

# From bespoke to fast fashion

Rena Kok is one of the first young designers from Singapore to be selected to create a collection for China-based fast-fashion retailer Shein

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Not many 26-year-olds can claim to have been approached for a fashion collaboration with a global e-tailer as influential and wide-reaching as Shein.

One would imagine it is a feat worth shouting about. But not for Rena Kok, who is reticent about her achievements.

The baby-faced fashion designer mentions her partnership with Shein offhandedly only midway through this interview.

The alumna of Lasalle College of the Arts and Temasek Polytechnic was tapped by the China-based fast-fashion retailer to create a collection of eight ready-to-wear designs. The collaboration is part of Shein's initiative to spotlight young designers, with Kok being one of the first from Singapore.

"It took me a while to assess and accept it because my average price point is about \$200," says Kok.

"But at this age, I just want to explore everything first before making a concrete decision on what I want for my label. I saw it as an opportunity to tap Shein's versatility and resources while reaching new audiences."

She simplified and adapted past designs for the collection, which will drop around July or August with prices yet to be confirmed. Shein is available online in Singapore.

The bespoke designer (instagram.com/renakok) and full-time fashion stylist for a shoe brand took an interest in design at a young age.

It helped that her mother ran four shops called Cute Tink from 2003 to 2015, which sold franchised bags that may be recognisable to some. The soft, colourful bags – embroidered with animals and in a mix of imported and original designs – were commonly toted in the 2000s.

Kok, then 10 years old, had a hand in choosing the fabrics and styles. "It nurtured my passion for entrepreneurship and design," she recalls.

She went on to study fashion design at Temasek Polytechnic and, after graduating, took a gap year to do commercial styling jobs for television advertisements. In 2017, she enrolled at Lasalle to study fashion design and textiles.

Lasalle gave her the "creative freedom" to experiment and trust her instincts, says Kok, who de-



Rena Kok (above) was last year chosen to create a four-piece capsule collection (left) for OneOrchard.Store, an e-commerce platform by Textile and Fashion Federation Singapore. PHOTOS: KHALID BABA, RENA KOK

scribes her style as being tactile and material-focused. A fan of textile manipulation, she once made a wooden skirt with laser-cut details.

She also takes inspiration from science fiction, such as television series *Black Mirror* (2011 to present) and films *Annihilation* (2018) and *Extinction* (2018).

Speaking animatedly about alien invasions and brainwashing, the petite designer says she draws from the "process of morphing, changing and adapting" to create her pieces, which can be worn in different forms.

In 2019, in partnership with a graphic designer, she created a top with Swarovski crystals which formed a motif that doubled as a QR code. When viewed through a phone, the bedazzled code activates an augmented-reality feature to play a video.

The innovative shirt, showcased during Lasalle's graduation fashion show, bagged her the Swarovski Innovation Award and a trip to the brand's headquarters in Wattens, Austria.

In October that year, she placed second runner-up in the Harper's Bazaar Asia NewGen Fashion Award and first in the Singapore edition.

It was her third attempt partici-

pating in the regional competition. She first did so as a student in Temasek Polytechnic and then again in her second year at Lasalle. On her second try, the judges felt she was not ready and told her to try again the following year.

So she did, and this time she clinched the awards with a futuristic womenswear collection inspired by an observation of commuters being glued to their digital devices.

The pieces, made from 3D PU material and debossed neoprene, "enhanced the notion of touch (to highlight) the relationship between the surface of the skin and the touch of cloth".

About 10 pieces, priced from £128 (\$5239) to £780, are still available on London-based designer service platform Fashion Crossover London, which connects emerging designers with international fashion buyers and professionals.

The win raised her profile and opened doors to retail opportunities, including the one with Shein.

Last year, she was also selected to create a four-piece capsule collection for OneOrchard.Store, an e-commerce platform by Textile and Fashion Federation Singapore. The collection (\$199 to \$360) was developed under A New Slate, an initiative by Harper's Bazaar Singa-

poring to mentor past NewGen winners to create retail-ready looks.

These days, when she is not on set styling shoots, she is at home designing her made-to-order line Renakok. She sees herself exploring more ready-to-wear in the future and is currently working on a diffusion line.

It has been challenging working as a "one-man show" handling both the design and business aspects, she says.

But constant support from her 50-year-old mother, a businesswoman who is venturing into the personal-care industry next, has kept her going.

"Not many parents encourage their kids to be in this line," she says. "At times when I was close to giving up, my mum made me press on."

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• This is the first season of Rave, a series of videos featuring young, up-and-coming fashion designers based in Singapore who are making their mark in the industry. Rave is produced by Singapore Press Holdings in partnership with the Infocomm Media Development Authority, as part of the agency's Public Service Broadcast initiative.