

THE BEAUTY PHENOMENON

KOOKY GOES MAINSTREAM

Who would have predicted it? An Asian nation better known for reliable cars and smartphones started delivering a different hi-tech aesthetic to create an industry worth \$2.5 billion last year alone. We've all read about it, now finally the weird stuff's landed here. Olivia Falcon reports

AMONG A NETWORK of neon and themed shops in Seoul, I find Barbie-pink doll's-house boutiques, salons with fully loaded bars and DJ decks, and towering skyscrapers of green living walls. This is Myeong Dong, the neighbourhood where South Koreans come to find the world's hottest and most coveted beauty products: Erborian's Bamboo Crème Frappée, a blend of traditional herbs with a sorbet-like cooling effect, just the ticket for flustered summer skin; Genuine Glow, which makes balms guaranteed to give you '*kwang*', an almost surreal radiance that is supremely desirable. They even have a term here for the sought-after sticky feeling following product application: *chok chok*.

Cartoon-motif sheet masks and moisturisers infused with snail enzyme and starfish extract are all part of South Korean women's elaborate 10-step beauty routines designed to give skin the suppleness of Kobe beef. At the capital's beauty counters, I'm rolling up my sleeves and trying Skinfood's Gummy Bear hand creams, which smell so good I could lick them. There are panda-eyed mascaras at Tony Moly and the Basquiat-like graphics of the Dinoplex range at Too Cool for School, two brands scheduled to land at Selfridges this summer.

It is boom time for the South Korean 'K-beauty' industry. There are now 10,000 brands on the market, far outpacing the rest of the world, and it's beginning to get disorienting. What makes the South Korean vanguard so smart is the speed of development; a product can move from concept to counter in months.

They are also marketeering magicians. Take Moonshot, which is owned by YG entertainment, the same people who brought us Psy and his (whoop, whoop) 'Gangnam Style'. Moonshot makes coveted jelly-pot eye shadows – and the face of the company? Tapping into the gender-bending look, it's a boy. G-Dragon is the young BB-cream-wearing frontman of Big Bang, South Korea's answer to One Direction. He is very pretty.

Industry giant AmorePacific, the so-called Estée Lauder of the East, has more than 30 brands, including Hera, which collaborated