

THE STRAITS TIMES

Iconic kebaya gets a modern makeover



Local adaptations of the kebaya at the recent Singapore Fashion Council gala. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI



Louisa Lim

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SINGAPORE – A two-piece denim outfit, a sculptural white dress and a jumpsuit with Nonya beadwork – these were just some of the kebaya-inspired looks spotted at the Singapore Fashion Council's (SFC) inaugural gala dinner on Oct 12.

Held at Pan Pacific Singapore in Marina Bay, the event was part of the Singapore Stories showcase, which has been organised by SFC since 2018 as a platform for local designers to display their talent.

The gala drew style enthusiasts and tastemakers, who turned up to show their support for the local fashion industry.

The 2023 theme, *Kebaya Re-imagined*, commemorated the reopening of the Peranakan Museum in February and the National Heritage Board's bid to inscribe the iconic garment onto the Unesco Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in March.

Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and Thailand jointly nominated the kebaya and a decision is expected in 2024.

“Singapore Fashion Council is honoured and grateful to be a part of the rapidly evolving and increasingly vibrant industry. We are placing the spotlight on the timeless elegance of the kebaya that has transcended time and space, and honouring its symbolic heritage and style,” said SFC president Wilson Teo.

The gala culminated in a runway show by 31 local fashion designers, who put their contemporary spin on the garment.



A fashion show featuring the kebaya-inspired creations of 31 Singaporean fashion designers at the Singapore Fashion Council gala at Pan Pacific Singapore. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

The top five winning designers – as voted by the attendees of the gala – were student Madhushah Samy, fashion brand Ans.ein co-founder Anseina Eliza, Meiko Tailor stylist Adele Chung, architect Cassandra Lim and creative director Kavita Thulasidas, who represented Indian boutique Stylemart.

See the winning entries at Design Orchard at 250 Orchard Road until Dec 31.

Madhushah Samy, 24

Design practice student at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts





Model May Siu Lim in Madhushah Samy. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Inspired by the colourful flower motifs seen in kebaya from the 1960s and 1970s, design student Madhushah Samy breathed new life into the traditional garment with a “bustier” worn over a bodysuit to give it a contemporary silhouette.

“The primary goal of my collection is to bridge the divide between tradition and modernity,” she said.

Anseina Eliza, 38

Co-founder of Ans.ein





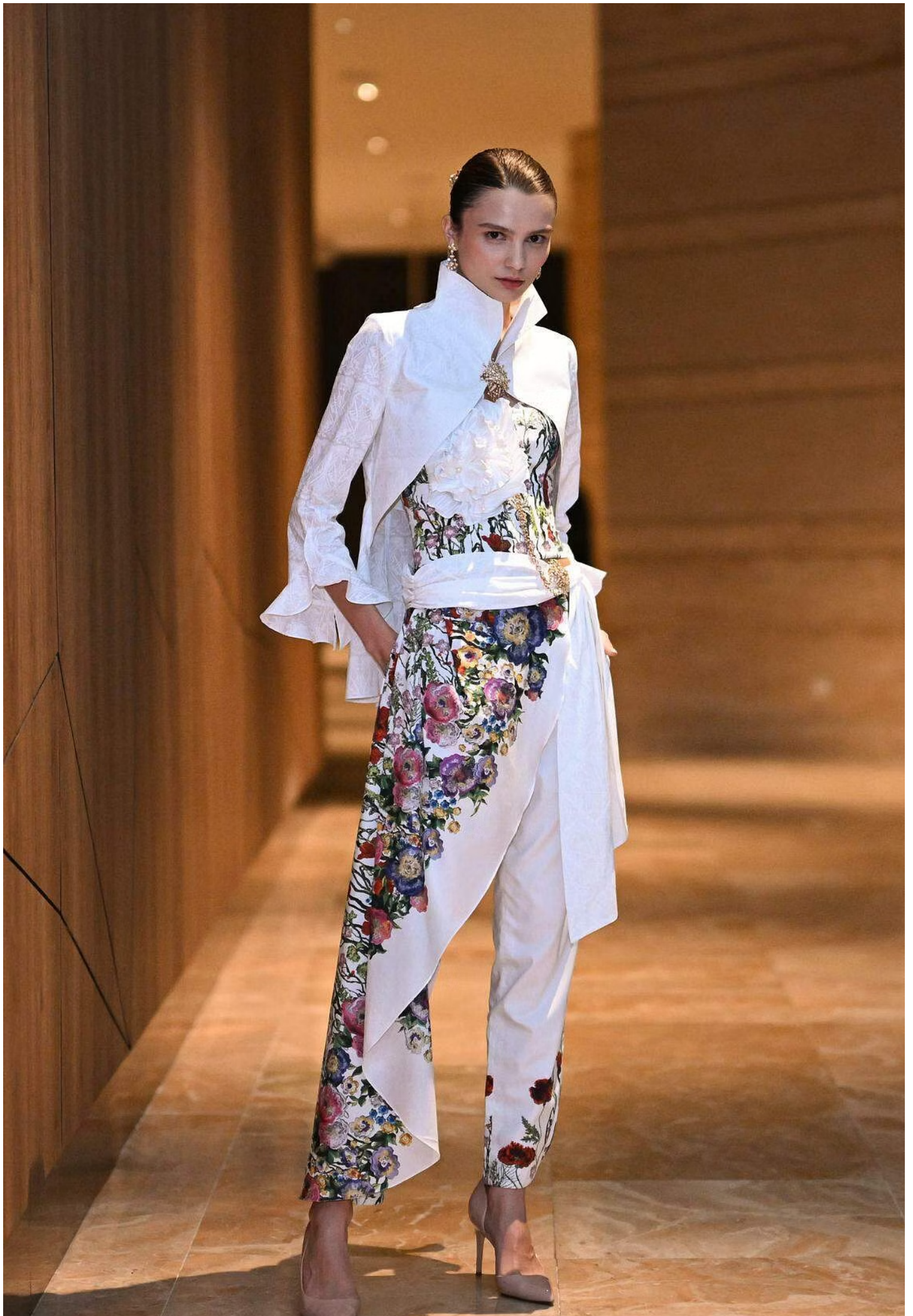
Model Melanie Jane Fernandez in Ans.ein. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Crafted from leftover fabric scraps that would have ended up in landfills, designer Anseina Eliza's kebaya was an eco-friendly masterpiece. The co-founder of Singapore fashion brand Ans.ein cut the scraps into modular pieces and employed individuals with special needs to assemble them to form an intricate pattern.

She said her kebaya carried a special message: "It's not just about fashion, it's about tackling global issues like reducing waste and helping people with special needs."

Adele Chung, 47

Clothier and stylist at Meiko Tailor





Model Elina Avdieiva in Adele Chung. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

With her background in menswear tailoring, clothier and stylist Adele Chung created an ultra-feminine power suit for women by using cotton prints as her main fabric, similar to the traditional kebaya.

The outfit – a bolero jacket over a jumpsuit – is elevated with laces and applique embroidery to give it a touch of glamour.

Kassandra Lim, 31

Architect at Urban Redevelopment Authority





Model Julia Sobol in Cassandra Lim. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Local architectural landmarks inspired designer Cassandra Lim's floor-sweeping kebaya with a ruffled skirt, which has a less constricting silhouette than the traditional version.

She acknowledged that the conventional floral motifs might not resonate as strongly with tastes as they did in the past and swapped them for geometric patterns that represent landmarks such as Golden Mile Complex and People's Park Complex.

Kavita Thulasidas, 49

Creative director at Stylemart and eponymous label Kavita Thulasidas





Model Luca Marie Scholz in Kavita Thulasidas. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Veteran designer Kavita Thulasidas aimed to breathe new life into artisanal craftsmanship by incorporating batik applique, and threaded and beaded embellishments into her creation. The winning outfit was a glittering kebaya that draped beautifully around the body.

“My kebaya seeks to rekindle the craftsmanship of South-east Asian regions, merging it with intricate embroidery techniques traditionally passed down from generations but now are at risk of fading away,” said the creative director of Indian boutique Stylemart and her own label Kavita Thulasidas, whose first collection debuted at Paris Fashion Week in early October.

Special mention

Leonard Cheong, 40

Founder and creative director of Finix





Model Opera Tang in Finix. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

The kebaya by home-grown athleisure brand Finix's Leonard Cheong drew inspiration from his "athflow" (athleisure meets comfort and flow) aesthetic and gender-fluid approach. By incorporating the design from Finix's best-selling pieces like the Noragi Jacket and Harem Jogger, he was able to construct a sporty four-piece ensemble.

The surprise, however, was in the details, such as the wrap vest that transformed into a unisex top and harem pants that opened up to reveal a flash of batik.

Sabrina Goh, 38

Founder and creative director at Sabrina Goh





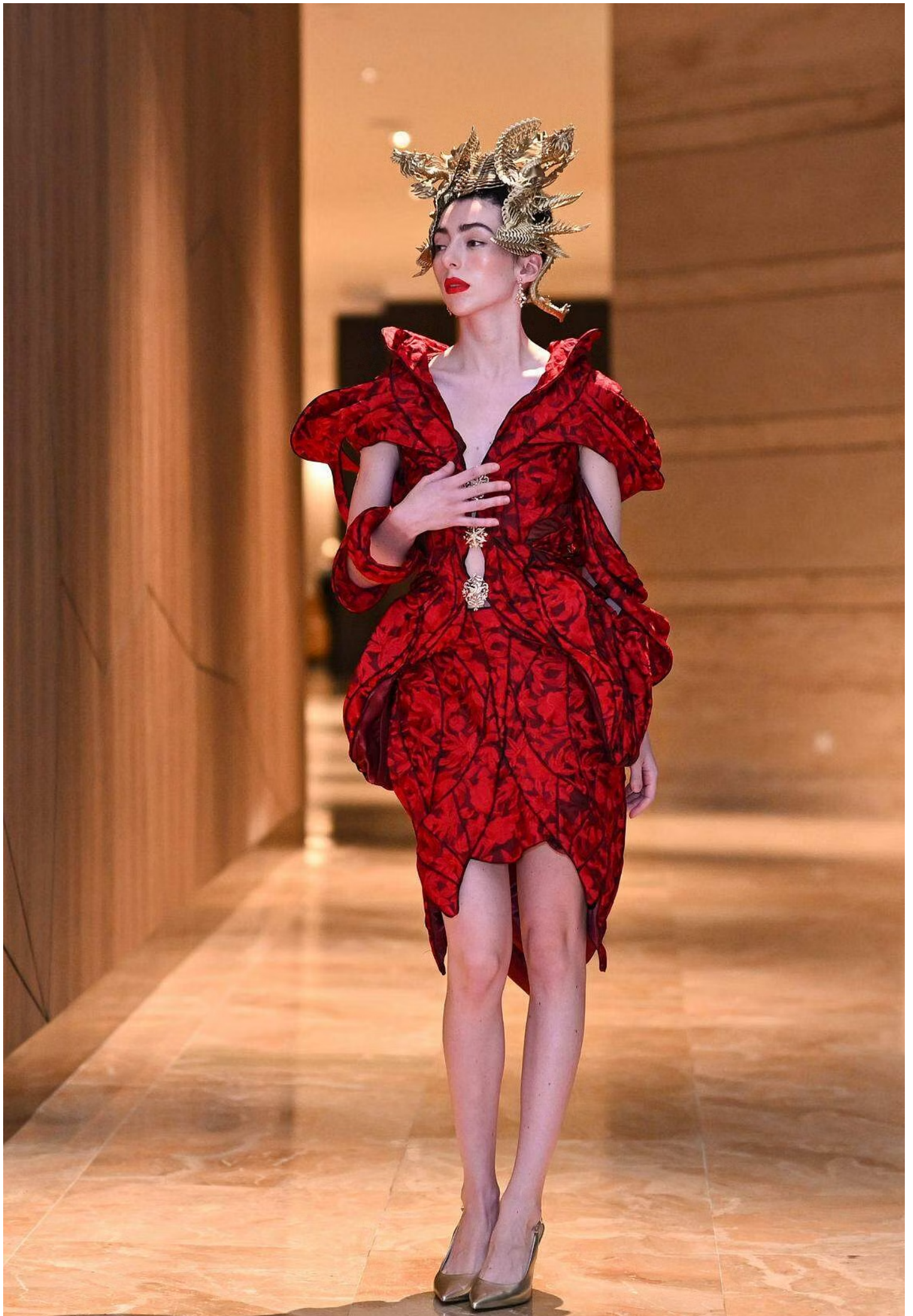
Model Duan Mei Yue in Sabrina Goh. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Using hand-drawn batik, designer Sabrina Goh created a sculptural kebaya by deconstructing the sarong. She designed a pleated skirt using the parang batik motif, pairing it with an oversized modern cropped shirt.

“This piece also serves as a celebration of creativity and heritage, redefining the kebaya’s role in fashion by uniting tradition and innovation,” she said.

Jamela Law, 31

Founder and creative director at Baelf Design





Model Magdalena Szymanek in Baelf Design. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

Home-grown label Baelf Design's Jamela Law stayed true to its ethos as a 3D wearable art brand by designing an avant-garde red kebaya with an equally elaborate headpiece.

"The Baelf aesthetic is often futuristic and always pushing the boundaries in both visuals and techniques," she said.

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