

Japan fashion's 'lost in translation' challenge

He's been hailed a "fresh new voice" by Vogue, won admiration from Giorgio Armani and bagged an award: Mitsuru Nishizaki is hot fashion talent in Japan. But that doesn't guarantee international stardom. Loud applause and uncharacteristic cheers erupted from the usually restrained Japanese fashion crowd at the 38-year-old's packed autumn/winter 2017 collection for brand Ujoh at Tokyo Fashion Week.

The models strode out to upbeat techno tempo, tearing up a multi-lane catwalk in a high-energy show starring preppy-grunge, sporty-tailored chic that would not look out of place in New York. It was eminently wearable with bright high-necked ribbed sweaters slashed at the side, a deconstructed pale pink trench coat and crisp shirts that button front and back to be styled how the wearer desires.

Shoes were trainer-meets-loafer-black with white soles and a yellow serrated grip, which he calls shark soles, worn with gypsy-style skirts, pin-stripped suits or slouchy velvet track bottoms. Nishizaki set up Ujoh in 2009 after seven years as a Yohji Yamamoto pattern cutter. Six years later he won a design award sponsored by DHL and then in 2016 staged a show in Milan.

Armani provided his theatre for the venue, though Nishizaki didn't meet the veteran Italian designer in person. Vogue wrote afterwards: "this is how cool girls dress now" and predicted a bright future for him. But what does it take to make it outside Japan? To follow in the footsteps of Issey Miyake, Yamamoto-Nishizaki's former boss and Rei Kawakubo, 20th century masters who have flown the nest to take their place among the greats in the fashion pantheon of Paris?



Models present creations from Ujoh by Japanese designer Mitsuru Nishizaki during his 2017 Autumn/Winter Collection show at Tokyo Fashion Week in Tokyo. — AFP photos

What are the hurdles that need to be overcome in a country where the fashion industry is embedded in exacting standards of tailoring, where creativity at times can take a back seat to doing it the right way? Ujoh is already stocked in more than a dozen foreign cities such as Barcelona, New York and Seoul. Still, Nishizaki's chief ambition is to expand further abroad. But it's a tough road to take domestic success to the next level.



'Give me ideas'

In an interview at his showroom in Omotesando, a chic neighbourhood heaving with high-fashion boutiques, he was polite and earnest, but also shy and nervous behind the wide brim of a black floppy hat. Nishizaki appears reluctant to present a compelling personal narrative in the rags-to-riches or fashion-ruled-my-childhood style that has helped many celebrated US designers market pret-a-porter to a mass audience.

When it comes to his collections, he says he works in the style to which he became accustomed at Yamamoto: having an open mind and designing freely without pre-selecting a particular inspiration. "It is a difficult question to answer and I wish you could give me some ideas," Nishizaki ventured when asked if he thought it was harder to break through as a designer from Japan than from Europe or America.

But he does admit that the Japanese calendar is stacked against quick success on the international circuit. Tokyo's bi-annual style fest in March and October comes several weeks after the main fashion merry-go-round in New York, London, Milan and Paris comes to an end. By then most international editors and buyers are too exhausted and saturated to board a long-haul flight to Tokyo. "What I really should do now is rearrange my brand schedule for press and sales not only in Japan but overseas," Nishizaki said. Misha Janette, a Tokyo-based stylist, creative director and blogger who has lived in Japan since 2004, said a major challenge for many Japanese designers trying to cut it in the West are different tastes.

She summed up the Japanese market as conservative and casual, rather than expensive and high fashion, warning that simple clothes were "not going to sell" in Paris.

"I think the most important thing is to have a balance of show pieces, interesting things that show their viewpoint with simple off the rack to satisfy both. That's hard," she told AFP. "Most Japanese brands don't have the investment, it's just girls and boys doing it alone out of their garage," she said. "Instead of having this balance of show pieces and wearable pieces it becomes either or." — AFP