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EASTERN STAR



Michelle Ong's exquisite designs have made her one of the world's most sought after jewelers. With a new exhibition chronicling her quick rise, Hong Kong's wonderful jewelry scene is spotlighted. By Betsy Lovit her. Photographed by Sean Donnola Jewelry photos by Anders Gramer





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o say it has been a good year for Michelle Ong would be something of an understatement. The designer and cofounder of the Hong Kong jewelry house Carnet saw her designs, if not her name, capture international attention earlier this year, when she created several key jewelry pieces for the film *The Da Vinci Code*, including the Fleur de Lys key that led to a mysterious safe-deposit box. In December her firm will open a new flagship in central Hong Kong designed by renowned American designer Edward Tuttle. And Ong and Carnet are currently the subject of a major exhibition, "Exquisite Jewels: The Art of Carnet by Michelle Ong," at the Burrell Collection in Glasgow, which opened in late October and runs through December 10. The exhibit features 100 of Carnet's pieces—many of which she begged to borrow back from clients who were reluctant to part with them. "I would say I've been very lucky lately," she says.

The show has the potential to raise Ong's profile significantly, yet her current good fortune and her growing recognition are the results of natural talent channeled through years of determination. "Michelle's success is the result of both the quality of her pieces and her personality," says Francois Curiel, chairman of Christie's Europe and the auction house's international head of jewelry. "Her designs are different from anything else you see at the moment. They have a very contemporary look, but they're also quite classical. At the same time, she is a very distinguished, elegant woman and that is very much reflected in her work." The legendary Paris jeweler, Joel A. Rosenthal, who penned the preface to Ong's exhibition catalog, is also a fan, describing her jewels as "mouth-watering" and capable of "bringing us beauty so near it here in our hand."

It has taken just eight years for Carnet, founded in 1998, to earn such accolades, though Ong has been designing for herself and friends for nearly 20 years. "Not many other contemporary designers have been able to achieve such a remarkable level of recognition so quickly," says Lee Siegelson, a New York gem and jewelry dealer who sells Carnet pieces. "Michelle is a true artisan who is involved with her pieces from conception to



production and even to marketing, with a real passion from start to finish. I think that in 50 years, it will be clear that Carnet pieces stand the test of time."

The designer's exacting vision—Ong readily describes herself as "very obsessive"—is instantly apparent in her work. In her plush gray and lilac office in downtown Hong Kong, a slight nod to an assistant starts a parade of vibrant Carnet pieces from an adjacent private showroom. The Organdy collection, first developed in 2001, combines intricate platinum work with diamonds in pieces that move with the body "like a sea of diamonds on skin," says Ong. Carnet's colorful feather brooches range from feather shapes to dragon motifs crafted from light titanium and finished with unexpected touches like the tiny flame-shaped brooches that accompany the dragons and can be pinned to look as if the creatures are breathing fire. An enormous antique pink tourmaline, meanwhile, has been transformed into a glowing pink peach that can be worn as either a brooch or a pendant. Bright flowers studded with petals made from colored diamonds, rubies, emeralds and sapphires, for example, often have clusters of



This page, clockwise from top left: A Chinese character sign; central Hong Kong architecture in Kowloon; Carnet 18K white gold and diamond earrings; platinum, titanium, pink tourmaline, garnet, pink sapphires, emerald, ruby, fancy vivid yellow and white diamond brooch, and platinum and diamond brooch; prices available upon request, +\$52-280K 0113, carnetjewelry.com. Opposite page, clockwise from top: Carnet boutique; jewelry store in the boutique; platinum, ruby, emerald and diamond brooch; price available upon request, +\$52-280K 0113, carnetjewelry.com. Selfie street scene; Kowloon street scene.

platinum stems, each topped with a tiny diamond bead. The intricate stems move ever so slightly when worn. "Jewelry has to breathe on its own," says Ong, her slender fingers moving lightly over each piece on her desk. "That's where the life comes in."

Even the backs of such pieces are thoughtfully crafted. Ong turns over a new mandarin orange—shaped brooch with the fruit made from yellow and white diamonds to reveal a beautiful expanse of gold, carefully treated to resemble the fruit's textured skin. "It's purely for the owner's satisfaction," she says. "When you buy a beautiful piece, you don't want it to be ugly even where you can't see it. I think it's the little things that determine how much you cherish a piece." (She may have a point: No sooner had the orange brooch arrived from the workshop than a customer scooped it up for \$100,000.)

Ong came to jewelry design from a rather unorthodox path. Her mother, a well-respected gemologist in Hong Kong (who delivered Ong's three children), had little interest in jewelry, so her daughter's childhood exposure was limited. It wasn't until Ong returned home after attending college at the University of Toronto that her interest in gems began when a family friend with a wholesale gem company offered to teach her about the business. The exposure to gems inspired her to



start designing pieces as a hobby, and eventually led to commissions from some high-profile friends on Hong Kong's social scene.

"In many ways, not having formal training has been an advantage," Ong says. "There are no limits in my mind about what I am able to do. I think anything is possible until proven otherwise." Ong's standards are so high that she will destroy any piece if she isn't absolutely delighted with the end result—even one that has taken years to make. "If I'm not happy, it won't work," she says. "I don't think twice about dismantling it."

Her business partner of more than 20 years, Avi Nagar, takes a different view. "I'm the one who feels sick every time she takes something apart," he says. If there is a secret to Carnet's success, it is the partnership between Ong and Nagar, a charismatic Israeli who has lived in the Asian hub for nearly 30

years. The two went into the gem wholesale business together more than 20 years ago and are now equal partners in Carnet. He handles the business side, including sourcing stones, while she focuses on creating the house's pieces, mainly one-of-a-kind designs as well as a small range of less expensive day-wear items. The partners are incredibly close, and even live in the same building. Ong, her husband, a cardiac surgeon, and their three teenage children (when not away at boarding schools in England) live on the top two floors of a high-rise in central Hong Kong; Nagar, his wife and their three young daughters live one floor below. The two interact with the familiarity of those who have known each other for decades. Ong jokes that Nagar prefers her end-



lessly; she claims the only reason he purchased another floor of their office building was to build a private dance studio where she could practice her hobby and still be constantly on call. Ballroom dance is one of her biggest passions; the studio, a few floors up from their offices, has even been outfitted with a proper sprung floor.

Dancing is one of Ong's secrets to maintaining her appearance, which is as impeccable as her designs. Slender and graceful, she favors simple clothes from labels like Jill Sander and Donna Karan for day, and Valentino and Lanvin for evening. "I plan my outfits around my jewelry," she says, gently fingering today's choice of striking leaf-shaped diamond earrings that she has paired with a Jill Sander lilac sweater and cream Ralph Lauren pants. "The jewelry is the most important part."

Though Ong's chic style has landed her on several local best-dressed lists, she claims she doesn't have a spare minute to shop when working in Hong Kong. On a typical day, she jumps between the office, the workshop and her home in the city's central district. It's easier for her to shop on regular trips abroad. "I'm



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very quick, both when it comes to my work and shopping," she says later, now relaxing on a plush sofa in her apartment overlooking the shiny skyscrapers of her city's downtown area. "I don't debate. I make decisions about what I like and what I don't right away."

It was exactly that quick thinking that landed her the *Du Vinci Code* project. Hollywood had taken notice of Carnet in early 2005, when Kate Winslet and Glenn Close both wore Ong's pieces to the Screen Actors Guild Awards. The film's prop team then contacted Ong to see if she'd be interested in submitting sketches for the movie's jewelry items, including the Fleur de Lys cross key and Captain Fache's Opus Dei lapel pin. When she agreed, they told her to wait for instructions. But Ong is no one to sit around and wait. Rather, she sketched her ideas for the four pieces, and when she sent them in, the response was immediate: She was hired.



While working on the movie was a thrill, Ong found a way to parlay the project into something more. Carnet negotiated with Sony Pictures to hold a black-tie premiere of the film in Hong Kong as a benefit for the Nature Conservancy, which had enlisted Ong, an active philanthropist, to help with its fundraising. (The Hong Kong event was the movie's worldwide premiere; due to the time difference, the official Cannes debut was actually hours later.) For the event Ong flew in celebrated London chef Tom Aikens to create the menu. (Aikens's restaurant is around the corner from the second home Ong and her husband keep in London.) Movie producers donated the elaborate caryx from the film to be auctioned for the charity; in addition, Ong designed a diamond version of the Fleur de Lys key that fetched more than \$250,000. The evening was the social event of the year in Hong Kong and raised \$6 million for the Nature Conservancy's efforts in Yunnan Province in southern China.

In December Carnet plans to unveil its new boutique in the Prince's Building. The shop is more than four times the space of the current store in nearby Chater House, a tiny jewel box with chocolate leather tiles from floor to ceiling also designed by Tuttle. The expanded space is essential since Carnet, available elsewhere only at Harvey Nichols' London flagship and through the occasional private show, is developing a reputation as a

destination jeweler. While its core clientele is still from the local powerhouse jewelry market and nearby countries like Malaysia and Taiwan, in recent years, customers have begun traveling from Japan and Europe to meet the designer and purchase her pieces.

Though obviously pleased with the response, Ong rests establishing firm goals for Carnet's growth. "I don't like to treat this as a business," she says. "I don't set expectations for myself. I don't think about what the market wants. I won't follow trends. I just create things that I like. My pieces are very much a personal expression." ❖

This page, clockwise from top: Carnet platinum and diamond necklace and platinum, titanium, basaltite garnet, amethyst, pink sapphire, emerald and diamond brooch, prices available upon request, +852-2808-0113, carnetjewellery.com; interior of the Carnet boutique. Opposite: Ong at a family residence in Hong Kong.

