

# Fantastical, Wild and Free

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Lenticular bulbous eyes, crushed paper napkins and grilled branzino somehow coexist in the eccentric universe of surrealist designer Leeann Huang.

Bamboo tencel Blinking Eye tank with TPU rubber, and cotton and TPU rubber skirt Leeann Huang

A skirt that flashes a smile. A dress adorned in sequins made of oranges. A tank top with a shrimp cocktail that morphs into a dirty martini. This isn't a sartorial reimagination of what it'd be like to jump down the rabbit hole of *Alice in Wonderland*, but rather, the fantastical creations of Los Angeles-based surrealist designer, Leeann Huang. A look at her colourful and transformative garments, it's clear why the 28-year-old Central Saint Martins graduate has been endorsed by fashion disruptors like Cardi B, Lil Nas X and CL. For example, Huang's signature



house fitted with a Barbie-styled bed and plastic vanity. Her mother was a musician, piano teacher and ballroom dancer. "I had very fun parents and grandparents," Huang said. "All of them are artists in their own spirit and life." On Saturdays, she would crochet and make dolls with her grandmother, instilling a lifelong appreciation for handicraft. Later, this would be fine-tuned with stints at Chanel's textile and embroidery division, Maison Lemarié and Maison Margiela. Today, Huang blends these experiences into her brand's characteristic textile-first approach

that allows surrealism to be two-fold. Huang also strives to re-envision traditional methods with more sustainable materials. "I want it to be recognisable enough that people know what it is but in terms of fabrication, it makes people look at it twice and be like, 'What is that?'," Huang explained. While at fashion school, she was made aware of the health and environmental risks of PVC plastic, a material commonly used in lenticular products. This prompted her to develop a more eco-friendly TPU rubber textile alternative that she now uses as a base for her designs. For similar reasons, her garments leverage on deadstock fabrics. "It doesn't make any sense for me to make new fabrics considering that if I dig a little deeper, I'll find a perfect fabric that I can make use of," Huang said. Despite being happy-go-lucky, Huang has admitted that her journey as an independent has not been all

lenticular pieces compel you to move to appreciate its full effect. Depicting wacky imageries inspired by food, eyes and her adolescent experiences, it's hard not to get an instant mood-lift seeing her 1960s style mod coats, geometric bags and Mary Janes in motion. "It's a kind of unencumbered sense of joy I want to convey through my work," Huang shared. "The same way you would feel the purest sense of joy when watching your favourite cartoon or playing your favourite game as a kid." Her childhood experiences have wired her to have fun. According to Huang, her seamstress grandmother lived in a doll-like

sunshine and rainbows. "It's made me resilient," Huang shared. "I've learnt that I don't fit into traditional fashion unfortunately, but this is also a blessing in disguise." Beyond her namesake label's upcoming *Vol 3*. collection due in early 2024, Huang has embraced a flood of opportunities that have come from outside the fashion world. At the end of 2023, she was invited by *Watermark*, an art gallery based in Seoul, to showcase her lenticular work. Furniture is another area she's venturing into. She created custom cushions for an architectural firm as well as a wall installation of a giant eye for an eyewear store. "There



are so many fun ways to incorporate surrealism using materials,” Huang said. “It makes life so much more fun and dynamic.”

**MANIFESTO: What was a formative moment that sparked your love of fashion?**

LEEANN HUANG: My art teacher in high school would play documentaries on different artists and designers. I remember watching one on Marc Jacobs and I found the entire lifestyle and lifecycle of having a fashion brand so inspiring. Just watching people be so heavily passionate about doing one thing and selflessly trying to pursue beauty – it gave me life.

**M Your designs reflect joyful childhood memories. What were you like as a child?**

LH As a child, my brother and I were very wild. We were almost feral children. *(Laughs)* We were not the typical Chinese family. My parents made sure we were always out and about either at a museum, on a road trip or going to a party. So as a child, I had a lot of energy and I wanted to do anything in pursuit of fun. I could never sit still!

**M You completed your formal fashion education at Central Saint Martins. What was your biggest takeaway from these experiences?**

LH I really defined what I liked, what I liked to make and how I wanted to carry myself in my career and life. Growing up, I always wanted to be the best at something or get an A. It’s a very Asian thing. But going into that school, there is none of that. There is no rubric to go by. The only rubric is: Are you satisfied with what you’re doing? Are you pursuing something that will make you happy? And as long as you’re happy with it, you’re doing something right. They want you to define your own manifesto and values, which is really important. It was a very freeing experience.

**M Surrealism is evident in your design language. Do you have any surrealist creatives that you look up to?**

LH Some of my biggest inspirations come from 1980s and 1990s Italian designers. They’re so colourful and wild. They always reference classical work but put their own modern spin on it like Franco Moschino. He literally made fun of fashion all the time but still made really chic pieces that people could wear everyday. For me, his work is very surreal but so fun and beautiful. Also classic artists like Salvador Dalí or Méret Oppenheim. They took something very recognisable but used a very unexpected material or image with it. I feel this is one of the main methods I use when I think about making things.

**M Your Vol. 3 collection is coming out soon! What were the key inspirations?**

LH A lot of it was inspired by how I – well, how everyone – was living in 2020. We all started living our lives more online, you couldn’t do much of anything else. That’s why the new collection has a lot of seductive stock imageries ranging from fish to plates to fruits. It was sourced from my stock photography or collaging actual stock photography found online. It’s kind of making sense of virtual fantasy.

**M We also noticed a lot of references to table settings. What inspired this?**

LH I wanted to also create a surrealist virtual dinner table. I often have dinner parties with my friends, so I got little bits of inspiration from that. For example, my friend who is not familiar with American culture had never tried a shrimp cocktail before. It’s my favourite food. He ordered it and was so disappointed. *(Laughs)* He thought it would be an actual cocktail! That inspired my shrimp cocktail T-shirt.

**M What about the development process? Did it differ from past collections?**

LH I wanted to combine my two most well-known elements for this collection. In 2018, I developed this very food-heavy collection like a surrealist dinner. It was also featured in a book called *Food and Fashion*. I started to veer away from that because I didn’t want to be pigeonholed into being like the *food designer*. For my Master’s graduate

Polyester Crushed Orange Blossom Napkin top, cotton and glass Orange Leaf earrings, and TPU rubber Fruity Flora heels [Leeann Huang](#)







Polyester Crushed Orange Blossom Napkin top, and cotton and glass Orange Leaf earrings  
Leeann Huang. [Opposite] cotton polo shirt, cotton Big Seam skirt, cotton and polyester  
Chef Toque hat, and TPU rubber Landscape heels Leeann Huang





collection, I started developing the lenticular textile stuff. Then I started getting pigeonholed as the *lenticular girl*. *(Laughs)* I realised, wouldn't it be fun to combine both of these elements? There is so much fun imagery and playful ideas that can come from that. For example, my friend inspired the use of a wine glass imagery in the new collection. She is constantly refilling her wine glass. I started gathering these little moments from life and making them into patches or little prints that I can put onto clothing.

**M    About your lenticular textiles, we noticed new takes in this collection such as your lenticular flip skirts. Tell us more about this.**

LH    I had this idea for a very long time but had no idea how I was going to do it. As my work became more popular online, people have been asking for a tutorial on how to do lenticular, but doing a DIY video of that is actually quite boring. It's just me Photoshopping images, slicing it up and then printing it out – that's it! I also can't explain it to people in a way that makes sense, so I started doing a paper analogue version of how lenticular works which is essentially two images on alternating pleats. I realised it would be a cute pleated skirt.

For my prints, I usually take two contrasting images and juxtapose them to get the dramatic effect. I wanted to also show the motion. So with the mini skirt that is smiling, I took a photo of my own lips smiling and then closing. Similarly, the other classic skirt print uses a lacy table cloth and a photo of an actual table. The actual mechanism [of the skirts] took inspiration from these old blinds in my house!

**M    You're also exploring smaller lenticular patches on cotton shirts and silk midi skirts. What motivated this evolution?**

LH    In the past, the full lenticular garments were very popular but I know they are very difficult to wear. Even I wear them only on special occasions. Having more traditional fabrics like cotton satin or silk taffeta as the base, then adding lenticular elements

as a nice little polka dot or square embroidery, a central patch or a specific placement print – it was just me trying to work around keeping the heavily creative elements and balancing it with wearability. Also, when I was a child, I had lenticular patch T-shirts. I think a lot of people had some variation of that... it's really rare to see these days. I started making them and they became really popular with my friends!

**M    In past collections, your designs leaned towards 1960s silhouettes with clean and simple lines. In Vol. 3 however, we're seeing more voluminous pleated silhouettes as you've mentioned. Tell us more about this.**

LH    The initial inspiration with lenticular textiles and my previous collections was 1960s mod. I wanted something very utilitarian, iconic and clean. It was very much inspired by utopian design but now, I want clothes that are very focused on textiles and how textiles would naturally perform. For example, the pleated crushed napkin look was actually an idea I had eight years ago in college. I was super inspired by food and Issey Miyake at the time and I started doing all these crushed textile samples. I started collaging them and naturally, it became its own organic shape. For this collection, I wanted to play with different styles and silhouettes. Some are very wearable like the simple midi skirt and simple tank top but I wanted to also make it more dynamic so there are different options. Also, the ideas I had kept going and going, and I guess I couldn't stop too. *(Laughs)*

**M    A pair of eyes is another signature motif. What about it that captivates you?**

LH    One of the first lenticular pieces I got was a postcard from my dad and it was of someone winking. I always thought it was the coolest postcard. Also, when you search up lenticular prints, one of the most iconic things is the eye. It's so natural to go that direction when you do lenticular pieces and I've been trying to develop it more. For this collection, I wanted to bring more reality and colour to it. A lot of the stock imagery I saw had bright blue eyes

Upcycled acrylic Rainbow Beaded Flower top | Leann Huang







Upcycled acrylic Rainbow Beaded Flower top, cotton Strawberry jeans, and TPU rubber Rainbow TV Stripe heels Leeann Huang. Casting BRENT CHUA; Hair and Make-up MIN HONG; Model XUN SEON AT SUPREME

that were blinking. So I started taking very close-up shots of my friend's eyes. I liked how bulbous it looked, almost like a fish eye. It was also kind of inspired by a 1997 Prada collection where they did embroidered skirts using unlikely materials like mirrors. Kind of drawing on the same idea, I thought I would use the eyes as very subtle polka dots on skirts so unless you pay attention you wouldn't know what's going on.

**M We've talked a lot about your key visual codes but sustainability is also central to your work. How has this evolved in your new collection?**

LH Nowadays, I'm trying to make sure every element of my business and production is sustainable. Always making new things is inherently not ecologically friendly but there are ways we can at least try to make it better. It's kind of an overwhelming thought process honestly but I can't not think that way – that's just how my brain works now. I think that's how a lot of people in our generation think. It's about tracing the source, using second-hand products where possible, making them beautiful, and also making sure that the fabrics are being taken care of after they reach the customer.

**M Tell us a bit more about the beautiful beaded tops in this collection. How has sustainability fed into this?**

LH I wanted to make beaded tops because I have a lot of beading in my background. I was trained at Maison Lemarié and I've always loved really meticulous techniques like beading. For me, it's so satisfying to work for hours doing the same repetitive motion and seeing it eventually grow into a beautiful textile. I sourced vintage beads to make them. The beads are very nostalgic as they are decorative elements on toys I used to have as a kid. Whenever I find something like this while sourcing and shopping around vintage markets, it's like a treasure trove. When I saw it, I immediately knew what I could make from it.

**M Your pieces are handcrafted and some are made-to-order. Why is this important to you?**

LH For me, creativity comes from personal experiences and your own vision. I come from a handmade and couture background. So for me, making these pieces are a labour of love. There's also such a human element to handmade stuff. It's so special and I always want to have this element in my work. Made-to-order is also a little bit more sustainable!

**M What role has social media played in the growth of your brand?**

LH It's a great tool to connect with people you typically wouldn't usually connect with, but also, a way to do things however you want, at your own pace and using whatever method you want. Honestly, it's very freeing to not have to abide by fashion schedules and things like that. I can make a collection when and how I want. It makes the quality higher too.

**M You started your independent brand at the tailend of the pandemic. What challenges did you face?**

LH As a small business owner, honestly you're just going to struggle all the time. *(Laughs)* Because the work is so personal, it's hard to not take things so personally even though you have to separate yourself away from the product at the end of the day. It's definitely something that I struggle with.

**M What advice do you have for aspiring independent fashion brand owners like yourself?**

LH My advice would be to do whatever feels right for you. I've tried to fit my work or business into a certain format but for me, it didn't work and it felt so forced and stressful. Just do what makes sense to you because you have the luxury to run your own business as you have a vision and know what values you want to uphold. It's important to find ways to stick to your guns... it is your passion and at the end of the day, you want to be able to do your passion for the rest of your life.

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