

“PEOPLE’S CHOICE” RENOLD YIP

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A few of the nearly 7,000 area cyclists who attended the North American Handmade Bicycle Show in Richmond, Va., the last weekend in February may have recognized Renold Yip from his years as a mechanic and bike fitter at a Maryland bike store.



BUT CLEARLY TODAY most were totally mesmerized by the bikes he now handcrafts one by one from his workshop in Colorado.

There’s no doubt that when you’re looking at a handmade bike, you’re looking at a work of art, but for Renold Yip the functionality of his bikes is the art. Fit, ride quality, and design for application are at the heart of YiPsan Bicycles.

Winner of the “Best City Bike” and “People’s Choice” awards for his Sunflower Bike presented at the 2010 North American Handmade Bicycle Show, Yip’s creations stand out as moving masterpieces.

Building frames since 2005, YiPsan Bicycles was conceived as a way to continue the craft of frame building in a single-person workshop. Started in 2007 on his philosophy of “modern fitting concepts, modern materials, traditional techniques,” he builds with mostly hand tools; his only power tool is the hand drill. As he says, “It’s not the most efficient way, not the quickest way, but it’s the best way to put your ideas and details into a hand-built bike.”

Trained as an engineer, not an artist, Yip received a degree in Manufacturing Engineering from the

University of West of England in Bristol, England. He returned to his native Hong Kong and pursued a career in this field, then as a quality management system consultant until moving to Seattle in 2002 for his wife’s job.

Not just her “arm candy” as he jokes, this is where he first delved into working with bikes as a career, forming a home-based bike repair service. Yip saw it as a service to the community and says he “learned a lot about American cycling habits.”

Though it might seem like a complete departure from his previous life, Yip says he first started to play with bikes when he was a teenager taking apart and putting together his BMX bike.

Another move in 2003 brought Yip to Maryland where he worked at All American Bikes in Damascus. Yip worked there through 2006, honing his skills as a mechanic and fitter. During this time Yip began to tinker with building frames and eventually went to the United Bicycle Institute’s (UBI) frame building school in 2005. He then upped his skill set by training with Serotta Bicycles at their New York factory and became a certified bike fitter.

In June 2006 Yip and his wife moved again, this time to Fort Collins, Colorado where he started offering his YiPsan Bicycles in 2007. Yip notes, “While I started building frames in 2005, the practice of two years was very important to me and my customers.”

Working alone, creating about 15 custom bikes a year, Yip explains that his process really starts with the non-artistic stuff (i.e., fit). As he says, “A custom bike that does not fit is simply a piece of metal decoration. Having the fit right is crucial.”

This information, along with other important factors such as riding purpose, terrain it will be used on, and desired handling traits are used for designing the bike. Working with steel exclusively using traditional lug or fillet brazed construction, Yip makes all styles of bikes (road, cross, randonneur, touring, commuting, and off road) as well as custom stems, forks, racks, and seat posts. Yip notes, “Only after these functional aspects are taken care of can we look into the more artistic side.”

Take, as example, the award-winning Sunflower bike. Created for Tom and Danielle Rinker, owners of Bicycle Escape in Frederick, Md., Yip worked closely with Tom Rinker to achieve not just a bike that fit, but one built on Rinker’s artistic vision.

Rinker knew Yip from working with him at All American and already owned a few of his bikes saying, “I knew him when he was making frames on the side and when he started selling them commercially I had confidence in them because I knew Renold and I know he’s meticulous and comes to it from an engineering background.” Rinker adds, “His bikes have a nice balance. We’ve talked about this often. He gets the functional art aspect of it. Some bikes are more art than function, but that’s not what he’s about—he’s 100% about what the bikes supposed to do.”

What Rinker needed he says was a “mommy bike.” “My wife just had a baby about eight months ago and we didn’t have in ideal ‘mommy’ bike for biking around town.”

Danielle Rinker had suggested a stock hybrid, but for Tom who considers bikes to be “a beautiful artistic expression of something I love,” that just wouldn’t do.

The only desire Danielle Rinker had was for the bike to be inspired by a sunflower; Tom notes that it’s meaningful to them and made perfect sense. Rinker contacted Yip and got the process going.

Both being bike fitters, Yip and Rinker speak the same technical language and with those specifications taken care of, they could explore the bike’s artistic features. Yip notes that those generally come across in “mostly the paint scheme, but also on the metal work I would consider adding features—a one-off cable hanger, the seat stay cap finishing, or lug shapes and cut outs.”

Rinker says that designing bikes is something he enjoys and used the sunflower as inspiration for the bike’s yellow and cream palette noting, “If you look at the bike you’ll see that the center of the wheels are black, like a sunflower.”

Beyond the paint job, Rinker wanted a unique bike basket which he needed to convey to Yip.

“In these areas I usually ask for a free-hand drawing,” Yip says. With Yip’s craftsmanship and Tom’s vision, the end result is a flower-patterned wood mosaic and the Rinkers couldn’t be happier.

To Rinker, “The Sunflower bike is a functional piece of art—the crank is customized, the chain guard looks classic with modern influences. We picked colors and components that flow together.”

To his wife, Danielle, who was kept mostly in the dark until the final unveiling, “It’s perfect.” To Yip, it’s what custom hand built frames are all about saying, “The artistic features can transform a seemingly common looking bicycle into a one-off, a personal,

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special, and in many occasions, the talking point in the future. Since my bikes are all built with a specific rider in mind, these one-off features also create a special connection with the owner of the bike.”

Yip believes that a custom bike is the ultimate choice for fit and function. “While a production bike is very rideable and may fit most riders relatively well, a custom bike will fit 100%. Plus the tubing size is also chosen individually for each customer so it is optimized for its design, not just geometrically allow the rider to position well, but also allow the bike to respond as desired with the input from the rider.”

Drive train response and handling are two of the key areas where customers can express their desires.

Yip also notes that being a certified fitter allows him to communicate on the same level with other fitters and the results obtained from a fitting session. Rinker believes that this is one thing which sets Yip apart saying, “We do a lot of custom bike fits [at Bicycle Escape] and Renold is very meticulous when it comes to the fit and that’s important to us. He understands the language of the fit and can make the bike to very specific specifications.”

While the process generally takes a few months and a few thousand dollars (Rinker estimates \$3,500 and up), Yip says “his customers are cyclists who can appreciate the finer details and subtle differences. They appreciate the connection with the one person who has built the bike from start to finish and they value the fact that the bike is made with heart and designed with them in mind.” He adds, “They’re passionate about cycling and appreciate the technical expertise required to make a bike and have it function as desired.”



Danielle Rinker (and son, Geoffrey) and her sunflower bike

Yip also believes that “in supporting custom bike builders, clients are supporting a small crafts person operating a small business which, in many ways, can hopefully revive what is left of manufacturing in the U.S.”

Yip is passionate and marks each of his creations with his distinctive logos, a circle and a square design. Yip explains, “The circular one is a stylized version of my last name, in simplified Chinese. It’s tradition to put ones last name on items that they are proud of; it’s quite similar to the use of the coat of arms. The square one simulates an approval stamp used by ancient kings to signify their approval of policies and legislature. The meaning of the four Chinese words is ‘hand made in steel.’”

On the subject of meaning, Yip’s father named him Renold after a famous motorcycle chain maker (oh yeah, Renold made bicycle chains, too!). Yip explains, “He believed that a motorcycle chain is small in size, but very efficient and important to the operation of a motorbike.” So yes, this bike maker was, oddly enough, named after a famous chain.

Of the future, Yip believes growing and improving is a never-ending process. “Just because one customer is happy doesn’t mean the next one will be.”

You can see Yip’s creations in person at the Bicycle Escape in Frederick, and maybe, if you’re lucky, you’ll catch a glimpse of the distinctive Sunflower bike around town.



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