

Project Reality

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In 1999, Gen Art, a New York-based incubator for art, fashion and film talent, hosted its first fashion competition for fledgling designers. The finalists, one of whom was the now celebrated but then unknown designer Peter Som, sent two looks down a runway, which were then scored by a panel of judges. After a quick tabulation of the results, winners for each category were announced by the competition's host, which that year was none other than ex-model Heidi Klum.

Sound familiar? Like something you've maybe seen before?

A handful of years after hosting the Gen Art Styles show, Klum - then known mostly for her Sports Illustrated covers - and her producing partner, The Weinstein Company, pitched a show to Bravo, a cable television network owned by NBC Universal. The show, *Project Runway*, would become a reality hit, pulling in 5.4 million viewers for its third season finale, the largest audience Bravo had ever garnered.

As for the show that inspired the show, it goes on - and, in fact, went on last Tuesday in front of an audience of more than 1,500 at New York's Hammerstein Ballroom. Sponsored chiefly by Eos Airlines, the event provided an interesting glimpse into the future of both fashion and, perhaps, a certain reality TV show.

The winning women's ready-to-wear designer, e.y. wada, featured a cropped trench jacket with lace edging over a white tent dress and a boxy white suit with lots of dark-coloured piping. Wearable? Yes. Inspiring? Not really.

Stronger were the looks sent down the runway in the women's avant-garde and evening-wear categories. London-based designer Dragana Rikanovic took home top honours in the avant-garde competition for her white jumpsuit with one sheer sleeve and a white knit dress with three-dimensional bubbles adorning the top.

FORM, a trio of young designers, won the evening-wear division with a shiny grey cocktail option and an infinitely more memorable black party dress featuring a deep V-neck and skirt slashed open to reveal a textured bubble below.

Also noteworthy were a pair of sizzling flapper frocks from Julia Clancy, a London-based designer already carried by Coco de Mer and Harrods. It's easy to imagine Clancy's gold-sequined, cowl-necked dress or her peach silk slip with gold, silver and crystal embroidery on any number of camera-loving starlets or socialites. While Clancy may not have taken home the cash prize, there's a good chance her Gen Art appearance could have a favourable impact on her career nonetheless.

For Gen Art remains involved in *Project Runway*, helping cast the reality show. "We help promote and get emerging designers to come to the castings," says Ian Gerard, chief executive officer of Gen Art. The organisation also sends members to sit on casting panels alongside *Runway's* judge Tim Gunn and others. "They came to us because they wanted to reach designers with credibility," says Gerard.

Having introduced some of the industry's big new names - Rodarte, Sari Gueron and Duckie Brown, a men's wear label up for a Council of Fashion Designers of America award this year - credibility is something Gen Art has plenty of. As for *Runway*, so far at least, it has done a better job minting reality TV stars than successful designers.

John Bartlett, a men's wear designer and one of this year's competition judges, says: "Gen Art is a little under the radar but people in the industry really respect what it does. If you are a finalist, I think it really gives you a step up in the business."

One of the Gen Art competition's winners last year, Bruno Grizzo, was picked up by Barneys New York following the show. His entire line sold out in the first week. None of *Runway's* finalists, despite their large fan bases, has earned such bragging rights.

That's in part because what makes for good television doesn't always make for great design. Of course, that's not to say that the two are mutually exclusive either. "It's absolutely vital that the people are talented but obviously we want colourful personalities," says Frances Berwick, executive vice-president of programming and production at Bravo. She also says that she and the other *Runway* producers originally struggled with making "people sitting in a room, drawing designs and sewing clothes fun" for the audience.

In the end, the answer to that problem came in the form of creative challenges such as taking the contestants to a grocery store to find sewing materials. Time pressure helps, too - the challenges take place, in general, over a one- to three-day period. "We want to show the drama and the stress of the creative process," says Berwick.

