

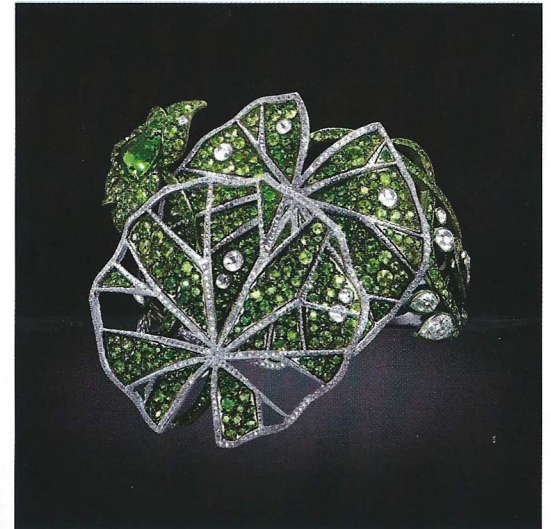
FLIGHTS OF FANCY

JEWELLERY

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AS JEWELLERY DESIGNER
MICHELLE ONG CELEBRATES
HER 25TH ANNIVERSARY
IN BUSINESS, WE TAKE A
CLOSER LOOK AT SOME OF
HER EXQUISITE CREATIONS

Words *Maria Doultou*



‘Her jewels, like all great pleasures, are devoured in one bite of the eye and remain unforgettable... a free hand making things we have never seen and will keep-see forever.’ This is how Joel Arthur Rosenthal, the jeweller so famous he is merely known as JAR, describes the work of his friend Michelle Ong, the woman behind the ultra-exclusive Hong Kong-based jewellery house Carnet by Michelle Ong. These carefully chosen words are from JAR’s preface to the book celebrating 25 years of Ong’s work.

Ong’s jewels are exuberant, expressive and awe-inspiring, yet every time I have met the impeccably dressed and perfectly colour-co-ordinated, bright-eyed, sparrow-like Michelle Ong, she is almost shy to talk about her work. She lets her jewels do the talking. And what jewels. Stare at them and like a master painting it is difficult to image how they could have been made, because Ong’s jewels are objects of rare device that turn the hardest materials like diamonds, into things of tantalisingly impossible beauty. Diamonds cluster on a necklace as effortlessly as dew drops on a sun-shot cobweb at frosty dawn. Billowing Chinese clouds hang as tenuous in the air as a wreath of smoke and ethereal flower petals dusted with precious stones appear light enough to flutter in the slightest breeze. A lone baroque pearl becomes a fluffy cloud drifting through the sky.

But how does she do it? Perhaps it is her ability to combine a cloud-gazer’s imagination with an uncompromising attention to detail. Michelle Ong didn’t start out as a jeweller but began to make her own when she couldn’t find any that she liked. What started as a hobby flourished and with time, and along with her business partner Avi Nagar, Carnet by Michelle

Above, clockwise from top left: Sunburst earrings in platinum, with light yellow and white diamonds; Azure Lattice bracelet in platinum and titanium, with diamonds and sapphires; Sparkling Lotus bangle in platinum, with white diamonds, green garnets and emeralds; Dancing Anemone brooch, in platinum and titanium, with green garnets, diamonds, emeralds, pink sapphires and amethyst, all price on application, from Harry Fane (harryfane.com). Below: Michelle Ong started her company Carnet when she failed to find any jewellery that she liked



Ong gathered an elite set of deep-pocketed clients who understood the genius of these jewels. From the very beginning, Ong has always had her own workshop, which she believes is key in achieving the seamless transfer from inspiration to finished jewel.

‘I make no compromises with my jewellery and I am very adamant that I need time to have my vision and to realise it. As you know, I like to control everything from the earliest step to the finished piece,’ says Ong. She will sit with her craftsmen for as long as it takes to get a piece just right. And one of Ong’s jewels can take months or even years to make. ‘Beautiful jewellery must always be a fantasy. I have a vision and then we work on construction. I never limit my designs. I don’t call myself demanding but I know what I want and I get it.’

This rigorous approach led her to start using lightweight titanium 17 years ago, before the material was as accepted in fine jewellery as it is today. ‘The materials I use are a means to an end. That is how I choose them,’ she explains. Ong believes that the key to a great jewel is to create an illusion through movement and space. ‘I enhance reality by how I set the stones and create depth and dimension,’ says Ong of the complex construction of her jewels. While one piece will be worked to be as light as a leaf using titanium, others are weightier. ‘It’s quite contradictory,’ says Ong, ‘with a bracelet you want to feel the weight but you want earrings to be light.’

The colours in Ong’s jewels are so intense they have the power to eclipse the sunniest day. Or they can be so subtle that they draw us into their gentle world of half-shades and gauzy hues. In her hands, emeralds are as bright as a summer water meadow or a pomegranate reveals its glossy red ruby seeds, tantalisingly ripe and ready to eat. As well as selecting top-grade precious gems and juxtaposing them, the use of titanium, that can be treated to take on different hues, helps to create this symphony of colours.

As an artist, Ong finds inspiration all around her. ‘I don’t force it, my mind can’t be cluttered. I look for inspiration in everything around me, even from the sound of a musical note. It’s a part of me, it’s how my mind works. It’s a subconscious thing, I can’t help but look.’

Ong confides that the most important lesson she has learned over 30 years of creating jewels is to be true to her creative vision and never compromise standards. ‘Beautiful jewels are memorable. If they are perfectly crafted, they will stand the test of time. ■

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