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Laurie Simmons and Thakoon Panichgul.

Rose Land

A collaboration with artist Laurie Simmons blossoms at Thakoon.

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It began with a book. Thakoon Panichgul was at the Whitney Museum's 2006 Art Party when a photo of a weathered hardcover, gilded ornamental scrolls covering its spine, caught his eye. The most striking part was the shapely legs sprouting from the bottom of its pages. A figure appeared to be wriggling in (or out) seductively, naked but for a pair of girlish undies. The image was part of a series of two-legged objects styled and shot by photographer Laurie Simmons in the late Eighties and early Nineties. Panichgul placed a bid on it during the evening's silent auction, only to lose out in the end. "I was sort of obsessed with it," Panichgul says. "I liked how it was quite erotic in a nerdy way. I was really upset when I lost."



A look from Panichgul and Simmons's runway collaboration.

Weeks later, Panichgul met Simmons at a New York screening of her film *The Music of Regret*, starring Meryl Streep, but Simmons doesn't remember the encounter. "I have no memory of that night," she says. "There were a lot of people, and I was never so nervous in my entire life."

No matter, kismet would work in the designer's favor. He and Simmons crossed paths again in 2007 at a dinner held by Simmons's dealer, Angela Westwater, and this time the connection stuck. "I love to talk about fashion, and Thakoon loves to talk about art, so we were each trying to talk about what we wanted to talk about," she recalls. "I was surprised he knew so much about my work." Panichgul invited Simmons to his fall 2008 show, while she asked him to stop by her TriBeCa studio. It was there that a print collaboration was born. "He kind of shyly asked me," Simmons explains. "A lot of people assume that artists don't want to work outside their prescribed area, that making the jump into the commercial world is a step down. What they don't know is that most artists are dying to collaborate with fashion people. It's exciting that my work could have another incarnation in his clothes."

Fast-forward to New York's recent Fashion Week. Simmons is sitting front row at Panichgul's Thakoon show watching models flit by in flowy frocks, chiffon cardigans and bandaged dresses. Of the various prints in the collection, hers are those featuring roses that, yes, seem to sprout legs. "Wow," the artist says a week later. "The first dress that had my pattern on it was a black jacquard, so I couldn't see if the roses were on it. Then the dress got close enough, and I almost jumped out of my seat! I was pretty pleased."

Good thing, as Panichgul had kept his entire collection a secret from Simmons; all she knew was that loads of blooms were involved. This past summer Panichgul sent the artist a batch of roses from his favorite Manhattan florist, Miho Kosuda Ltd. They were deliberately wilted, two days past their prime. "What I love about roses is the process of blooming and wilting," says Panichgul, "and Miho's roses die so beautifully." The resulting hue was a deeply saturated "bloodlike red," notes Simmons. "It was so intense, when I closed my eyes that night I could still see this blood color." Soon after, Simmons began pairing those flowers with dolls' legs that had been handpicked by Panichgul from the artist's shelf full of such extremities. She photographed numerous poses: knees knocking, legs open or tilted to the side and some lying down, "as if a ballerina collapsed on the floor," he says. Six of the photos were adapted into fabrics including cotton, silk chiffon and radzimir for Panichgul's collection.

Throughout her career, Simmons has attached legs to pretty much everything—a camera, a house, petits fours, a toilet—but this was her first time incorporating flora. "In terms of being an artist," she says, "flowers are something I would probably stay away from, like kittens or babies.... But it seems appropriate now and, in its own way, tough too—this really bloodred rose on legs."

For Panichgul, however, florals aren't such a leap. His spring 2007 collection was inspired by the numerous congratulatory

bouquets he received after being nominated for the 2006 CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund. Then there were his arty cabbage roses for resort, which got a major publicity boost when Michelle Obama wore a black, red and purple version to the Democratic National Convention the night her husband accepted the party nomination. As for the prints that ended up in Thakoon's spring 2009 collection, their inspiration came courtesy of Simmons's images of legged cakes, which happened to be topped with sugared roses. "I thought, Wouldn't it be cool to do legs on those [garnishes]?" says Panichgul. "They're very fantasy for me." In fact, when the designer first visited Simmons's studio, her pastry photos attracted him most, but he ended up purchasing the image of a pistol with legs because it was "more butch." Lying Gun (Color), 1990, now hangs on his living room wall. Inspired by commercials of dancing cigarette packs from her childhood, Simmons came up with the concept of human-object hybrids in 1987. "Plus, I used to see all the Rockettes, and Mr. Peanut walking around the boardwalk in Atlantic City," she says. "As a kid, that was something so profound for me, this crazy spectacle of legs everywhere...merging the animate and the inanimate." It's fitting then that her series "Walking & Lying Objects" aimed to showcase women "meshing with their environment," she explains. "There's a kind of passivity that women can have, this ability to merge with what you're identified with, whether [it's] your home, car, purse or perfume."

For his part, Panichgul sought to hone in on a different angle. "Sensuality and skin" is how he describes his collection's vibe. "I wanted to play with sensuality and what is proper. Those two ideas funnel into fetishism in a way." His runway riffed on transparency and bondage with elastic bandage strips crisscrossing delicate crepe dresses. Even the non-Simmons prints, done by Panichgul himself, played cheekily into the mood with fishnet, lip and eyelash patterns on gentle blouses, billowy harem pants and dresses. "It's using elements of seduction in a way that's not typical," he explains. In other words, romance aplenty, no whip necessary.

"Those prints were such a beautiful counterpoint to what we did," says Simmons. "What really stunned me was how he used our collaboration to take off on other ideas of surrealism. For me, the show was like looking at an exhibition, and that's not usually how I feel about a fashion show. I was really trying to understand conceptually how all the pieces tied together."

While she's already working on a new series (this time, placing downloaded porn images in dollhouse interiors), Simmons notes that two rose images she did for Panichgul will soon hit the gallery circuit, one in December's "Photographic Works" benefit exhibition at New York's Foundation for Contemporary Arts and another in January at the Tomio Koyama Gallery in Tokyo, part of a Simmons retrospective.

"It was a good marriage," says Panichgul of the collaboration. "She gets my sensibility and I get hers. I mean, she's naughty when you think of her work, but when you meet her, she's the total opposite, warm and easygoing. What's interesting to me is a sex appeal in something that's not perceived as such. I find that much more interesting than if you can read an open book."

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