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The Tommy Zhong label, established in September 2015, is jointly owned and operated by Jiaqi Zhong and Jennifer Nelson.

## **\*interview**

**Their focus is on creating original, modern, timeless, versatile, and tailored pieces. Instead of working from a sketch, the duo lets their independently made fabrics dictate the design process. Inspiration is also sourced from vintage London threads, of which only the rarest and most interesting make the cut. The a+w 018 collection achieves *“pure garments with elements of darkness”* through the use of dark floral prints atop silk organza, draping, and layering juxtaposed with sharp, exaggerated silhouettes, and a hint of menswear via checked jacket patterns + tailored shirting.**



Who is the Tommy Zhong woman?

The Tommy Zhong woman is a product of many influences in her life. We imagine her to be like a young punkish Edie from “Grey Gardens” but in modern times. As in, she has these bourgeoisie influences, loves rich textiles, old school classic shapes but also has a real artistic and youthful spirit.

How important do you think contrast is to art and design? Talk about the role that it plays in your work and specifically the “gothic version of floral” for your AW18 collection.

I think contrast is a fundamental part of design. Designs are a result of a contrast between one’s thinking and your environment. We like the challenge of taking something that is perceived as old or classic. For example, we look at a lot of Vogue’s from the 50’s for shapes and then we’ll make a jacket inspired by this very sculptural shape in a black patent leather or some modern fabric with raw finishings to turn it around.

References to the brand’s Eastern heritage and aesthetic are explored through shape and silhouette. Do you find this more effective than overly literal interpretations?

We think that Tommy’s Eastern heritage to the brand is more about another way of viewing things and interpreting visual cues. As we are from different cultures and have grown up in different environments, we think different things are beautiful. That can be more interesting when expressed into silhouettes, as you are coming from another viewpoint. It may not be as obvious to the viewer as traditional Eastern imagery, but it is there.

In your fabrics-first approach, how do you balance your lightweight, flowing fabrics with more structured elements or pieces?

Actually, we’ve only really started to use lighter fabrics in recent seasons, our earlier collections were more “hard” but as time goes on we want to explore the more romantic side of the woman we’re designing for and balance out the lightness with more structured pieces.

We were a bit scared to over-feminise the collections before, but we’re finding more ways to keep our edge whether it’s through darker gothic prints, frayed edges on a garment, etc. But saying that, we love structured tailoring: silhouettes with big sleeves, dropped shoulders, tailored waists, padding at the hips to give it that architectural shape around the hip-waist, etc.

As a brand that handmakes their fabrics in house, do you see fast fashion as slowing down?

Yes, I think there is a growing consumer consciousness about the environmental effects of fast fashion. People are beginning to prioritise quality that will have a longer life in their wardrobe. In that case, we have to make a product that is more specially crafted: our main goal since we started the brand. We also try to collaborate as much as we can with local mills and artisans on our textiles. This season, we worked with Alice Timmis, a textile designer we have worked with before, on hand weaving and Irish embroidery.

The AW18 collection employs collage techniques inspired by American visual artist Nancy Spero. What is it about her work that you love? What is it about her artistry that fits your brand?

We were drawn initially to the technical style of her work, as she had a very hands-on approach. Particularly we were drawn to the collage pieces, mixing hand printing, and collaging techniques. The cut and paste imagery and composition of female figures on various backgrounds inspired us to be more free and mix textures and fabrics within garments. We also found her ethos embodies the Tommy Zhong woman’s punk spirit. She was primarily a feminist artist and drew her female figures for the collages from ancient iconographies, such as pagan goddesses and amazon warriors. So her work and these figures she was inspired by, in turn, inspired us.

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How has the Tommy Zhong woman evolved? What remains consistent?

The brand evolves parallel to the Tommy Zhong woman and the needs of her will change over time. Our collections broaden and become more in depth as she evolves. Although the core values of who she is: a lover of unique textiles, classic shapes and sharp tailoring, doesn’t change, the presentation has. It’s a more relaxed but mature and finished vision. We hope that they are pieces you can wear day to day rather than overly complicated fashion pieces.



