

A platform for design

Naiise connects creatives and customers with quality products

BY TAN GIM EAN

When like-minded people connect, there is synergy and good things happen. Guests at the recent open house of Naiise Malaysia had a taste of the creative collaboration and community spirit that Dennis Tay has strived to harness since he founded his lifestyle retail business in Singapore in 2013.

At the back of the concept store in Zhongshan Building at Kampung Attap, Kuala Lumpur, Tommy Lee of in-house Tommy Le Baker was busy preparing food for the party. Across the floor, Renry Hollins from Public School and Barakat set the mood by playing forgotten gems, funky tunes and oldies. In one corner, guests had their cloth bags decorated with silk-screen-print motifs by Bogus Merchandise or had their names written on 555 booklets by calligrapher Joee Cheong. Steps away, the more artsy ones added their personal touches to a communal batik painting, guided by Jadi Batek staff.

The front portion of the spacious five-month-old store houses curated fun, unique and versatile products designed and created by people who “want to do something different and infuse something interesting into a space, all complementing each other”, says Tay. “That was how our brand grew and we hope we can continue to grow in this trajectory in Malaysia.”

Having the right premises, which houses individual design studios, cafés, bookstores, an art gallery, music studios and record shops, a bespoke atelier and event spaces, helps the team interact with and understand the creative landscape here, he adds. “It is not easy or common to find such a beautiful space with heritage and soul within a building. When we were first brought to this place, we fell in love with it and made a very fast decision that this would be where we would start in Malaysia.”

Connecting with designers and customers gives Naiise, originally an online platform, insight into how to improve its business, which is representing creatives and helping them sell their brand stories and original and quality merchandise that improves the user’s life. From an initial list of five to 10 Singapore-based designers, it now represents more than 1,200 brands from around the world, including about 40 from Malaysia.

Naiise opened its first physical store in Singapore in 2015, followed by five more in the last three years. Today, its omnichannel strategy creates an additional layer of value for customers, who can choose what they like online and pick it up from a store, says Singaporean Tay, formerly a creative director. In the coming months, he hopes the company will have a place to call home in London, where it had a pop-up store and has a strong online presence.

Last October, the Singapore Tourism Board appointed Naiise to manage and operate Design Orchard, a project to showcase and nurture home-grown brands. The

SHAHRIN YAHYA/THE EDGE



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physical space at the junction of Orchard and Cairnhill roads, slated for completion this year, will help young, emerging creatives gain a foothold in the industry without having to man their own stores as well as reach out to a wider audience.

“What we are doing is empowering creative entrepreneurs, enabling them to do what they love to do and making it sustainable, and making their products accessible. We are starting to see people being more open to independent local brands, buying them and being interested in their stories. Most of our items are made with love, with quality in mind. They appeal to clients who want something that has meaning and purpose, and who know that buying such merchandise will contribute to the greater social good.”

Naiise’s revenue figures prove this business model works. Tay started with S\$3,000 of his own money. The company chalked up revenue of S\$60,000 in its first year of operation. Last year, revenue rose to over S\$4 million. “That means S\$4 million to S\$5 million worth of goods were being created by people who never thought they could create, and being bought by people who never thought they would buy these things.”

People tend to fear the word design and associate it with something art-like. “It’s not,” he says. “There is form, there is function and there is value that comes from design. I want to change the way we consume. I believe the items we have contribute to better living. It could be something that puts a smile on your face — that in itself has value. That’s what I want customers to feel and recognise.”

Recognition will encourage brands to keep coming up with new, interesting and contemporary ideas and concepts and develop even better products, he believes. “That’s the beauty of good design — it never ends.”