



HEAVYWEIGHT DIVISION

THE JUDGING PANEL FOR ASIA'S MOST PRESTIGIOUS ANNUAL DESIGN AWARD IS A TOUGH ONE TO FRONT UP AGAINST – A GROUP OF DESIGNERS HONED BY DECADES OF THEIR OWN INDUSTRY EXPERIENCE – BUT THEY FOUND THIS YEAR'S POOL OF FINALISTS PACKED ITS OWN PUNCH.

WORDS CHRISTOPHER DEWOLF



The world's population topped seven billion last October – and most of us are now living in Asia. The social, economic and environmental challenges facing countries as diverse as India, Indonesia, China and Japan are immense, but so are the opportunities. That's where good design comes into play.

Every year since 2003, the Hong Kong Design Centre has held the Design for Asia Award to recognise the region's best design efforts, with an emphasis on projects and products that work towards environmental and social sustainability and innovative uses of technology. Gold, Silver and Bronze Awards, along with Certificates of Merit, are awarded to worthy projects in 18 categories that fall in several areas of creativity: Apparel and Accessory Design, Communication Design, Product and Industrial Design and Environmental Design.

This year's DFA Award honours 121 projects, including 10 Grand Awards, 2 Special Awards, 11 gold, 29 silver, 39 bronze and 42 Certificates of Merit. They range in scope from disaster relief projects for earthquake victims to purposefully simple bags of rice, but each of them shares an accomplishment: in some way, big or small, they improve life in Asia.

This year, the DFA Award's panel of 15 judges sifted through a thousand design projects submitted from around the world. Among the judges were some of the world's most acclaimed designers. We spoke to three of them.



BO LINNEMANN

"I strongly believe that as a designer you are a product of your environment," says Bo Linnemann, co-founder of the Danish branding and design firm Kontrapunkt. Linnemann places himself firmly within the Scandinavian design tradition, with its Bauhaus influence and Modernist emphasis on clean lines and purposeful simplicity.

He founded Kontrapunkt with Kim Meyer Andersen in 1985. Since then, it has worked on brand strategies for most Danish institutions – one of the studio's achievements is a stylised crown that serves as a visual symbol for government services – and major corporations like Carlsberg. "Our whole design approach has always been very human, very discreet, very clean and very sustainable in many ways," says Linnemann. That's something evident in Kontrapunkt's Humanist-inspired typefaces, the most prominent of which – the studio's own corporate type – was released for free.

But Linnemann also believes in judging design within its proper context. "I really try to dig into what is the right thing for Asia, and not just for me as a Scandinavian designer," he says. The submissions to this year's DFA Award left him plenty to excavate. "The design standard in Asia is so high and exploding so fast that it's almost scary for us designers coming from outside Asia," he says.

He was especially impressed with the quality of the work in emerging design centres. "I'm working very much in Japan so I'm quite familiar with the Japanese design standards, but what was new for me personally was the Chinese, Taiwanese and Hong Kong designers," he says. "I can only see this as a sign of where things are heading. It's Chinese design that will set the agenda from now on."

HENRY STEINER

If there is a lesson to be drawn from Henry Steiner's career, it's this: don't be trendy. Almost three decades ago, Steiner was hired to develop a brand identity for the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, better known these days as HSBC. He came up with a memorable logo – a stylised St Andrew's cross, based on the company flag – and shortened the bank's name to the catchier Hongkong Bank. But when it



came time to choose a company typeface, Steiner ran into some opposition.

"I used Times Roman," he recalls. "I wanted to do something classic and dependable. If you've got a typeface developed by a newspaper and is based on the highest standards of British typography, I thought it would be reassuring. But this was the early 80s and there were some people who told the bank that this was terribly old-fashioned. Everyone was using a bold sans-serif – all the banks were using it."

Steiner held his ground. Today, with the exception of the name change to HSBC, his branding remains intact, which is more than can be said for many other brands. Timelessness always trumps trends. "As Steve Jobs said, it's not the public's job to know what they want," says Steiner. "In the same way, very often it's not the client's job to understand what they want. They know what they need in terms of recognition, but how to go about it is my job. It's like going to a brain surgeon and telling him what to do. You don't. You tell him where it hurts and where to fix you."

Steiner took the same approach to judging the DFA Award. "I do feel that green is the new black," he says. "People are going out of their way to say something is sustainable or socially responsible. I don't think that makes up for a lack of design thought and a sensible approach to a problem. It's not enough to be well-intentioned. You've got to be good enough to do your work."

Luckily, there were several projects that Steiner thought were both meaningful and well-executed. He is fond of Nosigner's Olive Project – pronounced "oh-live" rather than like the fruit – which established a wiki for designers to share useful advice for victims of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan. "It is very helpful," he says. "It involved a lot of self-sacrifice, the way they dug in and devoted themselves to this without any thought for profit. I think it's very reassuring."

KAI-YIN LO

Kai-Yin Lo's influence has been quiet but unmistakable. International Herald Tribune fashion critic Suzy Menkes credits her Chinese-inspired jewellery designs and use of semi-precious stones with helping to create a "new value system" for



jewellery in the 1980s, one that forged a middle ground between precious and fashion jewellery. "I wanted things to be affordable, to be part of life, to be easy to wear," Lo says. "I've always found inspirations in old things."

Born in Hong Kong, Lo studied in Britain before returning to Hong Kong, where she worked as a journalist and public relations officer, all the while collecting old stones and making jewellery on the side. Her career took off in the early 1980s when Cartier bought some of her jewellery. Since then, much of Lo's work has involved the reinterpretation of traditional symbols and designs found along the ancient Silk Road, which stretched from China to the Middle East.

"When I was sitting in New York, I had to find some commonalities between East and West, and I found some Buddhist symbols when I went to Syria, Jordan, Iran and Turkey," she recalls. "I found all these different variations of [eternal] knots – some Buddhist symbols put in Islamic mosques." That kind of cultural syncretism not only found its way into her jewellery, but into her other cultural pursuits, including five books on Chinese life, decor and culture.

That gives her a unique perspective as a judge for the DFA Award. She admits to being particularly impressed with the submissions from Japan, such as the Yusuhara Wooden Bridge Museum and the Musachino Art Museum and Library, both of which won DFA Grand Awards this year. "Their use of space, because they don't have much, is masterly," says Lo. "The fact that they're so good in making use of limitations makes it all the more outstanding that they come up with surprises. They have this tradition of perception and quality that underlies everything they do. It's this search for quality."

(OPPOSITE, FROM TOP LEFT) Lo Res Project by United Nude; Alize bike in blue by Pryde Group Bicycle Design Development; Abundance Airtight Canister by JIA Inc; Tavolino by JOODESIGN; Cybertecture Mirror by James Law Cybertecture; METAPHYS gekka by hers design inc.

(THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT) Bo Linnemann; Henry Steiner; Kai Yin Lo.