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**REPORT
REAL ESTATE**
Top office leases,
building sales
in 2006; more
PAGES 19-35

Taking a bruising

Designer typifies flood of wannabes striving to make it; \$1M already spent

BY ELISABETH BUTLER

FASHION DESIGNER Jerry Tam draws inspiration from personal experience when he creates a new collection. This year, his line of black, blue and maroon clothes reflects the beating he's received since starting his own company, Form, more than two years ago.

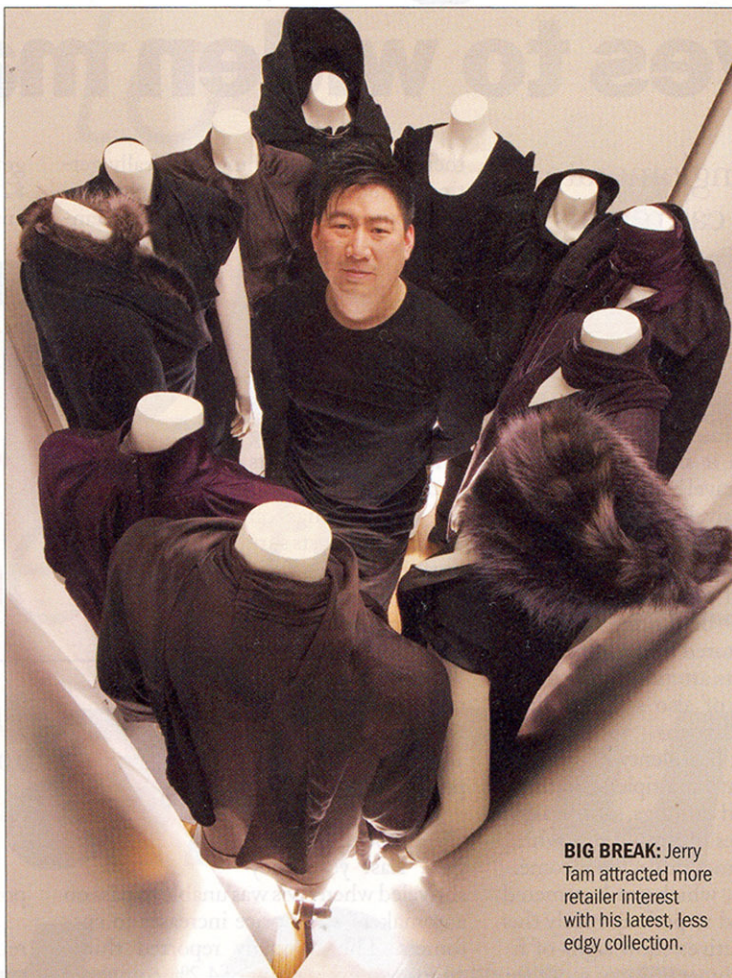
"It's about bruises," Mr. Tam says. "We're kind of fashion-forward luxury, and that's not something readily embraced in middle America."

Cashing out inheritance

ONLY A FEW BOUTIQUE locations sell his clothes; bigger retailers won't give him a break, saying his clothes are too edgy for their sales floors. Mr. Tam, 31, has spent nearly \$1 million of his own money to keep the company alive, cashing out his inheritance and even his life insurance.

"It takes a lot of money to have a serious, professional team and make payroll when you're worrying about affording buttons or fabric," Mr. Tam.

Giving until it hurts is just part of what emerging designers endure as they try to attract attention. Thanks in part to the hit television show *Project Runway*, hundreds of fresh New York designers are entering the business with dreams of becoming the next Ralph Lauren or Marc Jacobs. Aspirants are mob-



BIG BREAK: Jerry Tam attracted more retailer interest with his latest, less edgy collection.

bing fashion schools—Pratt Institute alone receives 33% more applications for its program than it did five years ago. But unknown designers face daunting odds in trying to appeal to retailers.

Mr. Tam has come further than many. Trend-spotting e-mail service DailyCandy praised Form twice last year, and celebrities like rock photographer Mick Rock

wear his clothes. But buzz doesn't pay the rent, and this fall will be a make-or-break season for Form.

"I need a minimum amount of sales to cover my investments in the past and continue this business in the future," says Mr. Tam. A graduate of Parsons The New School for Design and the Fashion Institute of Technology, he worked for Zac Posen and the Perry Ellis



CLOTHING VOYEURS

Style.com, which posted runway images from 96 shows, saw traffic soar 49% during Fashion Week.

1.2 million
VISITORS

67 million
PAGE VIEWS

Source: CondéNet

house before launching his line.

Mr. Tam needs to generate annual sales of at least \$250,000 just to cover expenses. That figure is attainable, as one of his jackets can cost upward of \$1,000. But getting there will require orders from more retailers.

'All about the buyer'

TO HELP JUMP-START SALES of his latest collection, Mr. Tam toned down his avant-garde style to make the clothes more wearable. "This particular season it was all about the buyer," he says.

The revamped look was put to the test during Fashion Week early-

See **NEW DESIGNER** on Page 8

New designer takes a beating

Continued from Page 3

er this month, when magazine editors and retail buyers converged on New York. Form's show was held in a Chelsea warehouse near the West Side Highway as part of a two-hour installation sponsored by entertainment group Gen Art.

The event, which included two other brands, attracted some of the industry's biggest retailers.

Though most important buyers attend the main shows at Bryant Park, smaller venues have become more popular with such players in recent years.

Hurry up and wait

"THE STORES are so competitive to get the new hot designer," says Mary Gelhar, vice president of brand strategy at Gen Art. "But the question is, how do you stay in business long enough when all the stores are saying, 'We want to watch you for one more season?'"

Henri Bendel, a specialty store known for carrying trendy wares, sends a team to as many as 75 shows during Fashion Week and pursues the most promising leads over the following month. "There has to be chemistry between the designer and us," says Henri Bendel Chief Executive Ed Bucciarelli. "They need to be able to come up with fresh ideas consistently."

Even department stores are taking more interest in emerging talent. Picking the next hot brand is "a blend of art and science," says Frank Doroff, general merchandising

manager of ready-to-wear at Bloomingdale's, a chain that lately has been giving more space to such designers. "We try to pick people that have great potential."

Gen Art paid for Mr. Tam's show because its executives believe that Form is ready to woo big-time buyers. "Form's people are polished, attractive, young and energetic," Ms. Gelhar says.

One big order

STILL, the line desperately needed a break, and Gen Art's support could not have come at a better time.

"They saved our lives and our season," says Mr. Tam, who has follow-up appointments with buyers from Henri Bendel and Neiman Marcus.

In anticipation of at least one large order, he's lined up production sources in China and sorted out some financing to help cover costs. If all goes well, Mr. Tam will start moving toward his five-year goal of selling Form to a major company such as Gucci, which could turn it into a global fashion house.

"We don't want to do the suffering and worrying in the studio," Mr. Tam says. "We want to be taken seriously by the people who matter in fashion."

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