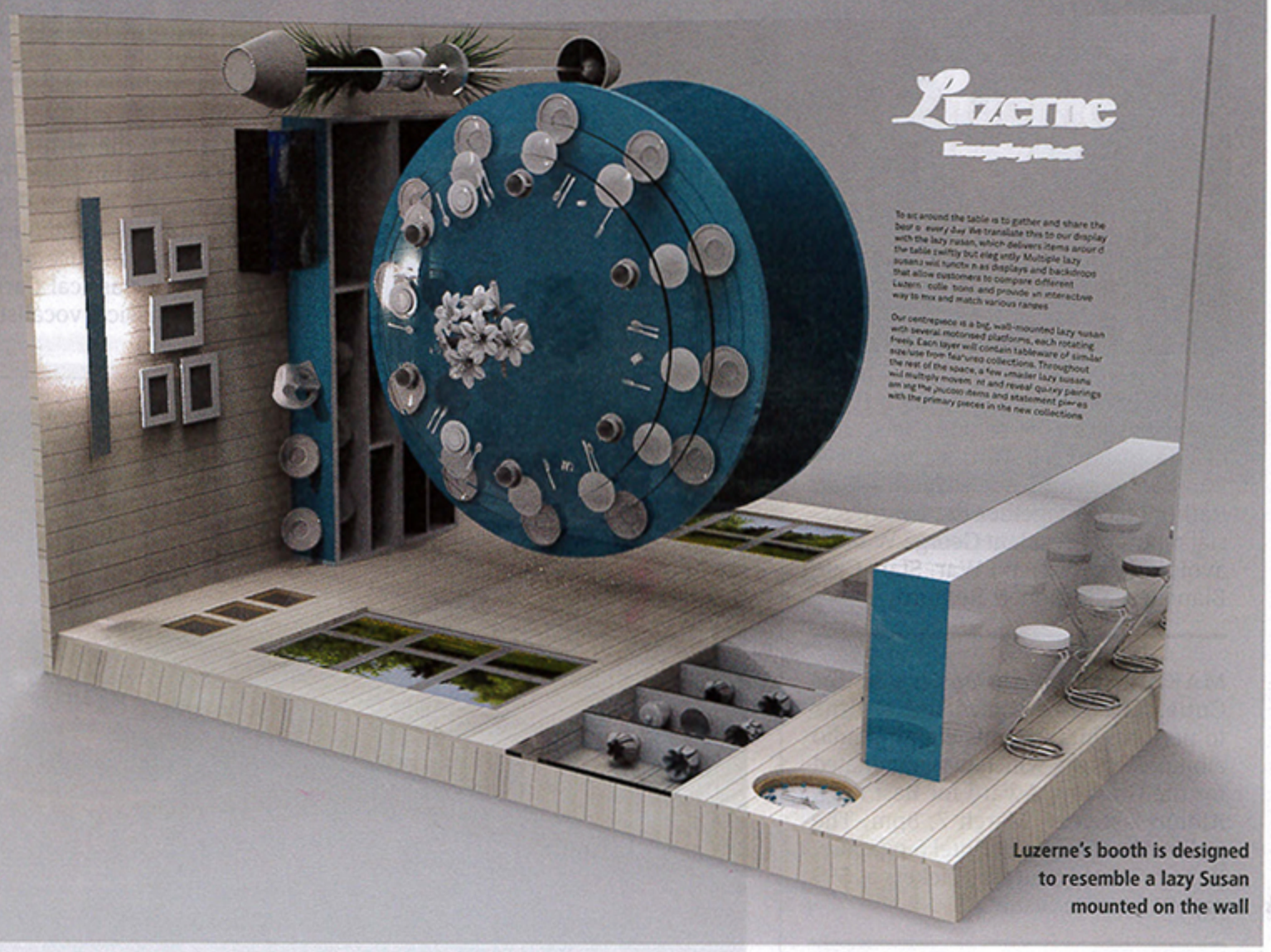
THE ASCOTT INTERVIEW

Design for LIFE

MAISON&OBJET ASIA is back for a third round this year. While the past two fairs suffered from an ambiguous identity, this year's edition is crystal clear about its role in serving the design community, says fair director Regina Chan.



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| STORIES BY AARON DE SILVA |

It might have something to do with the fact that our meeting takes place just before Valentine's weekend, but Regina Chan, Asia-Pacific director of Safi Asia — the organiser of MAISON&OBJET ASIA (M&O Asia) — is quite happy playing Cupid. "What we want to do is matchmake designer with manufacturer, client with manufacturer and/or designer and, because it's all about collaboration these days, designer with designer," she says.

M&O Asia is an offshoot of M&O Paris, the world's biggest and most glamorous salon dedicated to home furnishings, decorative flourishes and lifestyle merchandise. The Paris edition celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2015. The Asian edition, now in its third year, runs from March 8 to 11 at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre. About 150 brands from more than 20 countries are expected to take part, down from 250 in 2015.

The past two editions, Chan admits, suffered from an unclear positioning. Was it a mini-Paris, asked visitors and industry professionals. Was it a sourcing show meant for distributors, department stores/chains and retailers to replenish their stock of homewares and accessories? In reality, it was a bit of both. This year — third time's the charm — the fair's positioning is absolute. "I don't want people to think of us as an accessories show. That's secondary. We are a design show. M&O Paris is midway between being a sourcing show and a design fair, but M&O Asia is all about design."

What this means is that the fair will be less about trendspotting (is orange the new black? Are blob-shaped ceramic vases all the rage? Is chintzy tableware making a comeback?) than about making connections and finding design solutions. "It's a networking platform," says Chan. "If you spend one day here, you can see for yourself how the hospitality industry will develop over the next two to three years because of all these concepts and solutions. Plus, you will meet interesting personalities, people that share your interests. To organise such meetings — with the right type of manufacturers or designers — could otherwise take you a year!"

Chan adds that the reason M&O Asia is focusing on the hospitality industry is that spending power remains strong even in times of economic uncertainty. "People still spend on holidays and good food," she says, adding that she has no qualms the fair has downsized. In fact, trimming the fat has allowed M&O Asia to be described as a "curated exhibition". It also means that the organiser can take better care of the exhibitors, a feat next to impossible in a fair the size of Paris, which has close to 3,000 exhibitors.

Of the 150 brands taking part this year, only about 30% are from Asia. "The challenge I have is not to convince international brands to exhibit with me, but Asian ones," says Chan. "[Asian brands] always think the market is in Europe or North America. But the money is in Asia-Pacific. If you want branding, then yes, go to Paris, London or Milan, but be prepared to not have a lot of business opportunities in return." The Asia-Pacific hotel industry is worth about US$8.5 billion ($12 billion), according to a recent report by global real estate consultancy Jones Lang LaSalle.

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Chan says there is a lot of potential for Asian brands to get a head start at M&O Asia. She sees the fair as a platform for nurturing up-and-coming labels. "If you're accepted to this platform, you should feel really good about yourself. And if you're good enough for us and you're ready, we have Paris and Miami Beach for you," she says, referring to the two other global editions of the fair. "We really want to grow our clients. We don't make empty promises. We don't just sell square metres. It's about doing business together."

That said, this year's fair is organised into three segments: Curated Exhibition (exhibitors, concept cafés and concept booths); Interior Design & Lifestyle Summit, a line-up of 20 conferences helmed by notable speakers from Asia-Pacific; and Awards, which will honour the region's best with trophies handed out to the Designer of the Year and Rising Asian Talents.

A curated approach

Visitors pressed for time will want to zoom in on exhibitor highlights, such as home-grown company The Rug Maker. This 12-year-old, family-run business, which specialises in rug customisation, will launch its Tropical Collection. Designed in collaboration with Outofstock — M&O Asia's Rising Talent from 2015 — the rugs took two years to produce and will be mounted like artworks in a gallery. This alludes to the laborious nature of their manufacture as well as subverts the conventional notion of rug display.

Another local family-run enterprise worth checking out is tableware manufacturer Luzerne, which produces almost 30 million pieces of ceramic and stoneware a year for clients such as Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts and Las Vegas Sands. Its booth is designed to resemble a lazy Susan mounted on the wall — quite possibly one of the most creative installations at the fair. "It took us two years to convince them to do this, but I think it will take them to the next level," says Chan.

Local design collective Supermama — which touts itself as a retail store, artist residency studio and design platform all rolled into one — will present a hotel gift shop concept. Teaming up with nine different companies in Japan specialising in glass, ceramics and timber furniture, company founder Edwin Low is introducing a new collection based on the theme of souvenirs. These items could be retailed in a boutique hotel gift shop, for instance.

Also not to be missed is Japan's Asahi Glass Co, one of the largest flat glass producers in the world. Marina Bay Sands' glass façade, for instance, was produced by AGC. At M&O Asia, the firm will showcase a new product: Information Glass, a thin sheet of glass that can be used to display information and images. The possibilities for this type of technology are endless: think billboards, commercial building façades, residential home exteriors and so on.

Of ideas and concepts

Similarly rife with possibilities are the two concept cafés presented by Dutch furniture maker Eichholtz and Belgian furnishing company Sempre. Eichholtz's aesthetic is more Euro-luxe, while Sempre's is styled after a Japanese takeaway kiosk. Both will be fully operational, meaning that visitors can actually order a meal and consume it on the premises. The idea, says Chan, is to entice mall developers to buy the design wholesale and then get an F&B operator to run the outlet. "Instead of hiring a designer to do up the space, you can buy this whole concept, copy and paste, and put it in your mall."

For the first time, the fair will also showcase a concept booth curated by local design studio TERRE, called Framed. Set in a painted steel structure that resembles the skeletal form of a house — hence the name — the 63 sq m space will be transformed into a mini-residence with living, dining and kitchen elements. These areas will be furnished with pieces from various retailers and animated by a programme of activities, such as a sake appreciation workshop, coffee brewing