

FASHION & BEAUTY

Genderless label embraces diversity



Inclusive Sri Lankan designer Amesh Wijsekera's newest collection, Flower Boys, is 'a soft take on masculinity' and an exploration of romance, intimacy and vulnerability



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In a recent Instagram post, Amesh Wijsekera stands surrounded by tropical ferns, philodendrons and caladiums in his courtyard in Mount Lavinia, a suburban town in Colombo, Sri Lanka. His long hair is up in a messy bun, and he wears a hand-painted floral fuchsia long-sleeved shirt and matching trousers. It is, as he notes in his caption, "a full Amesh 'flower boy' look".

Wijsekera is the creator and designer of Amesh, his namesake clothing label. In September, he was recognised by CNN as a leading voice for ethical, sustainable and innovative practices. Other notable names include Stella McCartney and actress Emma Watson.

"Clothes are not just items," Wijsekera says via a WhatsApp call in October from Berlin, Germany. "Fashion is my fantasy world to express who I am. I can break boundaries here."

Wijsekera, 27, was born in London but grew up in Sri Lanka by the beach. His love for design – from making clothes to gardening to interiors – comes from his mother. "My mother is very artistic, but her parents did not allow her to follow her passion. She ended up being a lawyer who does not practise law," Wijsekera says. "So she gave her children the full freedom to do what they love."

Wijsekera went to a public school in Colombo. After he graduated, he enrolled in a four-year design degree at the Academy of Design (AOD) in Colombo. In 2015, he won the Student Graduate Industry Collaboration Award at the Mercedes-Benz Fashion and Apparel Awards, which gave him the opportunity to go to London.

In 2016, Wijsekera won the Oracle International Catwalk Competition at London Graduate Fashion Week. He showcased his



Amesh Wijsekera (above) and some looks from his Flower Boy collection (top, below). Photos: Handouts



**I don't understand why we are gendered even before we are born ... Why can't men wear pink or magenta?**

AMESH WIJSEKERA

collection at Fashion Scout (a display of design talent during London Fashion Week) in 2017, and secured apprenticeships with consultancy Future Laboratory and designers Edeline Lee and Zandra Rhodes.

The designer continues to make a name for himself – last year, he made his first appearance for his label at Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in Berlin.

"I made 40 pieces in two months for the show," he says, referring to his autumn/winter 2019 collection, brimming with colour and texture. The show pieces blend creamy golds with raspberry, crimson, and rust colours in a nod to his Sri Lankan heritage.

His ongoing collection "Flower Boys", he says, is, "a soft take on masculinity". It's what his label is all about: gender inclusivity. "It's a shared wardrobe. I want to make everyone a part of my label. Flower Boys is an exploration of romance, intimacy and vulnerability." On Instagram, his male models – friends, colleagues and everyday people – appear in handwoven artisan candyfloss shirts, and repurposed waxed taffeta skirts hand-printed with rainbows.

"I don't understand why we are gendered even before we are born. When I go to men's clothing stores, it's always dark colours – black, navy blue or dark browns. Why can't men wear pink or magenta?"

Wijsekera considers himself lucky to have been born into a family that gave him the freedom to express his queer identity and "embrace diversity". It's something that is not prevalent in Sri Lankan society.

Sri Lanka does not recognise LGBT rights. Indeed, sections of the country's penal code criminalise homosexuality. A 2018 human rights report by the US Department of State found that, in Sri Lanka, police used the provisions that criminalise same-sex

conduct to assault, harass and sexually and monetarily extort LGBT individuals.

None of this is new to Wijsekera, who can recall being bullied by his peers in school for being "less masculine" than the other boys. It is not uncommon for him to suffer sexual slurs and verbal abuse from rickshaw drivers. Earlier this year, while going for a run, he was beaten up by a group of men on Mount Lavinia Beach.

"We need broad, systematic change. Our schools teach us maths, science, and English, but they do not teach us to respect others. They do not teach us human development," he says.

Wijsekera believes that his gender-inclusive label is helping to address the issue.

"It's creating an emotion. An impact," he says.

Inclusivity aside, the designer is committed to slow, sustainable fashion. Amesh sources materials from deadstock (unsold goods) in warehouses – discarded fabric waste sent from Western countries. He works closely with local artisans, sitting next to them, chatting and learning from them.

"It's a very intimate process," he says, a reason he produces limited edition, handmade statement pieces (available at No Borders in India and 50m store in London). "I don't want to lose the authenticity and intimacy by mass production," he says.

Like many others, the designer's work has been hampered by the global coronavirus pandemic. "I should be in Sri Lanka, working with my production unit for my next collection," he says, "but I'm stuck in Europe."

Of the future, Wijsekera says: "I want to collaborate with more artists from Sri Lanka."

"Fashion is changing. The future is about slow fashion and embracing inclusivity. People no longer want to just see designs from London, Berlin, Paris or Rome. They want to see elements from all over the world."

Japan luxury retail in doldrums, but 'will bounce back'

Analysts say a recovery is just a matter of time and that major brands will weather the storm

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Fashion labels and other brands at the luxury end of Japan's retail spectrum are, perhaps not surprisingly, playing their cards close to their chests when it comes to the impact of the pandemic on their sales so far this year.

While retail in 2020 will be remembered for all the wrong reasons, analysts are confident that major brands from Louis Vuitton to Uniqlo will ride out the storm.

That is, however, scant relief for the here and now.

This time last year, the stylish boutiques of Ginza, Omotesando, Shinjuku and Harajuku were thronged with shoppers from around the world. Today, those same streets are eerily quiet. The pedestrians are virtually all Japanese and they are wearing masks, with few lingering to shop.

Doomen stand idle with their hands behind their backs while sales assistants – many of them bilingual and hired largely to communicate with Chinese shoppers – fold and refold the stock.

It was not that long ago that foreign tourists who pulled up in buses in Ginza were derided by some for clogging up the pavements and sweeping store shelves of every commodity. How they would be welcomed back now.

Some 2.5 million foreign tourists arrived in Japan in October 2019, up from 2.1 million three years earlier. At the turn of this year, the confident belief was that Japan would hit the target set by the government of 40 million foreign arrivals in 2020, up from 31.88 million in 2019.

Instead, the number of tourists arriving has plummeted since the first cases of coronavirus swept the region.

Just 8,700 foreign nationals arrived in Japan in August, down by 99.7 per cent from the same month in 2019. The largest foreign contingent was from mainland China, with 1,600 arrivals, while 700 came from South Korea, 400 from Taiwan and 40 from Hong Kong.

Officials from brands including Louis Vuitton and Chanel say they are unable to comment on the impact that the plunge in the number of visitors has had on their operations. Similarly, they are reluctant to speculate on what the future might hold.

A spokeswoman for high-end Japanese cosmetics brand Shiseido was also unwilling to divulge much information, although the company has confirmed that net sales are down more than 34 per cent in the second quarter of 2020 from the same period last year. Operating profit has contracted by 9.9 billion yen (HK\$742 million) and an offi-

cial assessment of sales to foreign tourists was a terse "close to zero".

But the company was keen to say sales appear to have bottomed out in April and have been slowly recovering since, driven in part by solid sales on the mainland.

In a statement released in August, Shiseido president Masahiko Uotani confirmed that it is likely to be the second half of 2021 before Japan's beauty market recovers, assuming a rebound in inbound tourists.

But like high-end fashion and other retail sectors, it will bounce back, says Roy Larke, senior lecturer in marketing at the University of Waikato in New Zealand and an expert on retailing and consumer behaviour in Japan.

"I think it is a temporary thing and there will be a recovery at some point in both domestic and tourist demand. It has been tough for all luxury brands in tourist locations like Ginza, but these brands are in it for the long haul. While short-term fluctuations are a challenge, they are not major challenges as the experienced, savvy brands here always take a long-term view when investing in flagships," he says.

**The experienced, savvy brands here always take a long-term view when investing in flagships**

ROY LARKE, RETAILING EXPERT

"The same attitude pervades boom times – these brands know that markets fluctuate and they do not assume that boom times last, [just] as they know bleak periods of trading will also end.

"It's possible these firms may face pressure due to poor results globally but, at the luxury end, Japanese management teams are generally some of the best in the world. Most headquarters back in Europe and North America know that Japan is a very high-quality market and that customers are very knowledgeable and willing to buy for brand value rather than mainly for status – which is the case in some countries," he adds.

The same applies to the tourism sector, Larke says, on which luxury retail is so dependent.

"I suspect there will be a flood of tourists to Japan when the time is right – and those people will have lots to spend, given how much restraint there has been in the last six months," he says. "Tourism in Japan is a long-term growth story, irrespective of short-term fluctuations."



Shiseido's global flagship store in Ginza, Tokyo (top); people wearing face masks in the shopping district. Photos: Getty Images, Handout