

# Woolmark Prize Asia Semifinal Winners Named

The labels I-Am-Chen, Youser, Yohei Ohno, and Angel Chen will move on to compete in the finals in early 2019.

By Bennett Marcus on July 6, 2018



**HONG KONG** — It's certainly intimidating for a young fashion designer to speak in front of a roomful of editors, buyers and industry heavyweights, and doubly so if they cannot speak English. That was predicament facing two of the four winners named at the Woolmark Prize Hong Kong 2018/19 semifinals on Thursday.

But both of the non-English speakers managed to find the words at a dinner at Aberdeen Street Social, where designers Zhi Chen of I-Am-Chen, Mooyeol Lee of Youser, and Yohei Ohno and Angel Chen, each of whom have eponymous labels, were chosen to move on to the next round of the global competition.

"I never expected this, so I'm just surprised now. Thank you so much," Japanese designer Yohei Ohno told the crowd with a stunned laugh. Earlier in the day, Ohno had conducted interviews accompanied by an interpreter.

Mooyeol Lee, who heads up South Korean label Youser, managed to say: "I never expected this honor, so thank you so much." Lee had no interpreter, so to speak to the press about his brand he'd come equipped with a written statement in English.

Lee said winning felt like a dream, and his head is already swimming with ideas for the finals, which will take place in early 2019.

The four finalists were selected from a field of 13 nominees whose mission was to create a capsule collection incorporating wool, with the theme of sustainability.



*The International Woolmark Prize 2018 Asia nominees*

Angel Chen said she was shocked to make it to the finals because she had not worked with wool in previous collections. "But wool surprised me," she told WWD about her collection inspired by the female divers of Jeju Island, off of South Korea. "This is very important for a designer. It's like discovering a new territory, discovering a new land. This is just really amazing."

The neoprene that the deep-sea diving women wear led Chen to research ways to use wool as a fiber for swimsuits, so she developed woolen fabrics that can be worn in the ocean and are machine washable.

She also developed woolen fabrics that are light and breathable, and can be comfortable for Hong Kong's sticky summer weather, explaining: "I live in Shenzhen, next to Hong Kong, and it's impossible to wear wool in summer. So it's really sad. The purpose of this collection is to show people how merino wool can be used as a fine fiber for summer weather."

Zhi Chen of I-Am-Chen said her win was unexpected particularly because her label is so new; she's been in business for 16 months. "Last year I was still in school, and this year I'm getting this, so it's really meaningful for me," she said. It was also the first time Chen had used so much wool in a collection.

Her inspirations for the capsule were Agnes Martin, the artist, and a new knitwear machine from Japan that revolutionizes the way in which she can make knits, without stitching. "It's my first time working with this machine, there are only like 200 in the whole world," she said. "So I spent time learning to understand the machine, and how can I use this technology for this collection to create a new idea of how wool is presented.

"When I think of merino wool, I think of the sweaters my grandma made, but I wanted to create something completely different," Chen added. Pieces like a long coat are made as a whole-piece using this machine, reducing the human touch, with no seams and no waste.

Yohei Ohno utilized vintage woolen fabrics that he discovered when visiting mills in Japan's Bishu region. "I found old textiles, from over 30 years ago. That's where I got the idea of creating new suits for women made from these old woolen materials," he said through an interpreter. The fabrics appeared fresh and new to him, and his inspirations were architecture and furniture, and vintage garment photos.

"I was not just thinking of making clothes, I was thinking about making some product between architecture, design, and clothing," he explained. "I used the old-fashioned fabrics to make new style suits for the modern, talented woman."

In his written statement, Mooyeol Lee explained the name Youser is a combination of the words "You" and "User," motivated by "a philosophical ideal about the importance of the relationship between the designer and consumers." Youser's main ethos is communication, and he looks to art, culture, country and history to communicate with consumers.



*During the judging process.*

"It was not something decided earlier, but the winners are from Korea, Hong Kong, China and Japan," said juror and designer Rahul Mishra, noting the diversity.

"The Japanese brand was influenced by the design philosophy of architecture and furniture..." Mishra said. "This girl from China [Angel Chen] had the oriental kind of embroidery on street separates, which make them look more special."

Another juror, Tawny Leung, Lane Crawford women's wear buyer, said the four winners were actually her top picks. Lane Crawford, in fact, recently started working with I-Am-Chen, and Leung was a fan of her take on knits. "She's done knitwear so it looks woven. I think that will just really help her develop her collection where she's able to do not only knit jumpers and coats, but skirts, dresses – everything, and she really will be able to reach a wider customer," she said.

For Youser, Leung said: "He used opposites, and his colors were amazing, and his sketches were really great. It's a very unique take on streetwear, and streetwear is doing so well for men's right now."