



INTERVIEW

BY JEANNE BEKER

A TEST FOR TALENTED DESIGNERS

The mood was celebratory in the dressing room at Reitmans in Montreal's Place Ville-Marie in November, as a spirited cross-section of fashionable women tried on a collection of 10 terrific dresses by Canadian design duo Martin Lim.

There was something for everyone in the offering from Danielle Martin and Pao Lim, the husband and wife team who got fashion tongues wagging last year when they won the Mercedes-Benz Start Up Program. Now, in this new collaboration with Reitmans, Martin and Lim have set out to prove they have commercial appeal.

The project is an acid test: With Reitmans handling manufacturing, distribution and marketing, Martin and Lim's creative vision can fly. If these 10 dresses sell, the two-year-old label could be catapulted to the forefront of the Canadian design scene. Judging by the ladies I met in the dressing room, Martin and Lim are off to a thrilling start.

The couple met in Quebec City in 1995 and the creative sparks flew: Lim, studying physical education at the time, took delight in helping Martin with her fashion projects. They eventually studied design at École supérieure de mode de Montréal. I met Martin at a design competition in Hong Kong in 1999. I was a judge. She took the Canadian prize. Years later, the pair moved to London to study at Central Saint Martins and wound up working for Roland Mouret. They were tempted to stay in London—its fashion community is tight-knit and inspiring—but the cost of living was too high. "Besides, we had a child by that point," says Martin.

By 2004, Martin and Lim returned to Montreal. Now parents of two girls, it was another six years before they launched their self-financed label. "We realized we had to bring something different to the market," says Martin. "We couldn't just play it safe. People would either love it or hate it." Their signature look is based on technically proficient construction and a modern, sophisticated edge, often accented with athletic details. Easy-to-wear dresses are their forte.

Reitmans was looking to follow up on its 2011 collaboration with Marie Saint Pierre. Brigitte Martin, merchandise manager, says her team became aware of Martin Lim and was instantly enamoured. The 10 dresses are priced around \$85 and seem like a sure hit for the retailer. Each dress had to address a need, from day to night.

By the time I flew back from Montreal, I was carrying two Martin Lim shopping bags through security. "Hey, is that label any good?" asked an officer. "I've been hearing a lot about it lately."

"Oh yes, it's very good," I said, feeling smug that I'd just had the privilege of partying with the designers. "You'll be hearing a lot more about them in the future."

I'm looking forward to wearing my flattering Martin Lim dresses this holiday, heartened to see talent and tenacity rewarded. But these designers feel like they have miles to go. "It's more like a step-by-step progress," says Lim. "Something else is going to come after this."

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