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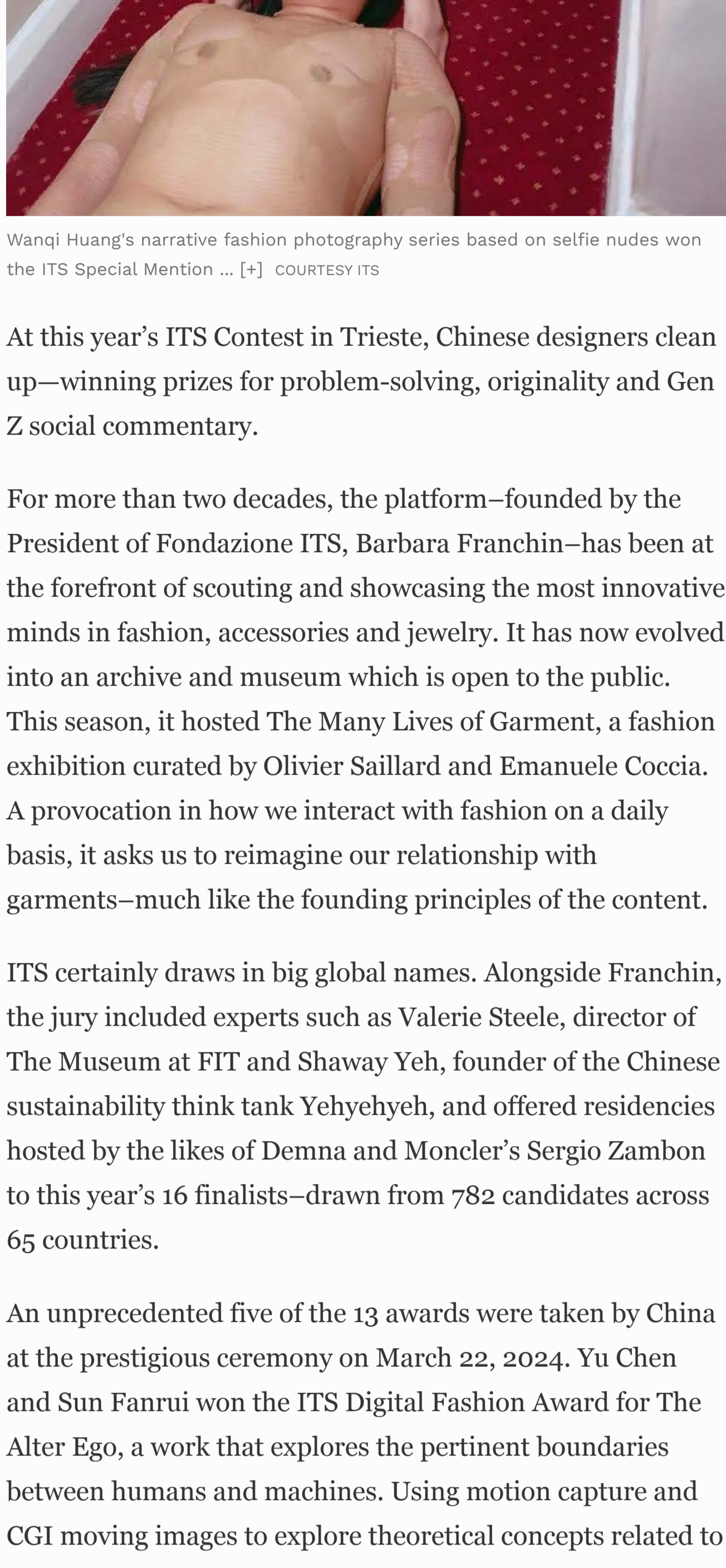
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ITS Contest: Emerging Fashion Designers Find Support At Trieste

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Wanqi Huang's narrative fashion photography series based on selfie nudes won the ITS Special Mention ... [+]

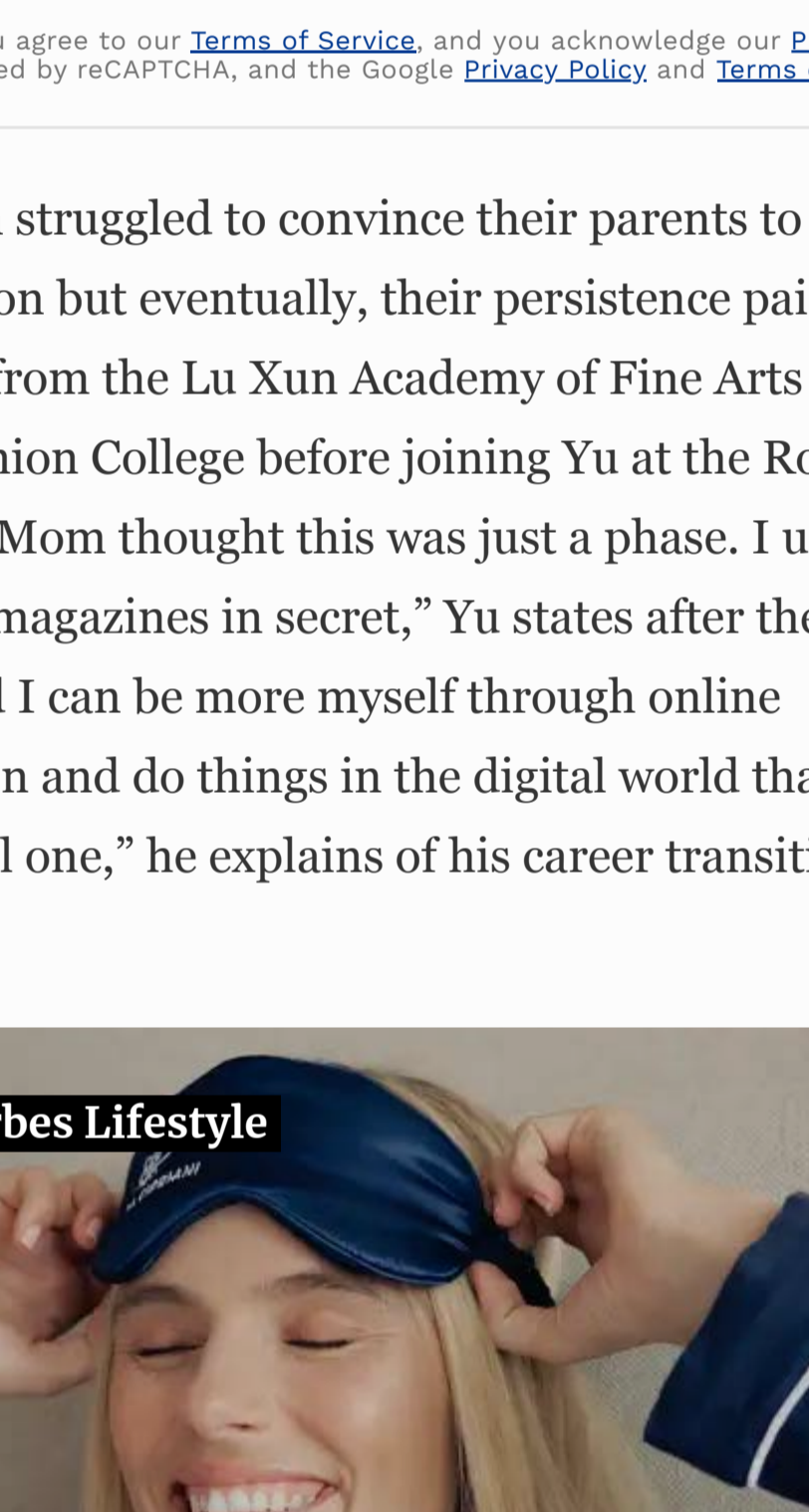
At this year's ITS Contest in Trieste, Chinese designers clean up—winning prizes for problem-solving, originality and Gen Z social commentary.

For more than two decades, the platform—founded by the President of Fondazione ITS, Barbara Franchin—has been at the forefront of scouting and showcasing the most innovative minds in fashion, accessories and jewelry. It has now evolved into an archive and museum which is open to the public. This season, it hosted The Many Lives of Garment, a fashion exhibition curated by Olivier Saillard and Emanuele Coccia. A provocation in how we interact with fashion on a daily basis, it asks us to reimagine our relationship with garments—much like the founding principles of the content.

ITS certainly draws in big global names. Alongside Franchin, the jury included experts such as Valerie Steele, director of The Museum at FIT and Shaway Yeh, founder of the Chinese sustainability think tank Yehyehyeh, and offered residencies hosted by the likes of Demna and Moncler's Sergio Zambon to this year's 16 finalists—drawn from 782 candidates across 65 countries.

An unprecedented five of the 13 awards were taken by China at the prestigious ceremony on March 22, 2024. Yu Chen and Sun Fanrui won the ITS Digital Fashion Award for The Alter Ego, a work that explores the pertinent boundaries between humans and machines. Using motion capture and CGI moving images to explore theoretical concepts related to gender, the immersive experience tests the potential for new paradigms of post-identity. Research for The Alter Ego cited touchpoints like the philosopher Judith Butler and voguing ballroom culture.

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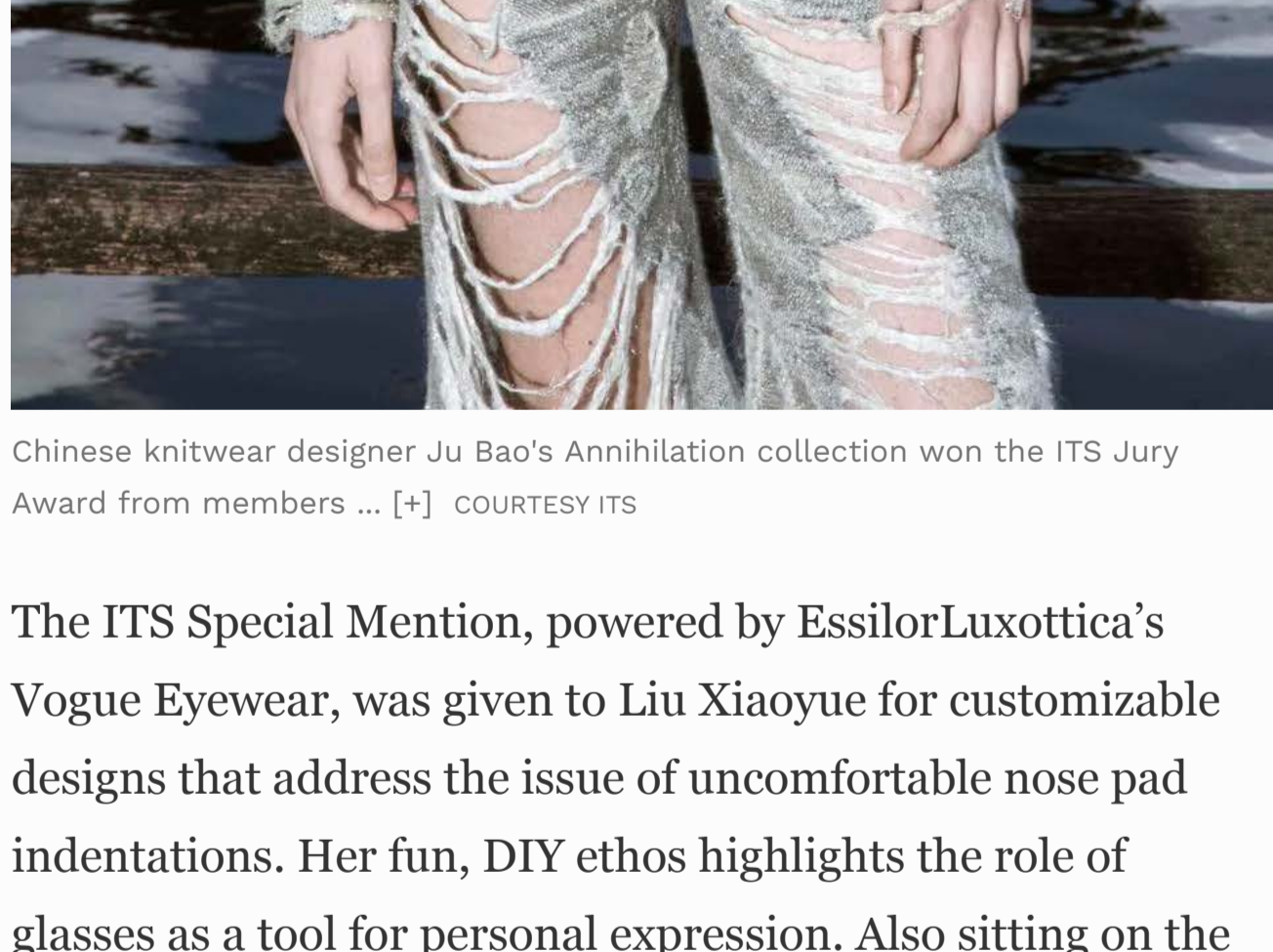
The duo are not the first Chinese designers from the RCA to find their feet in the newly introduced virtual element of ITS. Zowie Broach, Head of Programme Fashion at the Royal College of Art, who attended the event says there is an “inspirational movement of digital design” coming from China. This includes former ITS winners Zongbo Jiang and Keiga Hu as well as Shan Hua and Haoyang Jiao.

“It’s a new artistry of software, pixels and a very beautiful imagination. They are reflecting the intense craftsmanship’s of their heritage into the hyper digital atmospheres of the future. But this is also a space that allows their voices, identities to fly a little higher, acting with values in a forest of colours and silhouettes,” Broach explains.

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A still from the award winning project The Alter Ego by digital designers Chen Yu and Sun Fanrui

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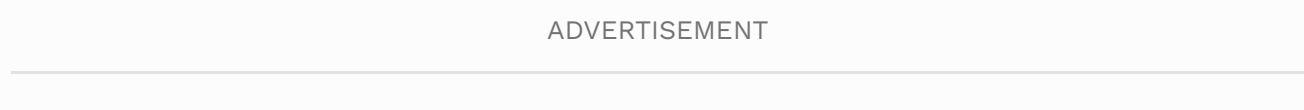
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Yu and Sun struggled to convince their parents to let them study fashion but eventually, their persistence paid off. Sun graduated from the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts and the Bunka Fashion College before joining Yu at the Royal College of Art. “My Mom thought this was just a phase. I used to read her Vogue magazines in secret,” Yu states after the event. “Now I find I can be more myself through online visualization and do things in the digital world that I can’t in the physical one,” he explains of his career transition into digital.



Sun confirms there's a big community of Chinese designers working in the virtual medium: “I think it’s a fast and immediate way for us to scale our fashion dreams.”

Knitwear designer Ju Bao jointly won the ITS Jury Award. Hailing from Yanbian in Northeast China, he completed his MA at the Institut Français de la Mode and currently works at Dior. His winning programming technique results in the optical illusion of denim and highlights denim alternatives. “He designs the technical patterns for the machine. It’s like having the architect and the engineer for one project. For me, that’s genius,” jury member Carlo Giordanetti, CEO of the Swatch Art Peace Hotel (which is based in Shanghai) says in an interview.



Chinese knitwear designer Ju Bao's Annihilation collection won the ITS Jury Award from members ... [+]

The ITS Special Mention, powered by EssilorLuxottica's Vogue Eyewear, was given to Liu Xiaoyue for customizable designs that address the issue of uncomfortable nose pad indentations. Her fun, DIY ethos highlights the role of glasses as a tool for personal expression. Also sitting on the jury, Matteo Battiston, Chief Design Officer at EssilorLuxottica, says the company's eyes were immediately drawn to Liu's transformative approach: “We are going to explore what we can do with her in China in the future,” he hints.

One big trend this year, according to Battiston is entries taking an overwhelmingly negative starting point to produce “positive and social messages.” By featuring naked and near-naked bodies in knitwear that is almost transparent, Huang's process challenges China's taboo of sexuality and sex—often deemed shameful. Picking up on this was fellow jury member Sara Sozzani Maino, creative director of Fondazione Sozzani. She selected Huang's uncompromising photography for the ITS Special Mention. “Flipping through the pages of Wanqi Huang's series one can connect with the feelings, desires, fears and loneliness of younger generations in China,” she announces on the night.

Huang's knitted graphics are derived from her photography which she fought to get printed in China. “For me, the clothing in it is just an auxiliary tool. [The] Nude exists as a metaphor in my design. It has no gender, no thought, no racial color, [it's] just a symbol to be explored,” she adds.

Winning the ITS Accessories Award, Spiritual Re-wilding by Yuxi Sun explores the concept of ... [+]

The ITS Accessories Award powered by Fondazione Ferragamo was won by the provocateur Yuxi Sun for her ability to explore emotional states through footwear. Entitled Spiritual Rewilding, Sun's biomimicry concept directly confronts the decline and extinction of the cultures closely connected to nature.

At a time when the fashion industry looks bleak—squeezed by budget cuts while facing negative consumer spending and sustainability critiques—often the only winners are big luxury and fast fashion. How refreshing, then, to see the ITS family expanding with so much young talent and iconoclastic passion. The industry needs to take note. If only all fashion prizes had as much soul.

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