

FASHION

Chinese Graduates Shine At ITS Contest Judged By Demna

Gemma A. Williams / September 13, 2022



Jing Daily joined the media jury and traveled to Trieste to celebrate 20 years of the iconic ITS contest, which featured Chinese designers, fashion exhibitions, and digital creatives. Photo: Francesco Chiot



Twenty years ago, Barbara Franchin had a vision. It was simple: to support young talent from around the world by creating a globally recognized fashion competition for new graduates. There was one stipulation, to donate an object from that final collection to an archive.

Two decades later, Franchin's manifesto has spawned a unique catalog of more than 14,359 portfolios, 1,077 dresses, 160 accessories, 118 pieces of jewelry, and over 700 photographic projects, all of which together form a tapestry that depicts the recent history of clothing design. Many of these past entrants and winners have gone on to work in some of the industry's most prestigious houses (Balenciaga's Demna, a winner in 2004) or set up their own labels (Richard Quinn, Cecile Bahnsen), making the archive a one-of-a-kind fashion curiosity.

This month, over six hundred guests gathered in Trieste for the anniversary, which honored 24 finalists as well as previous event winners. Alongside this, it unveiled the special archive's new home, a custom-built museum in the Northeast Italian port.

Of the 60 Chinese creatives who entered, one designer made the prestigious "fashion" category: Ching-Lin Chen from Taiwan. He presented eight looks that told the story of his parents' wedding. Sara Sozzani Maino, educational and scouting initiatives advisor at Vogue Italia, noted that "the wedding is a theme no one touches, but he saw it very creatively, in a new way, with a fearless expression."



Taiwanese designer Ching-Lin Chen presented eight wedding-themed looks. Photo: Pietro D'Aprano

Chen's presence was all the more significant due to the decline in the number of finalists from China in the line-up. "What's interesting about this competition is you never know who is behind the portfolios," Maino continued. "But for Chinese designers, the pandemic influenced this for sure. Also, this time, the entrants weren't afraid to expose themselves. Before it was less personal but now it's more about your interior issues, which are not easy to put into creativity. Some manage this, others don't."

The previous day, Chen shared his technical prowess and personal narrative to the jury, which included Maino, Demna, and *Jing Daily*, among others. The panel saw his designs evolve from shrouded silhouettes in pale lace patchwork to tailored outerwear in vibrant mustard or mint, and an elongated tailored coat in a bright pop of pink felt. Franchin herself endorsed his work, adding how "it was wonderful in terms of concept and production. The poetry he put inside made it really strong, romantic, inclusive, and saleable already."

Although Chen missed out on an award, 2022's winners in other categories did include the Hong Kong-born and London-based Hing Fung Jesse Lee. He secured the top spot of €3,000 (21,000 RMB) in the ITS Sportswear Award for his design, called "sustainability in a new, innovative way," by Lotto Sport President Andrea Tomat, who assigned the award. "When they rang me they were so excited about him. He thinks creatively about sustainability. He's unstoppable and full of energy," Franchin told *Jing Daily*.



Hong Kong-born designer Hing Fung Jesse Lee won the ITS Sportswear Award. Photo: Giuliano Koren

Dressed in his own colorful, cut-out creations, Fung was ebullient as he sat for his interviews in the lavish Savior hotel along Trieste's seafloor. "For me, it's about developing a new way of making that connects everyone in the industry through upcycling. The sneakers were cut out of the inventory or deadstock. This opens a big door for me. Here it's really a family, we want something new and to change things," he said.

The ITS Digital Fashion Award was scooped by duo Zong Bo Jiang from Chengdu and Xiaoling Jin from Ningbo; they both studied at the Royal College of Art, where they honed their imaginative, virtual craft, and currently live in London. Former finalist Hua Keiga Hui presented the award, given for the duo's "compelling and very unique aesthetic point." (Hua, from Shanghai, won ITS' inaugural Digital Fashion Award in 2021.)

As her 2021 Vogue Talent Award was presented virtually due to the coronavirus, Tianan Ding, from Changsha but also living in London, was invited to celebrate ITS' anniversary milestone. Ding completed the Fashion Humanswear Masters degree at the Royal College of Art and now runs the sustainable streetwear line Ala Tianan, where she gives new value to fabrics such as toilet roll through a "no waste ideology." Tianan explained how "as a Chinese designer, I think ITS has helped and encouraged me to express myself on an international level. I would encourage Chinese talents to step out of their comfort zone and make their voices heard worldwide."



Streetwear brand Ala Tianan makes many pieces using disposable materials, such as toilet paper and expired band-aids. Photo: Ala Tianan

2020's Media Jury Prize winner Sanya Chen was invited back as well, to make up for missing out on her live ceremony — but was unable to attend, proving again that complications regarding COVID-19 and its fallout remain. "These really are from the generation of the pandemic and we'll have the consequences for a number of years, especially in China," Maino added.

Earlier in the trip, guests were treated to a preview of ITS' inaugural exhibition drawn from this uniquely gathered archive by curator Olivier Saillard; it opened with a painted tulle dress by Yu Prize winner Caroline Hu. "When I was selecting the objects, I decided not to know the country of origin but my eyes kept being caught by Asian (Chinese or Japanese) designers. It's like another world that comes from the heart," Saillard shared. "Chinese people are interested in transforming textiles into something else by hand and it's much more touching. It is what I prefer, I have to say. It's more artisanal."

Despite all the challenges, not least the pandemic, Franchin has managed to support thousands of young artists, catching them in that unique phase of unbridled inventiveness. For students graduating now, it's even more difficult to create. "They are survivors. We need to respect them," she poignantly reminded us.