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Queen of diamonds

The creative power of jeweller Michelle Ong

Romancing the stones

Hong Kong's queen of jewellery explains to Fionnuala McHugh how her brand has been built on a partnership of creativity and business savvy.



It's the day after the United States presidential election. Wall Street hasn't responded to the Democrat-elect with quite the same fervour as the crowds in Chicago; the Bank of England has felt compelled to cut its interest rates as it shadow-boxes inflation; the Hang Seng Index, yet again, is heading south. You own a jewellery company called Carnet. Your customers aren't remotely Main Street. Your one-off pieces can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, they're sold at auction-houses and worn – by Kate Winslet, Glenn Close, Teri Hatcher – on the red carpet. How do you feel?

"Everything else is collapsing so fast," agrees Michelle Ong Cheung, mildly. It's exactly a year since she opened her first Carnet boutique outside Hong Kong at Bergdorf Goodman in New York. "The queen is here!" cried the store's chief executive, Jim Gold (sic), about that glittering arrival.

"We were the stars, I tell you. Now, we hear, it's quiet, a little slow ... But we feel lucky. We're small. We can concentrate on one thing."

"As far as we're concerned, maybe to be small is to be big," says her business partner, Avraham (Avi) Nagar. "And we never borrow money."

Ong, 51, grins over at him. They're sitting in the Carnet offices in Queen's Road Central. Apart from the double-door security entrance and some subdued photographs, gleaming in a tastefully low-key manner on the walls, you wouldn't know you're in the headquarters of one of the world's most respected jewellery designers.

"But we also have the Napoleon complex here," she says. Nagar, who is not a tall man, laughs. Such public banter is the hallmark of their relationship. "When he wants to expand, I say no. There are tens of thousands of shops around the world. I'm realistic. If he wants to expand and sell more things, why not? But he can't do it without the back-up. I must make sure I don't compromise. I don't care about anything else."

It helps, presumably, to have survived previous meltdowns. Officially, Carnet is 10 years old, which means that it was launched during the Asian financial crisis. Before that, Ong's work appeared under the title Dorera, a name which she hated – it came from a shelf company – and Nagar, naturally, loved. "I changed the name when I was solid enough with my own style," she says, "when it was me, not a mish-mash."

From the outset, the partners have depicted

Photographs by Gareth Jones

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Michelle Ong: she doesn't settle for second best

themselves as opposing forces heading, by some commercial miracle, in the same direction. They met at a Diamond Importers' Association (DIA) function in 1983. In 1979, Nagar had arrived in Hong Kong, from Israel, to check out the diamond-wholesale business for a month. He'd rented an office in Queen's Road Central.

Twenty-nine years later, he's still sitting in the same corner, only now he owns it. "To live in Hong Kong is a punishment," he says, "because afterwards you can't live anywhere else."



At the same time, Ong – who had not yet married her surgeon husband, David Cheung – had just graduated in sociology from the University of Toronto and was working in the diamond business about which, she says cheerfully, she'd been pretty clueless. Her parents are both doctors (her mother would go on to deliver Ong's three children) and knew little about jewellery – "They have to scrub up, you know, so no rings". But their daughter was just beginning to see design possibilities in the brilliance of precious stones.

Despite the fact that they weren't on the same table at the DIA's dinner, and despite the fact that she says she thought he was a barbarian (or an extra-terrestrial or Rasputin – the descriptions vary), the pair hit it off. Nagar tried to sell her a packet of diamonds and, two years' later, they went into business together: Nagar as the financial mind in the corner office, Ong as the creative force and exceptionally glamorous public face.

"The secret is in the partnership," he says of his backroom role. "You don't impose. The ego will carry you nowhere. I analyse the Chinese. They are what they are because they're patient. I'm Israeli, I'm impatient. I've had to train myself to wait for the other person to blow up." He pauses, glancing at Ong, who's elegantly eating dried plums. "With her, I need special skills."

"Don't flatter yourself," she responds; then, in an aside, "He's trying to get me to be more patient and calm."

Ong can certainly be a strong-willed presence. She's been known to spend months on a single exquisite piece, abandon it and start again. She doesn't settle for second-best in any aspect of her life. Joel Rosenthal, whose JAR jewellery designs are considered among the best in the world, wrote in the preface for an exhibition of Ong's work at Glasgow's Burrell Museum: "It is a terrifying and memorable

scene, listening and watching as she orders a meal." It's possibly no coincidence that he also describes her work as "mouth-watering".

Clouds, dragons, fruit, butterflies, anemones – her eye spins fantastic collusions between nature's organic shapes, stone and metal. The intricacy of her designs means that 10 per cent of the Carnet collection is made with titanium: the weight of gold or platinum would rip the delicate dresses to which they're pinned. It's also why she has her own workshop in Hong Kong. "If I didn't have that, I couldn't do it," she says. "Other workshops, they want to do a hundred pieces in a week rather than two pieces in two months . . . If you have an assembly line, there's no soul in it."

Still, in recent years, certain retail imperatives have been met. In 2003, in the wake of Sars, Carnet opened a shop in Chater House. Being tiny, and discreetly placed, it managed to please both partners. Ong could convince herself that "my little jewel-box" wasn't a major creative threat; and Nagar had the fiscal satisfaction of attracting customers who might otherwise have hesitated to visit the office.

At the same time, Carnet was stirring interest in Hollywood. Ong designed four pieces for the 2006 film of *The Da Vinci Code*, including the vital Fleur-de-Lys Cross Key (the one lurking behind a Da Vinci painting in the Louvre).

The attention encouraged them, at the beginning of 2007, to open another shop, in Prince's Building. In response to client feedback, they've also launched a watch line, for which there's currently a waiting-list.



"We're brave, we've come a long way," says Ong, as she's about to have her photograph taken. "This guy has no fear, really."

"It's not only me," says Nagar. "Everyone in the world has to be like this now. You have to build new targets. If you've had a fantasy, you have to wake up. If you can't do that, God help you."

"Avi! I can't smile!" calls Ong from in front of the camera.

"Think about me," replies her partner, affably standing in the doorway. (In an undertone, to the photographer: "She looks a little too serious.") "See, she needs a boost . . . It's a small job but it's a big job. You can't impose, that's the secret. You have to know that all the problems in the world today are a result of the ego." NW



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