Johan Ku (古文文) sits across from me at a coffee shop dressed in a plain black T-shirt and jeans — a remarkable contrast from the wildly inventive rough wool designs that are a hallmark of his fashion aesthetic.

Ku has earned plaudits and awards over the past five years for creating a series of knitwear collections that bridge the gap between fashion design and sculpture.

But Ku's fashion tastes don't end with haute couture; he has worked with local companies to design ready-to-wear swimsuits and was costume producer for the Taiwanese television drama *Hot Shot* (籃球火), also known as *Basketball Fire*. He says, however, that his first love is designing runway fashion.

Next month, Ku will travel to New York as a finalist in Gen Art Styles International Design Competition, an annual fashion design competition judged by a who's who list of magazine editors (*Vogue*, *GQ*, *Details* and *Marie Claire*) and buyers (Saks Fifth Avenue and La Garconne) from the fashion industry. Ku is a finalist in the competition's avant-garde category. Winners will be announced on July 15.

A month after returning from New York, Ku will be off to London where he has been accepted into the master's degree program at the prestigious Central Saint Martins School of Art and Design.

A few weeks ago, Ku sat down with me to discuss his creations, Taiwan's nascent fashion industry and his aspirations to make a mark on the Taiwanese fashion scene.

Taipei Times: The last time we spoke, you

A man with a knack for knit

Fashion designer Johan Ku breaks the boundaries between sculpture and fashion with Emotional Sculpture

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER



[TECHNOLOGY REVIEWS]

A ZOOM LENS YOU CAN DOWNLOAD

Although the iPhone has many features to offer, it lacks one particularly handy tool: a zoom lens for its camera.

That's what makes Camera Zoom worth checking out. The app adds a 4X digital zoom to the iPhone.

The app is easy enough to use — just move a slider on the screen to the desired magnification and touch the camera picture. You can position the slider along any border of the screen, and photos are saved in your photo album.

Camera Zoom works like other digital zooms, basically by blowing up just a portion of the picture you see in the viewfinder. That does mean that the more you zoom, the more degraded the picture quality. Your shots will get an increasingly noisy grain and distorted colors as you approach maximum magnification. That noise becomes more pronounced in lower-light photos.

While you can get the same effect by blowing up and cropping a picture on your computer (maybe even with a slightly better result), Camera Zoom has one major advantage: it's right in your camera.



From left to right: The Wii Motion Plus controller; KendiTech's Camera Zoom software for the iPhone; Panasonic's DMP-B15 portable Blu-Ray DVD player; and Yahoo's iPhone application.

PANASONIC'S PORTABLE BLU-RAY PLAYER

Mark this day in your calendar. On June 1, 2009, Blu-ray officially jumped the shark — and you can thank Panasonic for that.

On June 8, the consumer electronics company announced it was bringing to market the DMP-B15, the world's first portable Blu-ray player. You read that right. Stunning high-def video and 5.1-surround sound on an 8.9-inch screen, with mini stereo speakers.

Let me file that under gizmos you don't need. Nix that — US\$800 gizmos you don't need.

I bet even Panasonic views this product as more of a high-end engineering exercise than a truly viable product. Who needs hi-def at 9 inches? And sure, the B15 can also connect to your HDTV screen with an HDMI cable, but why not just get a standard Blu-ray player for half the price and be done with it?

Panasonic's own DMP-BD60 does everything the portable player does: It can get you online and access BD Live content via Panasonic's Viera Cast service, and it costs US\$250. At that price, you can use the money you save opting out of the B15 to buy all those costly Blu-ray movies.

DEVICE PUTS A NEW SPIN ON WII SPORTS GAMES

Q: What's this Wii MotionPlus I've been hearing about?

A: Wii MotionPlus is a small add-on that snaps onto the bottom of a Nintendo Wii Remote, increasing its ability to sense motion. It will be particularly useful for sports games, where hand and arm motion count. It contains a sensor that instantaneously measures the angular velocity (the rate at which an object turns) of a hand or arm. So, throwing a Frisbee is tricky, just like the real thing. According to Nintendo, you'll be able to buy one

for about US\$20. Games in the works include Virtua Tennis 2009, Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10, and EA Sports Grand Slam Tennis.

Q: How much do extra sets of controls cost?

A: About US\$55, which includes a Wii Remote and Nunchuk.

Q: Which is the correct term — Wii Remote or Wiimote?

A: According to Nintendo, the official term is "Wii Remote" and it connects to the "Nunchuk." According to Google search results, "Wiimote" is a popular nickname.

A NEW VOICE FROM YAHOO

Yahoo has added its voice-enabled search program to its iPhone application.

Although the new capability will eventually arrive on an iPhone through an update, the impatient can go into the iTunes app store and download the free Yahoo feature to get the update right away.

Voice recognition, called oneSearch, is already available for BlackBerry, Nokia and Windows Mobile phones. The Google app for the iPhone also has voice recognition.

But all the other features found on the Yahoo iPhone app will not be available for the other phones. Yahoo has shelved its Yahoo Mobile for Smartphones that was intended as an all-in-one product to consolidate information, social networking and mail from several sites and aggregate it into a single window.

Individual widgets from the project will be released to different phones over time, the company said.

In the meantime, iPhone owners can have the complete Yahoo mobile browser experience. That currently includes a few flaws with voice recognition. In a test, it worked well for search, but it failed several times in organizing a customized page called My Interests.

— NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE