

As the revered design lead for Uniqlo, Naoki Takizawa is redefining the idea of bare essentials as he strips away anything that threatens to impinge on the brand's famed "Made For All" ethos.

BY ADELE CHONG

For Naoki Takizawa, simple can also be complicated. Fortunately for the Tokyo-born fashion designer, this *raison d'être* continues to prove indispensable when it comes to his day job. As the head of design for the utilitarian high-street brand Uniqlo, Takizawa and his team devote endless time and energy to fool-proofing clothing staples and evaluating what everyday basics mean for different people. There's also the question of affordability—oh, and can it actually survive that first spin cycle? It's a whole lot to ask of a mass-produced t-shirt but judging from Uniqlo's soaring popularity amongst even the most discerning fashion palates, Takizawa appears to have it down to a science.

The *modus operandi* may not be unique—The Gap more or less pioneered the original formula and with a rising number of brands adopting a less-is-more stance to trendy casuals, Takizawa doesn't exactly have his work cut out for him—but if the increasing number of Uniqlo flagships throughout the globe are of any indication (there is reportedly one store opening at every given week somewhere in the world) then he must at least be on the right track.

Minimalist and refreshingly free of embellishments, each outlet, regardless of its context, is distinctly evocative of the clothes. Methodical without being austere, the interiors are imbued with a blank slate-like quality that has become starkly symbolic of a new generation of savvy, iPhone-wielding shoppers drawn to functional materials and easy customisation. Walking into a store, one is immediately entranced by the democratic nature of the space; there's something undeniably comforting about its non-specificity, reinforced by tidily stacked wares, expansive white walls and the earnest glow of purposefully diffused fluorescent lights. Friendly young staffers receive patrons with a peppy "Welcome to Uniqlo!" and while the greetings are systematically dispensed, this automatic act of collective happy-making regardless, does much to heighten the brand's appeal, leaving one feeling suspended in a kind of brightly coloured, urban idyll where Heattech lounge pants are proffered with a discount and a smile. Here, utility is celebrated as a form of utopianism, culminating in the perfect backdrop for Takizawa's cozily streamlined designs.

From the onset, at least, the Takizawa-Uniqlo pairing feels like a match made in brand heaven. Brought in by the company's founder Tadashi Yanai in 2011, Takizawa was initially lured by Yanai's vision "to design for everybody around the world, and not for segmented people." Having held impressive roles at Issey Miyake and Helmut Lang—experimental fashion houses that struck an unabashed appeal to the "segmented"—he embraced the idea of designing for legions of Uniqlo fans as the ultimate creative challenge. "I wanted to realise [Yanai's] ambitious idea by using my experiences and acquired skills, which were cultivated by designing for Issey Miyake and other brands," he says.

At Miyake's atelier, where he honed his craft for 27 years, Takizawa developed a keen awareness of how different fabrics would affect his clients' varying lifestyles. It's a skill that would translate nicely into his role at Uniqlo as he made the transition from luxury labels. In crafting the brand's collections, Takizawa continually regards "people" his main source of inspiration. "The most important thing is to find out the 'needs' of consumers," he says. "Thus, the designs come about from various angles of research. We consider [wearers'] nationality, body type, as well as the feeling of the general public."

Indeed, nowhere is Takizawa's talent for processing personal idiosyncrasies more evident than when one's life is suddenly made easier through say, a comfortably structured sleeve punctuated with a thumbhole for easy maneuver when one's other fingers are curled beneath the fabric for warmth, or seamless underwear made from smart fabric that dries in a pinch when washing on the go. And although critics jeering "Unibare"—a Japanese slang insultingly inflicted on Uniqlo enthusiasts for their unoriginal dress sense—might dispute this, the chic factor nevertheless exists in these simple solutions and the way they have come to perpetuate the logic of intelligent casuals, giving wearers an edge where run-of-the-mill equivalents fail to deliver.

Along with the thrill of creating designs that divine a precarious balance between practicality and desirability, the opportunity to work with Yanai also sweetened the deal, says Takizawa, who describes his time at Uniqlo as "inspirational". "All my emotions are stimulated," he declares of their work dynamic. "I'm constantly pacing myself as we move towards new stages that appear one after another."

Given this talent for riding the wavelength of fluctuating trends, it's difficult to envision Takizawa in any other vocation. Asked if he'd ever seen himself as anything other than a designer, he reckons that he'd be a good science fiction writer. Though his tried-and-true ability to tap into the ritualistic ongoingings of strange new worlds might very well prove him right, it is somehow tempting to imagine him more of a hopeful alchemist prodding unfamiliar compounds for results and undergoing rigorous distillation processes that slowly but miraculously give rise to pure gold.



PHOTOS: COURTESY UNIQLO

(OPPOSITE) Naoki Takizawa. Uniqlo jeans spring/summer 2014.

Uniqlo