



BY ALEXANDRA KOHUT-COLE  
IMAGES COURTESY FIDE FASHION WEEKS

RENOWNED FOR CONSTRUCTING FLAMBOYANT AND INNOVATIVE DESIGNS, THE VIVACIOUS DRAMA EVOKED BY HIS CREATIONS HAS EARNED FREDERICK LEE RECOGNITION AS ONE OF SINGAPORE'S MOST SOUGHT AFTER AND AVANT-GARDE FASHION DESIGNERS.

Individuality and diversity is the name of Frederick Lee's game and he is feted for his creation of opulent wedding and evening gowns. A winner of the Singapore Fashion Awards' Designer of the Year crown in 2004 and two years later of the same accolade at the Cleo Fashion Awards, by 2009 he had been nominated by Fashion Asia China for the Asian Top Fashion Designer gong.

Lee's work designing costumes for the theatre has been recognised - twice - by the Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards,

earning him the best costume designer award for productions such as "The Importance of Being Earnest" for the theatre group W!ld Rice. Following this, he became director of costumes for the National Day Parade in 2008 for two consecutive years, and subsequently costume designer for the Youth Olympic Games in 2010.

The self-taught designer maintains that the road to becoming a fashion designer is one paved with a willingness to work hard and handle rejection. "Rejections are unavoidable in this industry. It's



perseverance, despite the rejection, that is more crucial. Though the fashion world can be exciting and alluring to some, it might be a different story behind the scenes”.

He likes the realistic depiction of the type of criticism that you can expect on television shows such as Project Runway. “The main problems most designers have are missing that connection to their potential customer base - missing exposure”. He warns that this can lead to a downward spiral, “If you don’t have enough customers, you won’t be able to sell and produce enough pieces. Industry manufacturers will then be less interested in working with you and might end up working with far more expensive tailoring. High production costs lead to horrible selling prices and low customer conversion - as a result you receive more rejections from boutiques to stock your products.”

As part of the couture week in October 2013 in Singapore, organized by Fide Fashion Weeks and held at the Marina Bay Sands hotel, Lee was the only Singaporean designer showing. This was a week that had a dedicated Japanese couture and French couture evening and showcased top Asian designers from all over Asia including Lie Sang Bong from Korea, China’s Guo Pei and Sebastian Gunawan from Indonesia.

**D**eath & Destruction was what Lee, a self-confessed fan of the author Stephen King, dubbed his show, a decadent all black 30-piece collection - and it took him six months to create, “I looked into the dark side of my nature, where the passion and energy lies” explains Lee before clarifying that it is not about what is depicted in the clothes but rather, “it is all about the tone that is set by the interesting collage of elements that inspires and haunts at once”. Working on the collection affected him to the extent that he describes being “like a lost soul searching in the depths of darkness...I only saw the darkness of black - where I found true beauty”.

For lovers of the dark side of literature and authors such as Robert Bloch (Psycho), Edgar Allen Poe (the Raven), Bram Stoker (Dracula), Alfred Hitchcock (The Birds) and the whole Gothic or Psychological thriller genres - the collection was a dream, “Psycho, The Raven, The Book of Revelation, they are all a very dark a part of us.”

A haunting soundtrack of blood-curdling screams, creaking doors slamming shut with a sinister bang and the recorded voice of the child, “I see dead people” from the film *The Sixth Sense* was a more than fitting backdrop for the show. “It’s the mindflow of things... the bells haunting... I wanted to send a chill - it’s also very inspired by music and this is how it all blends”. It all created drama as a black leather dominatrix catsuit suit emerged styled with a silver zip up shrug made out of thousands of hand-stitched dressmaking pins. Crimped, huge hair streamed out of skull caps signifying, “Its back to basics - that’s why the hair is so frizzy”.

Lee’s inspiration for the collection derives from the depiction of rage, suffering, gloom, depravity and the

supernatural, “It is often seen as unsettling and offensive but often these disturbing images elaborate the wildest dreams and subconscious desires of humans in richer form” says Lee, maintaining that this is not necessarily conflicting with the belief in a heavenly world. He explains, “This collection remains feminine and desirable and has a grotesque elegance with a twist. It invites viewers to redefine the horizons for beauty and morality and savour the exquisite genre with a dramatic and dark compilation of designs that touches the taboo areas of death and destruction.”

Lee sources his fabrics - exclusive silks and laces - from selected specialist suppliers from the UK and Japan and the detailed embroidery, appliques and luxurious beading work from India, China and Thailand. However, it’s feathers that he prefers to work with the most, “I love to work with feathers, they add that ephemeral touch and they allow me to create an object of natural poetry. They are aerodynamic marvels of perfection... they come in literally every colour imaginable, every shape and size”.

All the feathers that Lee uses are derived from the plumes of farm-raised birds and for this collection he incorporated goose feathers hand-painted in gold to impart an unusual texture, pheasant, jungle cock, saddle and a “pinch of marabou”. The final look was a sheer apparition of black and gold feathers with huge horns sprouting from crazed platinum hair set off by the show’s ubiquitous Goth make-up.

Lee maintains that he is deeply honoured to have been invited to show as part of the couture week, “I am humbled for being recognized for my couture work with its treasures of workmanship, artistic conceptions and grace, allowing me to bring to the public the vision of an art that must not be forgotten - while constantly evolving as a witness of its period in time.”

By always reminding himself about the ultimate goal that keeps him coming to work every day - and never losing sight of it - Lee handles the stress of the fashion world, “But to keep up in a fast-paced fashion industry, I have to stay on my toes and not allow any insecurity to get in my way. Work has to be my first priority and it does require sacrifice, making sure to balance it by really taking advantage of the free time to do things to revitalise myself.”

A passionate believer in the notion that the innovations of couture will continue to set the modern standards of clothing design, what does the future hold for Lee? “I will continue to do what I love most, what I do best - to present an exciting new perspective on the world of couture”. This incurable romantic feels that it is his duty to give women a dream, “I have dedicated my whole working life to the creations that will enhance their beauty and bring moments of joy to their lives.”

And the person he looks up to the most, Frederick Lee’s idol, is his mother “the kindest, most intelligent, compassionate and loving person in the world... she has been and still is my role model; she is 84 and still inspires me - and for that alone I am grateful.”

