

# GRAPHIC EXCHANGE

The It-girl of the Hong Kong design scene, Whitespace's Danielle Huthart is the creative brain behind some of the coolest looks and logos on the block.

Text by Debbie Soo



Whitespace's Sheung Wan offices are decked out with contemporary minimalist furnishings – mostly in white, as might be expected. Colour comes from hundreds of books on shelves lining the walls and whirling black ceiling fans. It's a busy Tuesday morning and staff at the creative agency click away on iMacs on long white tables. An old piano that once belonged to founder Danielle Huthart's grandmother graces the hall.

Huthart is the creative power behind Whitespace, which is fast becoming one of the leading branding and design agencies in Asia, providing a growing client list with identities, websites, books, exhibitions and more.

In Hong Kong, the firm recently rebranded popular Vietnamese restaurant chain Nha Trang, and its clients include fashionable names such as BRAT sausage restaurant, JIA Boutique Hotel, W Hotels, Joyce, the Hong Kong Ballet and avant-garde performance group Zuni Icosahedron.

Huthart is breezy in pink pants, white shirt, glossy, wood-framed glasses that complement her close-cropped hair and expressive eyes, and bracelets from one of her hip clients, jewellery store The9thMuse. She strikes a solid balance between friendly yet professional, important yet understanding.

"I was born and raised in Hong Kong," she says. "I'm half English and half Chinese and went to an American school. Growing up here was very international, dynamic and cosmopolitan – I had friends from all around the world, I travelled a lot and had the opportunity to see a lot of different things.

"From a young age, I was interested in art. Both my parents are very creative and they gave me the freedom to do and pursue what I loved. I was exposed to a lot of art, but I didn't really discover design until I was in high school."

Huthart attended the Hong Kong International School and then a boarding school in Monterey, California.

"Santa Catalina School had an amazing art programme," she says nostalgically. "You'd spend six hours in an art room, just staring at an apple. You had to make sure you interpreted it correctly, and then you had to translate it. That's one of the crucial things I learned there, that the most important thing for an artist is to observe the things around you and to take what you see and re-visualise to make it into an art form."

It was there that Huthart also discovered graphic design, and the combination of art and communication won her over entirely. After school, she headed to New York to study at Parsons School of Design, and stayed in the city for nine years.

"New York was great because I got to try out a lot of different things. It was one thing to learn design in school, but another to be practising it in a real studio and work environment. I loved my first internship and I just kept thinking to myself, 'This is what I want to do. This is the environment I want to work in. This is my career. I could do this forever'."

Huthart stayed true to her dreams. She returned to Hong Kong in 2003, and started her own creative studio two years later. Entrepreneurship is in her blood; Huthart's sister is Michele Li of The Wedding Company and her cousin is Kevin Poon of urban lifestyle brand Clot.

"Coming home to Hong Kong was an opportunity to pursue design on my own terms," she explains. "I was exposed to so many facets of creativity in New York and I found in Hong Kong that there wasn't a studio I felt was doing interesting things or that I had a connection with. Whitespace was born as a combination of all the amazing, cool and interesting places I worked at in New York."

In Hong Kong's competitive F&B landscape, a solid brand identity is what can help a place stand out, as places with strong personalities like Yardbird, Lily&Bloom and The China Club continue to attract a steady stream of customers.

**"When we develop a brand identity for a restaurant client, we ask ourselves if it communicates what the concept is about in a clever and interesting way. Is it smart? Legible? Unique?" Huthart explains. "We also want it to be authentic to the whole experience. A good restaurant's brand identity tells you what it is, yet gives you something to think about and leaves you wanting to come back – not just for the food, but for the entire experience."**

Despite her expertise, Huthart says she decided early on that she wasn't in this for the money.

"It's important to know how to say no and to not take on too much," she says about juggling projects at Whitespace. "You have to make sure you are always doing projects you are passionate about and believe in. It's important to work with like-minded people. Part of our success stems from the fact that our aesthetic at Whitespace is strong – people come to us because they see our work is clean and modern, simple but not simplistic."

Huthart's passion for what she does is almost tangible as she describes her work and design history.

"I find myself very fortunate to have chosen design as my career," she says. "I have an eye, passion and love for design that I found early on and never strayed from. People say you need a balance between life and work ... but when you love what you do, it's all the same thing." ■

## My Favourite Things with Danielle Huthart



**What is your go-to breakfast food?**

I'm a big fan of almond croissants but I don't eat them everyday. I'm a very simple juice and yoghurt kind of person.



**Which restaurants have great brand identities?**

Pastis, Balthazar (pictured), Sant Ambroeus, La Condesa and Butterfield Market, all of which have worked with New York's Mucca Design studio.



**Best eating experience overseas?**

A friend took me to Momofuku Ko in the East Village for my birthday a couple of years ago. David Chang was there and we had an incredible meal.



**Coolest restaurant in Hong Kong?**

The Night Market because the whole thing has been considered, from the brand identity, to the plates, to the green rustic walls.



**Do you have any other passions besides art and design?**

I have always loved books and writing. In fact, I have a second degree in writing and literature.



**Would you say you are spontaneous?**

I got a comma tattooed on my pinky on a whim in Paris. I think it's a beautiful symbol – a break between two things that also acts as a connection.