

Paper-Cloth Conversations

kwodrent x farmwork

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IMAGES COURTESY OF **kwodrent** and **FARMWORK**

Local fashion designer Grace Tan of kwodrent and architectural practice FARMWORK team up to push boundaries with a dialogue between fabric and paper at the State of Design festival in Melbourne. **Lisha Ojun** gets the word from both creatives on their interdisciplinary collaboration.

For a country with a small creative community, Singapore put up an impressive show at The State of Design 2008, Victoria's Design Festival in Melbourne. In particular, Envelop: kwodrent x farmwork, the exhibition and floor talk by local fashion designer Grace Tan of kwodrent and architectural practice FARMWORK attracted the attention of art practitioners attending the week-long festival. Launched by the Australian Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Innovation Gavin Jennings, the exhibition drew a large crowd of designers, artists and students to RMIT Gallery on its opening night on 17th July. The exhibits, consisting of kwodrent's spiral, "kollapsible" fabric works and a hanging paper installation by FARMWORK, were the culmination of an interdisciplinary collaboration between the two.



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Since founding kwodrent in 2003, Grace Tan has exhibited her fabric works in cities such as Singapore, Tokyo and London. **A fashion designer by training, her work at kwodrent involves a progressive and empirical study of rectangles and fabric and an exploration of the relationship between the physical and the abstract.** Blurring the lines between fashion, fine art and architecture, Tan's working process is a fusion of intuitive craftsmanship and rigorous mathematical analysis. The organic and sculptural forms of her fabric works often belie the mathematical precision behind their conception, each painstakingly sewn together by hand based on a set of predetermined stitch points, which are recorded in a running log sheet of Cartesian coordinates as part of her post-analysis process.

In a bid to move beyond the confines of the fashion world, Tan approached local multidisciplinary practice FARMWORK with an invitation to interpret the gallery space and structure in response to her work. No stranger to Tan's work, FARMWORK's Principal Peter Sim and Associate Torrance Goh responded immediately to the challenge of creating something completely new and site-specific for the intimate space. The only stipulation was that the intervention had to be in equilibrium with the existing kwodrent pieces, with the gallery working as a micro-landscape for the fabric works.

"It should never be about entirely separate things," intoned Tan. "Ideally, a visitor without a design background should be able to feel that everything comes together as one immediately, although practically, the installation consists of two separate components, the fabric art and the architectural space."

Initially, FARMWORK toyed with the idea of modifying the architectural space of the gallery on a larger scale. Intrigued by kwodrent's explorations with the rectangular shape, they

thought about creating a space or a structure along the same lines. Tan was concerned that the dialogue would be too restrictive, however, given the emphasis on a single geometric shape, the rectangle, which had only served as a starting point for her works. FARMWORK's subsequent idea of designing the table upon which the fabric works would be displayed too did not materialise – Tan felt that a nondescript table would allow the pieces to be viewed without distraction. When asked if there was a difference in design styles, Tan said that she was aware of the disparity from the start: "FARMWORK's designs are colourful and playful, whereas my style tends to be more austere. I thought then that it would be interesting to integrate our different views into a single project. However, at some point, you do have to let go and trust the other party to make their contribution work."

At the end of a three-month dialogue, FARMWORK hit on the deceptively simple idea of modifying the space above the fabric works display with an architectural surface made of paper. Although the form of this surface was largely undetermined at this stage, with no one really having any idea how it could be created, Tan decided to "let go" and to leave FARMWORK to devise a technical solution of their own.

FARMWORK embarked on an exploration to develop the paper structure with origami and computer modelling techniques. Moving back and forth across the different media, the process became an opportunity to produce architecture through a juxtaposition and dialogue between a more familiar computer-based approach and a more hands-on approach inspired by kwodrent. With the help of both paper models and a combination of computer software such as Rhino, AutoCAD and Microstation, FARMWORK created a cloud-like structure that floated weightlessly above the visitors and the fabric art display.

Formed by 2,494 pieces of A4 drawings folded into varying sizes and stapled together, the paper cloud colonised the ceiling space and transformed it into an undulating origami landscape of shifting translucency.

Although stunning in its own right, the paper structure did not distract from kwodrent's fabric works, but had the effect instead of turning the traditional white cube into an envelop that formed a cocoon around the visitor, focusing the attention on the delicate installations below eye level.

Even though sections of this paper cloud were constructed in Singapore before the exhibition, the actual assembly process took place in the gallery itself over an intensive one-week period. With the help of the RMIT staff, the paper structure and the lighting system above it were erected before the display tables were brought into the gallery.

"We chose to use A4 pieces of paper because they are something very common," explained Sim, previously from SCDA Architects and Alsop Architects. In a sense, the shape of the A4 sheet was a distillation of FARMWORK's initial idea centred on the rectangular form. Viewing the collaboration as a parallel process across different media and disciplines, Sim said that the process has allowed the inner craftsman in him to emerge.

On the wall next to the entrance of the gallery space was an organza dress, which rested beneath the paper cloud like a black tulip in bloom. Commissioned by TheatreWorks for its 2008 multidisciplinary production *Dance, Dance Dance*, the dress was used both as a costume and the soundtrack by the director and multimedia designer Choy Ka Fai, who had ingeniously translated the dress's stitch points into sound waves, which were then played to the audience as part of the performance. For the first time, not only could the audience see a dress in motion, they could also hear it.

Pointing to the walls lined with sheets of paper displaying the XY-coordinates of her fabric works and FARMWORK's line drawings, Tan shared her plans to eventually translate the purity of this mathematical precision into other viable media. To her, the exhibition marked not the end of a project but, rather, the beginning of a whole new world. Agreeing, Sim added, "Perhaps by looking at the act of making rather than the end product, we can then begin to change the product a little more. The understanding of the process informs the making." ■

Envelop: kwodrent x farmwork ran from 11th July to 23rd August 2008 at RMIT Gallery, Melbourne, Australia as part of The State of Design 2008. For more information, visit www.stateofdesign.com.au.

