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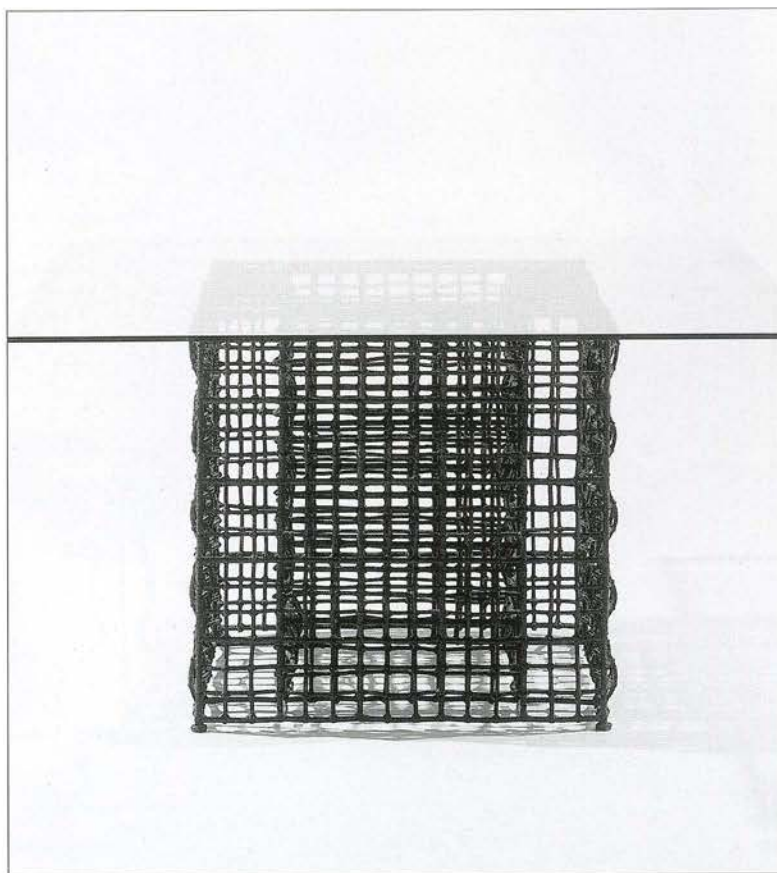
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cover story

DOYEE

GRACE UNDER PRESSURE



Kenneth Cobonpue's design's have become conversation pieces built for style and with style

by DIANNE ARNIE P. NICOLAS

NOCTURNAL DREAMS

Everything seems either so ordinary or uninspiring after a visit to Kenneth Cobonpue's furniture showroom. Modern yet classic, Kenneth's paradoxical designs go over the top in ingenuity and resourceful innovation.

"Each of my designs has a story", says Kenneth for each of his designs has a name. "The bed is called Voyage, because that's my interpretation of sleep. I've named others Luna, Suzy Wong and Nobu, each for the things they represent", explains Kenneth. But why name a piece of furniture Suzy Wong? Simple. Because "the Suzy Wong sofas, with their extended backs and private screens, box you in and evoke a sense of intimacy", says Kenneth.

Collecting awards from the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York, *Katha*, *Mugna*, Japan and Singapore design competitions, Kenneth's hands have crafted furniture pieces that have taken the West by storm. Judging by the rage in reviews and full-length articles in Time magazine, Newsweek, Elle Décor, Surface, Washington Post, LA Times, Maison Française and other

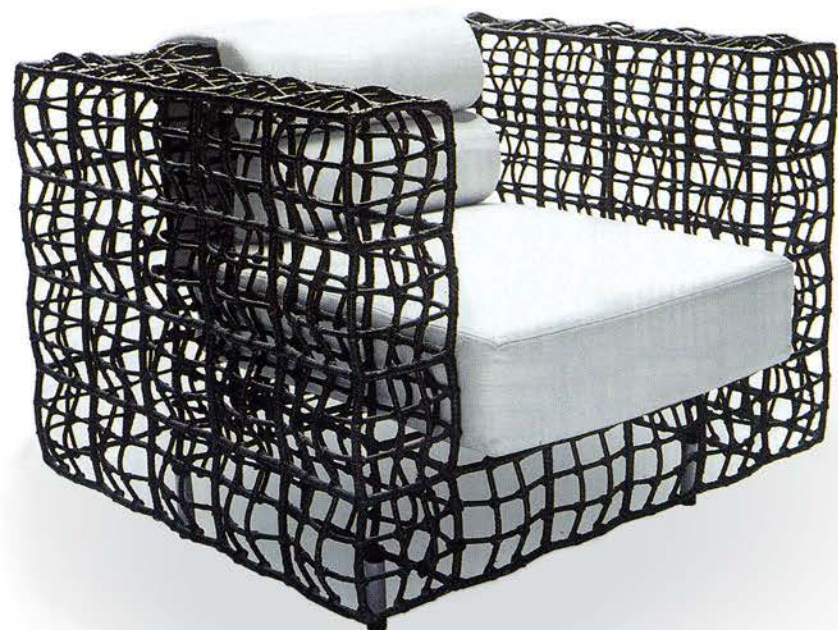
international publications, the storm is still very much in the radar.

What does it take to break into the international market?

"You have to have the right", Kenneth simply says. And that right he was born with.

This 36-year-old Cebuano pride, Ten Outstanding Young Men of the Philippines awardee and Perlas Award for Outstanding Cebuano 2004 awardee, grew up with the smell of lacquer, wood and varnish. Son of famous designer Betty Cobonpue, he, after 11 years in the academic world, took over the Interior Crafts of the Islands, Inc in 1997, a family-owned company that have been exporting furniture since 1984.

His academic journey began in the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City, as a Business Administration student. After two years, he shifted courses and addresses. Kenneth took up Industrial Design at the Pratt Institute of New York where he finished with summa cum laude honors. After that, he apprenticed in a leather and wood company in Florence, Italy and



earned certificates of completion for furniture marketing for Europe and basic woodworking machine courses in Germany.

Despite and after all these, Kenneth's philosophy remains simple. He wants to create pieces that are both beautiful and functional. Something he can achieve with his favorite tool, his hands. Designing pieces that are ideal for wide spaces, providing both accents and conversation pieces for homes that are built for and with style.

Like jazz, Kenneth's furniture designs are sophisticated. Thanks to his expertise and discerning eyes, never before have indigenous materials like rattan, abaca, bamboo and buri been put to improvisatory yet technically adept use.

Kenneth's works, inspired by nocturnal dreams and diurnal, "can sit beside a modern Italian sofa."

A besotted man once said of a woman, "I don't understand her but I love her". He could as well be talking about jazz. And, like jazz and women, Kenneth's works are not immediately perceptible, but effortlessly fascinating.

His most famous chair, the "Pigalle" named after the red light district in Paris, easily resembles a woman. Made of steel and hemp, it is a woman curved delicately yet coiled tightly inside so that it is stronger than it looks. This highly accented design, like most of the Kenneth's furniture pieces, is completely made from local materials.

In fact, some of his designs have been around for seven years and are still being hand-woven to meet the demand of 26 major distributors all over the world.

Yet, Kenneth remains restless. He still dreams of designing for international companies and expanding his brand, a brand that is proudly Filipino. Kenneth, sleek and confident, steers away from play-it-safe Filipino designers who dissociate themselves

from the Philippines for fear, perhaps, of the country's unsavory image abroad.

This has paid off handsomely. Kenneth continues to gather growing respect as he leads Movement 8, an alliance of 12 award-winning designers and manufacturers representing the Philippines in major exhibitions and shows abroad.

Playing seer, Kenneth intones, "Designs will always follow fashion", "Asia will play a major role with the emergence of China as a new power. As Asia rises to economic power, designs will follow", he adds.

However, Kenneth foresees that there will be "a lot more use of the synthetic material because natural materials are dwindling". This means that even Kenneth will have to look beyond Cebu for the materials for the new furniture designs.

Closer to home, his advice for those who want excellent design for their homes and offices but don't know where to start, "design is a lifestyle component. Choose a look that fits the way you live".

As Kenneth is still building his home which is being designed by Budji Layug, everyone is asking, how will it be like? "It will be simple, minimal, clean and modern. The materials will be cold, but the interiors will be warm", Kenneth reveals with a smile.

RELOADED OPPOSITE PAGE FROM LEFT Kenneth Cobonpue foresees the use of synthetic materials because natural materials are dwindling; Yin and Yang side table with glass top. **THIS PAGE FRO LEFT** Yin and Yang chair with white upholstery seats; the Segovia easychair.