

Heiress, designer come together in cool show

By Cheche Moral

Philippine Daily Inquirer

First Posted 21:05:00 07/02/2009

Filed Under: [People, Fashion](#)

MANILA, Philippines – In a typical world, their lives probably would never intersect.

She, big-city girl, born to high society and money—lots of it. And he, working-class, small-town boy, born imaginably to so much less.

But late last year, Bianca Cristina Zobel met for the first time Leonardo Salinas, the Filipino-born designer behind the up-and-coming Australian fashion label. The heiress had signed a deal to distribute his brand in her new e-commerce venture, High Maintenance or www.im-hm.com. Salinas flew in to present his collection at the launch.

“The first time I heard about him was when Leo’s (Salinas) marketing guy contacted me while I was in [Rosemount Australian] Fashion Week last year,” says Zobel, 28, who was there to scout brands for distribution. “My name was on the list under the Philippines and since I was the only Filipino in Fashion Week, he sent me a look book and invited me to Leo’s show. I unfortunately was not able to watch his show, but I really liked his designs.”

On July 9, the two will come together as Inquirer Lifestyle and Nokia present Leonardo Salinas’ collection in a by-invitation show at the newly renovated Rizal Ballroom of Makati Shangri-La. Zobel’s High Maintenance is bringing Salinas to the Philippines for this show.

Chic, independent women

Salinas, 40, launched his label with his Spring-Summer 2008 collection at Australian Fashion Week. He graduated from the Whitehouse Institute of Design in 1995 and has worked for top Australian designers like Alex Perry, Lisa Ho, Nicola Finetti, Willow, as “fashion technician and pattern cutter” until, with a business partner, he started a prêt-à-porter label. Before this, he had been doing bespoke designs.

Coming from a brood of 10 in Malasiqui, Pangasinan, Salinas migrated to Sydney in 1990, following three family members who had moved there in the late ‘80s. Soon after, he studied fashion, attending classes in the day and working at night in “hospitality and retail” industries to put himself through school. He graduated with distinction.

“From a very young age [fashion] was all that consumed my thoughts,” Salinas says in an e-mail interview. “I bought every fashion magazine from the US and the UK and visualized the day when I would be designing couture fashion for a living.

“One thing I realized is that women in Manila are fashionable and equally stylish as women in other fashion cities,” he says, which fits well with his intended market: the chic, independent, modern working woman “with disposable income,” age “25 to 45, who loves structured feminine, unique pieces during the day and amazing one-of-a-kind dresses for special occasions.

‘Duality of extremes’

“Salinas’ most recent collection (Spring-Summer ‘09) has a duality of extremes, which makes the collection in itself edgy and exciting,” Zobel describes. “If you take a look at his designs, you will notice that the pieces have a ‘futuristic’ element, featuring detailed pleats and metallic fabrics. Yet

at the same time, the cuts are very classic—tailored skirts and jackets, and corseted dresses. This is what makes this collection so interesting.”

For the July 9 show, Salinas will present a mix of his current summer collection and a preview of Fall-Winter 2009, as well as his haute couture and bridal collections.

While the designer says being an upstart in Sydney is a “very exhausting” and “expensive” process, he also believes his ethnicity hasn’t been barrier to establishing his name. “At the end of the day, it’s the strength of your ambitions and goal [that] overrides” questions of race, he adds.

Homecoming

In his hometown up north, where his mother has chosen to retire after living for 10 years in Australia, the town folk have been especially warm in their welcome. “I even went back to my old school and met with my teachers and talked to the students about living your dreams,” he says.

He says his story isn’t your typical “rags-to-riches yet, but I am very focused on becoming very successful in the fashion industry.”

Apart from a boutique in Sydney, IM-HM.com and some retailers in the US, Salinas also hopes to take a crack at the European market, and be able to show and sell in Paris.

“One of the philosophies of IM-HM.com is to internationally promote the Filipino talent,” says Zobel. “Like Salinas, if that talent is something I believe in, I would take the risk. The Filipino talent is so vast yet still unrecognized worldwide; IM-HM hopes to change that.”

After Salinas, IM-HM has also begun selling a special collection from another Filipino, resort-wear designer Charina Sarte. Zobel says she will also soon sell Naga Jewelry by Wynn Wynn Ong. Ong is Burmese-born, married to Filipino investment banker Norby.

Initially geared only to the Asian market, with a catalog of mostly Australian brands, IM-HM has also attracted online shoppers from the UK, US, Australia, Italy and the Netherlands, with British shoppers forming the bulk.

“We carry quite a few Australian brands, some of which are not widely available there, which explains why they are our biggest shoppers,” Zobel says. Sass & Bide, best known for denims, has been a top seller, while Salinas “has been received well so far... People want brands that aren’t available to them locally,” she explains of her decision to represent “new and up-and-coming” labels.

“The Internet today is so much a part of our market’s everyday life that the chances of fashion fanatics learning about new brands being launched by browsing online are far greater than them spotting a new brand while window shopping,” she says.

As for Salinas, he has full confidence in Zobel’s efforts for his label.

“I know that the brand is in good hands and she has been very supportive from the start,” he says. “I really admire her for taking in the brand under her wing. I see her as a fashion visionary.”