

GLOBAL POSITIONING

SINGAPORE-BASED DESIGNER NATHAN YONG'S TAKE ON DESIGN EXCELLENCE IS PRETTY SIMPLE: IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO BE GOOD BY SINGAPORE STANDARDS, YOU HAVE TO BE GOOD INTERNATIONALLY

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There's no way around it; every push of progress begins with dreamers, people who are not afraid to test the boundaries, carve their own paths and listen to the inner voices that guide them. You could say that Nathan Yong is a member of this exclusive league.

The design scene in Singapore has gone through a metamorphosis in the last decade. There's an ever-growing buzz, with young designers striking out and design studios sprouting up. A climate of local furniture design that's dated has long been left in the dust with today's designers who are conjuring up new ideas every day. The fact that we are having an international furniture fair yearly is telling of the two-way road that is making both the designers and the industry here blossom.

So why is Yong part of the aforementioned group? He was, after all, one of the pioneers. He was behind Air, the furniture company with a vision that Singapore-based modern furniture producers can succeed. The company, which opened in 1999, gained its status for its mastery of wood and a design language that is sleek yet witty. Air developed an appreciative audience not just in Singapore, but also beyond our shores.

Yong's designs also captured the attention of European furniture manufacturers. French furniture company Ligne Roset bought three of

his designs. Among them was the aptly named Break stool with the surprising detail: a crack that seemingly appears to threaten the sturdiness of the stool but does not. Italian company Living Divani bagged the Bolle table and stool, while another Italian company SpHaus picked up the FoxHole sofa and Drapery table. Not bad, you'd say, for a young designer from this region.

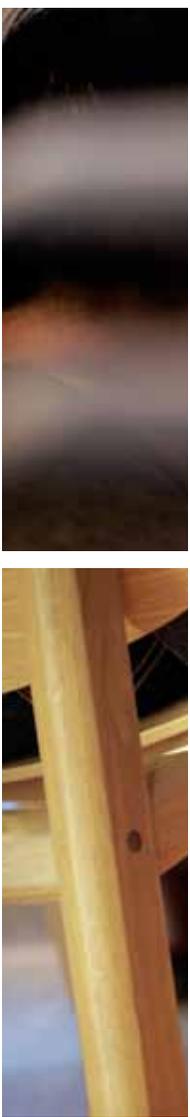
His design studio, Nathan Yong Design, continues gaining reach internationally. His designs such as the Line console and Primary Desk have been available in the USA via Design With Reach since last year.

Today, Yong is no longer helming Air Division, but is living what some might refer to as his second act, having returned to another of his loves: retail. With a business partner, Jefery K, he has started Grafunkt a little more than a year ago. He says, "We wanted a name that cannot be found in the dictionary. Grafunkt is a combination of words that we like with a bit of German influence."

Indeed, the name gives a "very fresh and edgy feel" that resonates with its product selection. The two Grafunkt stores, one in Park Mall and the other at Playfair Road, stock Yong's signature designs, as well as those from European design manufacturers such as Vitra and Miniforms. Yong is an admirer of industrial designer Dieter Rams, and the latter's turntables designed

A man with short dark hair, wearing glasses and a dark grey sweater, is shown from the chest up. He is gesturing with both hands, with his fingers spread, as if explaining something. The background is slightly blurred, showing a window with a red circular object hanging from it. The lighting is warm and focused on the man.

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during his days at Braun dress up the stores, contributing to their vintage vibe.

His furniture designs with wood for Singapore furniture brand Folks and those with steel for Grafunkt portray a distinct voice. When asked what is at the heart of his design, he says, “A lot of people think design is about showing and giving as much as possible. For me, it’s about subtracting, taking out and throwing away things. It’s about removing the unnecessary, so you get the essence of the product.”

That does not adequately explain why this Singapore boy’s design is getting international attention. He says simply, “You’ve got to be good at what you do. The world is not blind. The manufacturers know what they want. We as designers have to prepare ourselves before we venture out. We have to constantly understand ourselves, who we are, what the market needs and what can we do. We should benchmark ourselves with the world outside, and really be good at what we do before they will notice us.”

This was said in such a no-holds-barred manner that it can be easily mistaken as arrogance. But Yong was speaking from his collective experience

of missteps and small successes along the way. Having graduated with a diploma in industrial design in 1991, he charted his own course towards a life in design, regarding each step as part of the learning process. In other words, he designed his career.

Instead of setting up his own design studio upon graduation like many young designers are wont to, he felt it important to start at the bottom. Yong went into retail (“I wanted to study closely how furniture pieces are joined together,” he says) and then became a buyer, getting himself in proximity to the happenings behind the scenes. Travelling to places like India, Vietnam and Malaysia, he saw craftsmen at work and the various production techniques used. All these culminated in what he does today as a designer.

“Designing is like acting. You have to keep acting and polishing, and learn and unlearn. You have to refine. Sometimes, you copy. Through copying, you learn,” he says. “You have to withstand the peer pressure of people talking about you and not care.”

Put simply, he believes in “paying your dues”, and his efforts have paid off. Aside from his

international reach, in 2006 and 2007, Yong won the prestigious Red Dot Concept Design Award with his conceptual designs of a mass production coffin and a portable room heater. In 2008, he garnered the prestigious Singapore President’s Design Award Designer of the Year. And in 2011, Yong landed a sought-after spot among the most promising Young Designers on the international scene in the INTERNI supplement for Salone del Mobile.

He shares that his biggest struggles and, often, triumphs as a designer is to achieve his design goal with the engineers and manufacturers. Where engineers are always planted on the side of caution, preferring to go the extra inch to ensure something is structurally sound, designers like Yong strive to refine the form or function of a design. “There certainly is a lot of going back and forth during the process. Their knowledge is based on reality. If it breaks at a certain thickness, it will, regardless of what you want as a designer” he says. “But all this is crucial because it helps me as a designer to learn. And sometimes, they too realise that the thickness you want does actually work, and they also learn. In the end, we as designers push design forward and that’s for the betterment for everyone else, I suppose.”