



are willing to tackle the issue. Isaac Mizrahi is name-checked by several in the industry as having a history of employing models of all ethnicities and body types. He recalls one incident when he took a stand against the skinny models trend. "I discovered a lovely biracial girl in a café who was rather zaftig, and I featured her in one of my shows. You could feel

editors shutting down whenever she hit the runway," Mizrahi recalls. Several people told him his models weren't 'edgy' enough. "But I don't necessarily care about this or that particular edge fashion tends to walk on," he adds. "One thing I will say in its favor is that it is an equal-opportunity discriminator. It seems to randomly choose whole sectors of society to be bored with."

The idea of being "right now" often trumps social responsibility. Few view race within the context of diversity. "It's looked at as an aesthetic issue. Would a homogenous look make a more powerful statement on the runway?" asks Givhan. She notes that models are not looked at as individuals the way they were during the supermodel period and that the designer's singular vision takes precedence. Yeohlee, a designer who has cast real women and models in her shows, concurs: "We're in a faceless period in fashion right now."

HOW ONE

chooses to define his or her singular vision is where the problems come up, though. If one chooses

to produce a collection defined by faceless minimalism, for example, and decides to illustrate that through a group of entirely white and blond models, it sends a pointed memo to

consumers, aspiring models and young girls alike that certain groups of people are more valuable than others. "The message once it's established is pervasive and pernicious," Trebay says.

It's also possibly illegal. "There's a fine line between artistic vision and discrimination. If a designer chooses to define a certain vision as all white or all black, you run the risk of violating Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964," explains Anna Park, regional attorney in the Los Angeles district attorney's office of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The Act prohibits employment discrimination "based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin." Park worked on the case against Abercrombie & Fitch, which the retailer lost. "Abercrombie & Fitch got into trouble when they tried to define 'all-American' as white male. If I said I wanted to hire an aggressive attorney and that 'aggressive means white, an Asian attorney wouldn't be aggressive enough,' that's discrimination," she adds.

Mistakenly, many in fashion believe EEOC regulations don't apply to them. "I don't think people see the problem as especially pressing. They see it as sad and bothersome, but I don't think people necessarily equate it with unequal hiring practices in other fields," Givhan says.

OF COURSE, it would be unreasonable to examine the diversity of shows without looking at the agencies that supply them. While browsing through the women's boards of the top New York agencies listed on Models.com, few represented more than two black, Latina or Asian models. South Asian women were represented by exactly one model, Ujjwala at IMG, while some agencies such as Supreme management had rosters that were entirely white.

When Omilana realized she had reached a ceiling of sorts at her agency, she met with others in the hopes of getting more work, only to be greeted with the same rejection. "They'd say, 'we already have Kiara or Kadra,'" she says, referring to two black models with similar looks. "Yet, they'd have 50 white girls who looked just alike. Is there really only to be one of us?"

After weeks of the same results, an agent finally leveled with her. "I had flown to Paris, and the agent I met with said he liked my look and walk but didn't receive enough calls for black girls to justify having that many," she says. Omilana was glad to get an honest answer, but devastated: "What I'm doing is all about appearance. I can't change the color of my skin."

Park says that setting a quota based on race also toes the line of EEOC regulations. "You can't just say, 'We have enough of you.' If it appears you only want white people, that can be viewed as discrimination," she says. This especially seems true when one considers the pool of attractive people out there. "The onus is on us as managers to scout all areas of the world," Hagler says. "It's not in any way that the talent doesn't exist. It's an employment issue. There's no accountability. There isn't one group of people who can't model. You can't ignore whole segments of humans," Trebay adds.

Then again, one obviously can when a profit is at stake. "Trust me, we're all in this for the money," Hagler says wryly. "It's like politics; the consumers have got to speak with their dollars." That's what has begun to happen in Asia. "For the longest time, you never ever, five more evers, saw Asian girls. But the market opened up, consumers complained and things changed," Trebay says.

Givhan speculates many designers don't view black women, "unless her name is Halle Berry," as their customers. What's puzzling about that, though, is that African-American spending power in the apparel category is estimated at \$22 billion, according to Target Market News.

ULTIMATELY, above the market and legislation, it's a societal issue, albeit a very complicated one. "Artists should take responsibility for the images they create," Mizrahi admits. Otherwise, young girls of color have few or no role models. "People are missing out on an opportunity. I'm not saying everyone will be Iman, but they should at least be given the chance," Campbell says. Hardison agrees, saying "After years of thinking there was no need to scream about this issue anymore, things have fallen. I need to bring some consciousness to this industry again." She plans to start the process by holding a panel discussion on the topic at the New York Public Library in October.

Omilana looks forward to the day when high-fashion runways will look more diverse. Six years after moving to New York, she's frustrated but unmoving: "When I began working, Liya was the only black girl working at her level, and now it's Chanel Iman. It's frustrating, but, at the same time, I'm happy at least someone got there. It may not be my time now, but I'm determined to get there too."



In the calm before the storm that is the spring collections, Thakoon Panichgul is all charm

by MAISIE WILHELM

THAKOON PANICHGUL, the Thai-born, Parsons-trained designer and former fashion writer, could be spending the last days before his Friday show running around stressing and obsessing over the remaining details of his new collection.

Instead, he's up bright and early, gabbing with us on the phone about food and VH1's "Charm School." We love this guy.

Describe your design aesthetic.

Classic with a twist. It's about the particular attitude of the girl. She loves fashion but is always nonchalant, like Sofia Coppola, who can wear a basic T-shirt but with an attitude that makes it look chic.

You won a 2006 CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund runner-up award. How did things change for you?

It put me in a place where I feel more confident in my work.

Was there a point at which you felt you had made it?

Every day! I wake up and think, "Wow, I am doing the thing I have always wanted to do." It also felt like I made it when Steven Meisel does a shoot with my clothes.

If you've always wanted to design, why the business degree from Boston University?

My family pressured me to do it. I excelled but always had a longing to

be more creative and knew it would come out some time.

You moved from your home in Bangkok to Omaha at age 11. Do you ever go back to visit?

I go back and forth all the time. I miss the culture and fantastic energy. The people are the most friendly.

And the food?

It's amazing. My favorite is noodle soup with spicy broth, made on a boat. You can eat 10 small bowls and not be full. In New York, I just eat whatever that's put in front of my face.

How do you stay stress-free during pre-show weeks?

I have a big Post-it pad that I make lists on all the time and stick up over everything. I can definitely be obsessive-compulsive in my work.

What's your guilty pleasure when you unwind?

When I zone out, my obsession is tragic reality TV shows. I loved "Charm School" with Mo'Nique. I thought that was genius.

You've collaborated with Nine West, Gap and Lancôme. Are you the guy who can't say 'no'?

I always err on the side of 'no'! With Nine West it was in the company of Vivienne Westwood and Sophia Kokosalaki, and for an American company to be in that mix, I thought it would be cool.

FAR LEFT: "I can't change the color of my skin," says Keisha Omilana. **CENTER:** Ujjwala, pictured walking a Victoria's Secret show in 2003, is the only Indian model to reach near-supermodel status. **LEFT:** Naomi Campbell in a Chanel ready-to-wear show in 1995.