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## A GENTLE RISE

Interview by Stephanie Peh  
Images courtesy of Hussein Chalayan

—Hussein Chalayan, on his latest collection, *Rise*, and the constant need for escape.



His Autumn/Winter 2013 show was a gentle rise itself, beginning with a steady pace of consistently smart patterns and refined cuts before arriving at its climax. An unexpected tug at the neckline transforms one garment into another, and a dress emerges with two different souls. The process of the transformation itself was pure visual adrenaline and a showstopper; a creation epic to witness, leaving the audience with a longing to adorn.

Taking inspiration from the dull and raw effect of peeling walls, some pieces were made with laser cut-outs and carefully selected kaleidoscopic colours. London-based fashion designer Hussein Chalayan seems to effortlessly take invention to the next level with each new collection, seamlessly marrying concept and commerce. We catch him in the midst of his travels before he makes his way to our sunny island for the Audi Fashion Festival 2013, where he will be showing the entire collection with a few additional light pieces ideal for our hot and humid climate.

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Your Autumn/Winter 2013 collection, *Rise*, is spectacular. Could you please tell us the story behind the collection?  
The whole collection was based on the dichotomy between

disembodiment and being earthbound. Domestic references combine with garments which appear to be escaping, like the spirit leaving a body but never quite leaving.

*That is beautiful. What do the respective states of disembodiment and metamorphosis mean to you personally?*

I feel that the constant state of flux is what keeps life going. With this in mind, I always want to work from inspiration, which involves movement and change so that the clothes have a sense of life within themselves.

*Speaking of movement and change, how do you take flight from your work? What comes after?*

The ideals of escapism for me is simply to make life more interesting. What comes after is unpredictable, as one thing leads to another.

*What is your working process like, from inception to the final product?*

It starts instinctively, then gets rationalised at later stages. These are visual processes which cannot be explained, but there is a lot of experimentation and back and forth before the collection is finalised. My work has always been about juxtapositions and making connections between alien worlds.

*Do tell us about a certain material that has surprised you so far in the midst of creating.*

The wall texture in the collection, which was inspired by peeling walls and made three-dimensional through laser cutting.

*These are cutting edge techniques. How do you perceive the Asian fashion market and its reception to your work?*

I find the Asian attitude to fashion more open than in Europe and America. People embrace new ideas more enthusiastically and this, I believe, is a reflection of a more progressive society we all see in Asia.

*We sure hope so. Lastly, the multiple layers in the collection remind us of the soul and spirit of a person. Do you often envision a relationship with your wearer?*

I would like to know the wearers better and it is in my future plan to do so, through creating my own environments.

*Hussein Chalayan will be presenting *Rise*, his Autumn/Winter 2013 Womenswear collection as part of the Audi Fashion Festival on 19 May, 2013 at Tent, Marina Promenade, Singapore.*

[www.audifashionfestival.com](http://www.audifashionfestival.com)





# A RENEWED PERSPECTIVE

Text by Patricia Lee  
Photography by Sean Lee

*—Fresh from a year back at school, Singapore's foremost installation artist opens up about her creative hiatus, and why she considers her best known work her most boring.*

When an artist creates a hit work, it can be a prize as much as a prison. Once hailed as boundary breaking, Damien Hirst is, of late, plagued by dead butterflies and formaldehyde cows, just as every article on Turner Prize winner Tracey Emin returns to *My Bed*: the semen-stained installation that shot her to fame. The double-edged sword of Donna Ong's career is *The Crystal City*. The glassware composition she created for The National Museum's Night Festival in 2009 has been featured by *Reuters* and *The Huffington Post*, and exhibited in multiple variations around the world.

"I made it for a specific occasion," says the Goldsmiths graduate. "So, I wanted it to be visually spectacular. In terms of concept, however, it didn't have any personal resonance for me. I'm not particularly interested in cities, so I felt it failed as a personal art work."

The soft-spoken artist is meeting me on the back of a year that saw her take time out from the art world to complete a Masters in Fine Art at Lasalle—a surprising move for a practitioner beginning to break waves on the international scene. When I first met Ong in 2006, she had just given up the financial security of part-time lecturing to focus on creating art full-time. Although she told me she didn't quite know where this was going to lead, she was resolute about her decision.

Over the next few years, I rarely saw her, but the ferocity of her numerous commissions and exhibitions signalled her growing success. What I didn't realise at the time was that this crescendo in her career ironically coincided with a creative lull.

Sitting down with her seven years later, Ong has gained the clarity and perspective she needs to move forward. "After lots and lots of interviews, I found myself losing fragments of my story till it became kind of superficial. When you narrate something, you're giving a condensed version. But in life, it's not really like that."

Catchphrases like "creating imaginary landscapes from makeshift objects" and "recapturing childhood dreams and fantasies" do not begin to describe the complexity of her uncomfortable installations. Yet, the more these descriptions were rehashed in articles, everyone—including Ong herself—came to believe that was all there was to work. From dolls trapped in bell jars to seemingly soft coral-like forms made out of hard-metal nails and screws. "The more I said it, the more I convinced myself that was my story. So I started making pieces about imagination and makeshift objects and transformation. But it was never just about that. It was a means to an end."

She found that her works were becoming bigger and bigger, but at the same time, shallower and shallower in thought. She was also juggling the downside of critical acclaim. "I felt that people were on my heels. There aren't many installation artists in Singapore so, invariably, students would choose me as a reference. I felt an anxiety to innovate because a whole chunk of young people were making works that looked a lot like mine. In order to move forward, you need to experiment and fail; yet with all these eyes on me, I felt unable to make a misstep."

Recognising the need to reboot, Ong made barely any work in 2010 and returned to school a year later. Today, she is finally feeling excited again. "I'm taking on more complex themes that I'm unable to fully explore with just one work. So, I'm pushed to make a next piece that delves deeper. It gives me momentum." Going by the reception her latest piece, *Cocoon* (*The Garden of Waiting Virgins*), received at Art Stage Singapore in January, galleries and collectors are equally enthusiastic.

In it, she explores the passions and pain of being a woman, a recurring theme in her work. Of a wooden cupboard that opens to reveal a garden of paper cut-outs of Virgin Marys, she says, "As I started researching on Mary more, it struck me that she's the only character in the Bible that changes. We see her at the Annunciation when she's 14 and a bit scared. We see her pregnant and hopeful. Then, we see her as a mum, sorrowful at the crucifixion, and then lifted up and venerated by Jesus at the end. She could almost represent every woman."

Indeed, Ong has seen more than her fair share of tribulations in her own thirty-four years. At sixteen, she was diagnosed with lupus, a condition that has framed her out-



Donna is wearing a Comme des Garçons blazer from the BLACK range.

look as an artist and as a woman. "It means that your immune system is defective, so it turns against your own body. It's usually suppressed, but you get sick more easily and go through different seasons where you will be in pain. I went through a period when I lost my hair, and another time when I had rashes all over my body."

Lupus, however, is also what lends Ong's work its dark edge. Her 2006 piece *Secret, Interiors: Chrysalis* comprised fetuses-like dolls trapped in glass bell jars. "The condition makes it more difficult for me to have children. One of my exes talked about that being a woman's highest purpose, which got me thinking: what if I was this woman who couldn't have children, what would I do? Would I play with dolls?"

Half a decade later, Ong continues to address these issues, but seems to have reached a more harmonious place. She says, "The illness teaches me about reality. We can have a lot of positive thinking, but sometimes life just has limits. It's about learning how to deal with them and still having hope for the future."

In March, she presented *And We Were Like Those Who Dream* in Lugano, Switzerland. A piece that builds on *Cocoon*, it features Annunciation pictures that alternate between the Virgin Mary kneeling with the angel overhead, and vice versa. "When we hope and pray for something, sometimes it feels like heaven and earth are coming together to make it happen for us. Other times, it feels barren like we're knocking on a closed door."

"It wasn't just my own stories I was talking about. It's about desires and dreams a lot of people have. They may not be apparent in the everyday, but we all have secret hopes we hold dear."

Even in her darkest moments, Ong's work has always been life-affirming. The beauty is that it can be appreciated on so many different levels. There is the visual. There is the conceptual. And at the core, there is her personal narrative.

Knowing Ong and her life story, her art becomes more meaningful. Like her, it's provocative without being loud or abrasive. It deals with sensitive subjects with a light touch. For those of us who want to see, it brings us face-to-face with reality. And for those of us who want to dream, it doesn't need to be anything more than beguiling sensual imagery.

Donna is featured in *Creative Cultures: The Singapore Showcase*, page 160-162.

[www.donnaong.com](http://www.donnaong.com)

First Person is an in-depth interview with a leading creative that delves into the private person behind the public body of work.