

CHICAGO ARTS & CULTURE



Taste the Fierce Flavor of Chicago Drag Superstar Kim Chi

Her high-fashion inspiration and elaborate makeup made her a fan favorite in *RuPaul's Drag Race's* eighth season.

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As drag scenes go, Chicago's is known for its heightened artistry and developed sense of irreverence. The most recent drag queen to erupt out of Boystown into international stardom is Kim Chi, who was one of the top three finalists on Season 8 of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which wrapped up last week. The world came to find Kim, the stage persona of 28-year-old Sang-Young Shin, to be even more extraordinary than the fermented cabbage dish from Korea after which she is named.

Drag Race—which has aired on Logo for the better part of the past decade—is a reality elimination-style competition television program hosted by Supermodel of the World and gender-bending matriarch RuPaul that searches for “America’s Next Drag Superstar.” At the start of this season, one hundred queens have appeared on the show, and time has proven that it’s not only the grand prize winners who go on to greatness. As Ru tweeted last week, “Your soul is made of stars. We are all stars.” Ru Girls—queens whose careers were launched from being on the show—have elevated

drag into savvy and fantastical brands by releasing music and videos, apparel, makeup, perfume, and global tours.

Spoiler: Chicago's own Kim Chi didn't take the final victory this season. But she is already on tour and sharing her unique blend of high-concept fashion, South Korean cultural references, and polished makeup artistry (she currently has more than 373,000 followers on Instagram where her cosmetic genius is on frequent display) with drag enthusiasts all over the country.

Kim enchanted audiences this season not only with her elaborate looks inspired by designers like John Galliano and Gareth Pugh, but also her sweet vulnerability as she spoke openly about the process of overcoming her personal insecurities, and addressing body shaming and racism in the gay community. *Chicago* caught up with her last week, before a performance in Denver.

Who do you become as Kim Chi? What does she give you access to that you don't have out of drag?

Kim Chi is a live-action anime character who works as a high fashion model. That's the persona I base everything off of. I like to incorporate outfits that are inspired by the avant garde runways, things that are cutesy, creative, and poppy. Being in drag has opened so many doors for wearing traditionally feminine fashion. Playing with makeup is an opportunity to develop a bunch of different looks.

When did you first start experimenting with cosmetics?

It was Halloween about three years ago. I was friends with Pearl [another Drag Race alumna formerly based in Chicago]. She was going to try drag for the first time, and she asked if I wanted to do it, and I said sure why not. It's just escalated from there. Everything I do is self-taught.



PHOTOS: ADAM OUAHMANE

More so than most of the queens who have been on the show, you are deeply inspired by haute couture runway fashion. Who are your favorite designers right now and why?

Definitely Guo Pei. Ever since Lee McQueen died, I feel like she's the next McQueen of our generation. Just in terms of the artistry and the avant garde-ness of it all, there's no one to compare to her right now.

At the finale, you wore one otherworldly fantasy after the next. Did you work out ideas for those garments collaboratively with the different designers? What were your inspirations for those looks?

Yeah. Honestly, I started dreaming up those looks ever since I got home [after taping all but the finale episode of the season]. They've been in the works since then. The red carpet and opening look was created by Diana Li. Our inspiration was a fairy coming out of a hyacinth flower. The performance and interview look was created by Tiger

Lily. We wanted a modern take on a traditional Korean *hanbok* that was super dramatic and took up a lot of room. The final crowning look was created by Dallas Coulter. There was a dress from Dior Couture 2007 collection worn by Shalom Harlow that I fantasized about wearing since I started drag. Dallas made my fantasy come to life!

Tell me about your new single and makeup for Sugar Pill.

The single is a complete joke. Every year during the finale, Drag Race queens release a disposable music track as a single. I wanted to poke fun at that tradition by making one that is as stupid as possible and doesn't make any sense. So yeah, I have a new single called "Single." [giggles]

And for my collaboration with Sugar Pill, the very first product we released this week is a teal eye shadow that I picked the color for. The second product will be coming out shortly, and I'm going to keep it a secret for now.

Throughout the season, you proved how hard you were willing to work at challenges that were far outside of your comfort zone. What were the most difficult moments in the competition?

Probably just dealing with other personalities on the show. But honestly I had a blast throughout the whole experience. It wasn't so hard; it was a lot of fun.

Anime is a big inspiration for you. What are some of your favorite titles?

Madoka Magica, Death Note, and Another. Soul Eater is also really good.

In the political campaign challenge you confronted prejudices within the gay community, often expressed as "no fats, no femmes, no Asians," and during the finale, you based your anthem around addressing this problem. Tell me more of your thoughts on this issue.

I've never really met up with anyone on hook up apps, but I've used the apps before to just see what's available out there. Seeing things like "no spice, no rice" or "no fats, no

femmes, no Asians,” just feel like jabs, as if someone has decided what they think about you before they’ve even had a chance to meet you.

In one episode, judge Ross Matthews said that your drag could shift how we understand the art form. You are much more than a female impersonator—where would you like to see drag evolve to?

Bob [the Drag Queen, fellow competitor and winner of the season] said it best: The only thing about drag is blurring the gender line and creating art.

Several times during the season, you opened up about your insecurities with feeling fat and unattractive. What would you say to viewers who are struggling with self love and confidence?

Once you learn to love yourself and stop listening to other people’s opinion about you, life just becomes a lot easier. Accepting that you’re a beautiful person is the start to discovering happiness.

What are your current inspirations? What new fantasies are you eager to make into looks and performances?

I saw a picture of a bobbit worm, which I think will be a really interesting look to make. It’s this worm that lives underground in the water.

If readers new to drag want to explore Chicago’s drag scene, where should they begin? What are your favorite shows and parties?

Oh my gosh! Chicago drag. There’s something wonderful for everybody. Whatever you’re into—pageant drag, dancing drag, freaky drag—it’s all there. If you want to go to a fun dance part and hang out with queens who are dressing really cool and club kid, you should go to the Neverland Parties. And at Berlin Nightclub every Saturday, Trannika Rex has a show called Drag Matinee where she books a whole variety of queens. There’s a good mixture and it’s a great show.

Who are some of your favorite Chicago queens?

Oh god! There are so many! Naomi Smalls [who also made it to the top 3 on Drag Race Season 8] just moved to Chicago. She lives a few blocks away from me, and it's cool having one of my best friends from the show so nearby. And Trannika is my number one homeboy.



PHOTOS: ADAM OUAHMANE

<https://www.chicagomag.com/arts-culture/May-2016/Kim-Chi-Drag-Queen/>