



Events

500 List

Shopping
GuideLuxury
NewsCulture &
LifestyleFashion &
BeautyWatches &
JewelleryReal
Estate

Columns

Wine

Dining

飲食

Style / Fashion

Fashion

Interview: Vivian Luk

The former Vera Wang designer talks to us about the art of handmade couture, and why she always takes the more difficult route to success

By Charmaine Mok

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Vivian Luk's atelier is, to appropriate a cliché strangely apt here, like an Aladdin's cave of treasures. The young Chinese designer surrounds herself with vibrant folds of colour, peppering her workspace with so many trinkets, mood boards and paraphernalia that it's hard to let your eye linger for too long on any one point. A cream and beige *chaise longue* hidden underneath folds of silk and chiffon, while a battered cushion has an air of voodoo doll about it, thanks to a smattering of dressing pins plunged into it. Vintage postcards, pieces of lace and fake flora peek out from dressers as a curl down from the ceiling, and as we peruse the photos and clippings adorning one wall we catch glimpses of 1 fairytale iconography that inspired her first collection, [Peter] Pan.

Amidst it all, Luk sports a look that is a happy medium between the chaos of the workplace and the elegance of her work — tousled dark brown hair frames a classically pretty face, a billowing sapphire blouse is layered atop form-fitting white trousers. She hurriedly applies her make-up for our photoshoot at the last minute, sat at her desk, apologising for the mess. It was the final few weeks before the showcase of her second collection, Coral, and Luk is an energetic ball of pride, nervousness, and adrenaline.

While Luk only debuted on the Hong Kong fashion scene two and a half years ago, this isn't her first rodeo. The young designer left New York City in 2008, where she had graduated first with honours from the Parsons School of Design, then again from the Fashion Institute of Technology, before working directly with Vera Wang in the acclaimed designer's Bridal and Celebrity Ready-to-Wear departments – two sectors her fellow students shied away from. As it turns out, facing what no one else wanted to do is what fuels her.



Image courtesy of Vivian Luk

"I'm not afraid of doing things that are difficult," Luk explains. "If you ask my parents, they would probably say that I actually gravitate towards them." Drawing upon her performance arts training (Luk also studied dance, music, and drama as well as fine art), Luk found that it was through highly conceptualised dresses that her signature style slowly began to manifest. "My designs have a lot of movement, and that's what I got from dancing," she explains. "I think it's fascinating when a girl puts on a dress and you can be a part of manipulating how they move. This is what made me interested in more elaborate gowns versus a ready-to-wear t-shirt."

Most designers may be turned off by the relative difficulty of working on bridal and detailed eveningwear, but then Luk doesn't see it that way. "People ask me why I'd go into something that isn't necessarily the most straightforward part of fashion," she admits. "But to me, it's actually easier. I'll take something that no one is really doing and I'll do it, bringing my own perspective."



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Image courtesy of Vivian Luk

How that translates into her handiwork is clear – Luk insists on doing everything by hand, no matter how long it takes. "It takes patience and time, but apart from that I like things that are organic, three-dimensional and almost accidental." We peer at a few of her newest pieces, the aforementioned Coral collection, and immediately clock the free-flowing aesthetic contrasting with a carefully considered structure. "When you do things with your hands, you can't always replicate it," she explains. "When you work with your hands, there's a sensuality behind the process."

Luk's designs are a combination of the organic and the structural, tinged with a fairy-tale naivety and otherworldliness. The kind of clients that gravitate towards her work, Luk says, tend to be quite "intellectual". That is, they too have patience and an appreciation for the slow and considered process of creation. To Luk, there is no other way of creating elaborate gowns, though it isn't to say that Hong Kong's fast-paced industry hasn't created moments of doubt. "Hong Kong is not like other cities where they really nurture local designers and recognise craft," she says, pointing out the tendency to go mass – be it in design or production. "You go to Europe and [crafting by hand] is everywhere, whether you're making a pizza or a shoe."



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“Maybe my parents have been here [in Hong Kong] for much longer, but they would also question me. They’d ask, ‘do you really need to work on a dress for that long?’ It’s what parents do. They try to help but sometimes it puts more questions in your mind, but you need to block it and keep doing what you think is right. I stuck with it and now I feel much stronger.”

Perseverance is an admirable quality, and throughout our conversation, Luk is completely dedicated— she will go off on tangents, but always return to the main question, zoning in on the details. “I do tend to focus on a lot of detail,” she admits. “I’ll think and rethink when it comes to what I’m working on. But one thing I don’t do is regret the decisions that I make.”

Photography: King Fung