

Wannabe decorators compete in new reality show hosted by Todd Oldham

by Cathy Lubenski

Designer Todd Oldham is such a nice guy that he didn't want to judge the contestants on Bravo's new competitive reality series "Top Design," which pits aspiring interior designers against each other in a series of challenges.

"I would've been very uncomfortable judging these people because design is such a subjective call. I was more interested in witnessing the mountain of creativity that comes out of the series," he said in a phone interview from Los Angeles, where he was preparing to meet the press at the annual Television Critics Association get-together.

DESIGN CHALLENGED - Internationally known designer Todd Oldham considers himself a mentor to the contestants in Bravo's new reality show, 'Top Design.' CNS Photo courtesy of Trae Patton/Bravo. So instead, Oldham hosts the one-hour, 10-episode competition series, which moves to a regular time slot at 10 p.m. Wednesdays, starting Feb. 7.

Oldham based his role in the series on "Project Runway's" urbane den father: "If you had to draw a parallel that would be Tim Gunn, who's more of a mentor," he said. "I get to work earnestly with the designers, I can articulate why this or that might be lovely."

The premise of "Top Design" is based on Bravo's "Top Chef" and the Emmy-nominated "Runway." Contestants from various walks of life are culled from hundreds of entries and then challenged to redecorate a space in a limited amount of time with a sometimes-big, sometimes-minuscule budget.

"Any of these contest reality shows are very challenging, but this one is 50 times harder. Just think how many elements are in a room: furniture, accessories, carpeting ... and then you have to build the design," Oldham said.

The assignments sound benign: Design a bedroom, create a dream family space, design a high-end modern hotel room, but like "Project Runway," the fun usually starts when the challenges have unexpected twists. One episode requires the contestants to use "uncommon materials," another includes a visit to the beach where "the sun and sand will turn out to be the grounds for another challenge."

"In every episode something bizarre happened - that happens when you put that many people together in a pressure situation," Oldham said. "The contestants go after each other once in a while, but that's the footprint of this kind of program. It can be funny, these guys are cutting and clever, but it's a pretty sophisticated show."

The contestants' completed projects are rated by a panel of judges who eliminate the losing designer, while the winners move on to the next challenge. Serving as judges are Jonathan Adler (lead judge), a nationally known designer whose home accessories are sold in Bed Bath & Beyond; Margaret Russell, editor in chief of Elle Decor magazine; and interior designer Kelly Wearstler.

Oldham is impressed by the 12 contestants' talent level. "Their taste level and their abilities are off the chart. Because the age ranges are from the early 20s to the early 50s, there are so many different points of view. One contestant is from the Far East and he brought so many flavors into his designs.

"The variety of experience and age is the backbone of all the amazing explosions of creativity."

Oldham, 45, is one of the country's top designers. Although he claims Dallas as his hometown, his family is originally from the South and the frequent "ma'ams" sprinkled throughout his conversations are testament to his upbringing. "That's the way we were raised, to show respect," he said.

Oldham's family was financially "challenged" for a while when he was growing up. He said, "I remember digging pennies from the back of my car to buy a burrito. I've never lost sight of the challenge that people have with money."

Oldham started his career in fashion and then branched out into home decor, designing for Target and, currently, a line of furniture and accessories for La-Z-Boy.

His designs have been described as retro, but he said, "I think my design is more of an American look, although I do love the periods of the '60s and the '70s, which were very colorful." Plaids and stripes are two of Oldham's signature looks, and he plans on incorporating both into future designs. "When I bleed, it must be plaid. I think I have plaid in my DNA."

Not content with "limiting" himself to home decor and television, Oldham is designing flower arrangements for FTD, and has a book about Charley Harper, the 85-year-old surrealist artist, coming out in June. He also designed The Hotel and the Fairfax Hotel (scheduled to open in 2007), both in South Beach, Fla.

Oldham's creative zeal extends to his home in northeast Pennsylvania, where he gardens. "There are many, many acres of garden, it's a monster," he said, laughing.

"It's gotten out of control, but I love the passion of creativity."

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