

WWD THURSDAY



Sportswear



Who's Got Style?

NEW YORK — Leave it to hyperkinetic stylist-cum-TV personality Robert Verdi to shake things up at the annual Gen Art Styles 2007 design competition on Tuesday. As the evening's emcee, his off-the-cuff remarks offered plenty of comic — and some cringe-worthy — moments to entertain the 1,600-plus audience at the Hammerstein Ballroom here.

While introducing Michael Vollbracht, for example, he called the Bill Blass designer "my favorite log-cabin Republican. He's a Bush supporter, but don't boo him — Naomi's going to come out here and throw some stuff at you if you're not good." And he teased former employer Cynthia Rowley by saying, "She gave me one of my first jobs in fashion...imagine how old she is!"

But it's fashion, of course, that fuels the event, now in its ninth year. This time, 38 finalists in six categories — called from more than 800 submissions by a committee of 25 editors and retailers — competed before the panel of judges that included Vollbracht and Rowley, as well as IMG Fashion vice president Fern Mallis, model Liya Kebede, Elle style director Isabel Dupré, retailer Jeffrey Kalinsky and designers John Bartlett, Reem Acra and Trina Turk. Awards of \$5,000 were handed out to five winners, while the \$10,000 Perrier Bubbling Under Award for Design went to Wanda Marie Sanders for her Pop Art-inspired sketches.

The accessories nod went to Derrick R. Cruz of Black Sheep and Prodigal Sons for his handcrafted jewelry with a slightly Gothic air — intricately carved pendants, for instance, in the shape of a bighorn sheep head. Other standouts included ready-to-wear winners Shuji Wada and Eunyoung Song of E.Y. Wada, who charmed with their chicly feminine daywear looks, and Dragana Rikanovic, whose conceptual dresses garnered the Avant Garde prize. Meanwhile at Form, Jerry Tam's simple cocktail frocks won in the Eveningwear category.

Some of the designers were repeat guests on the Gen Art roster. Eveningwear finalist Il Fredriksson, for example, took part in the Styles 2006 competition as well as the Gen Art Fresh Faces show that same year, and Form was one of three labels showcased in the New Garde presentation during New York Fashion Week in February.

"Ultimately, this is about helping the designers who are really talented get on their feet, business-wise," explained Lee Trimble, fashion director of Gen Art. "That's where the cash grants come in. That money could go back into production for their line."

And, indeed, as these players can well attest, it takes a lot more than a moment in the spotlight to make it in the industry. As Turk put it: "Getting the orders is the easy part."

— Venessa Lau

