

JULIET WEIR-DE LA ROCHEFOUCAULD

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY JEWELLERY DESIGNERS

AN INSPIRED STYLE





MICHELLE ONG/CARNET

“I can see beauty in a lot of things, I can use great internally flawless gemstones but I can also use great flat stones full of inclusions and I can turn it into a Chinese scroll or a painting. I see it, I see the faults and what I can do with it.”

MICHELLE ONG/CARNET

The Art of Carnet

Michelle Ong’s medical background did not necessarily augur well for a career as a jewellery designer, however, it helped Ong to escape the usual confines of what is expected in jewellery design leaving her free to think outside the box. As a child she was always drawn to beautiful things – from fashion to paintings. Her attention to detail was honed from these early days, as she says herself:

“I’m crazy about details.”

Hong Kong is a place where people feel at ease wearing stunning jewellery at lunchtime functions as well as in the evenings. It is a place where wearing jewellery is the norm. Ong remembers her parents entertaining and was always fascinated by their guests arriving wearing fine jewellery. Ong credits her mother with giving her confidence and independence:

“She taught me that it’s important to be passionate about the things you do.”

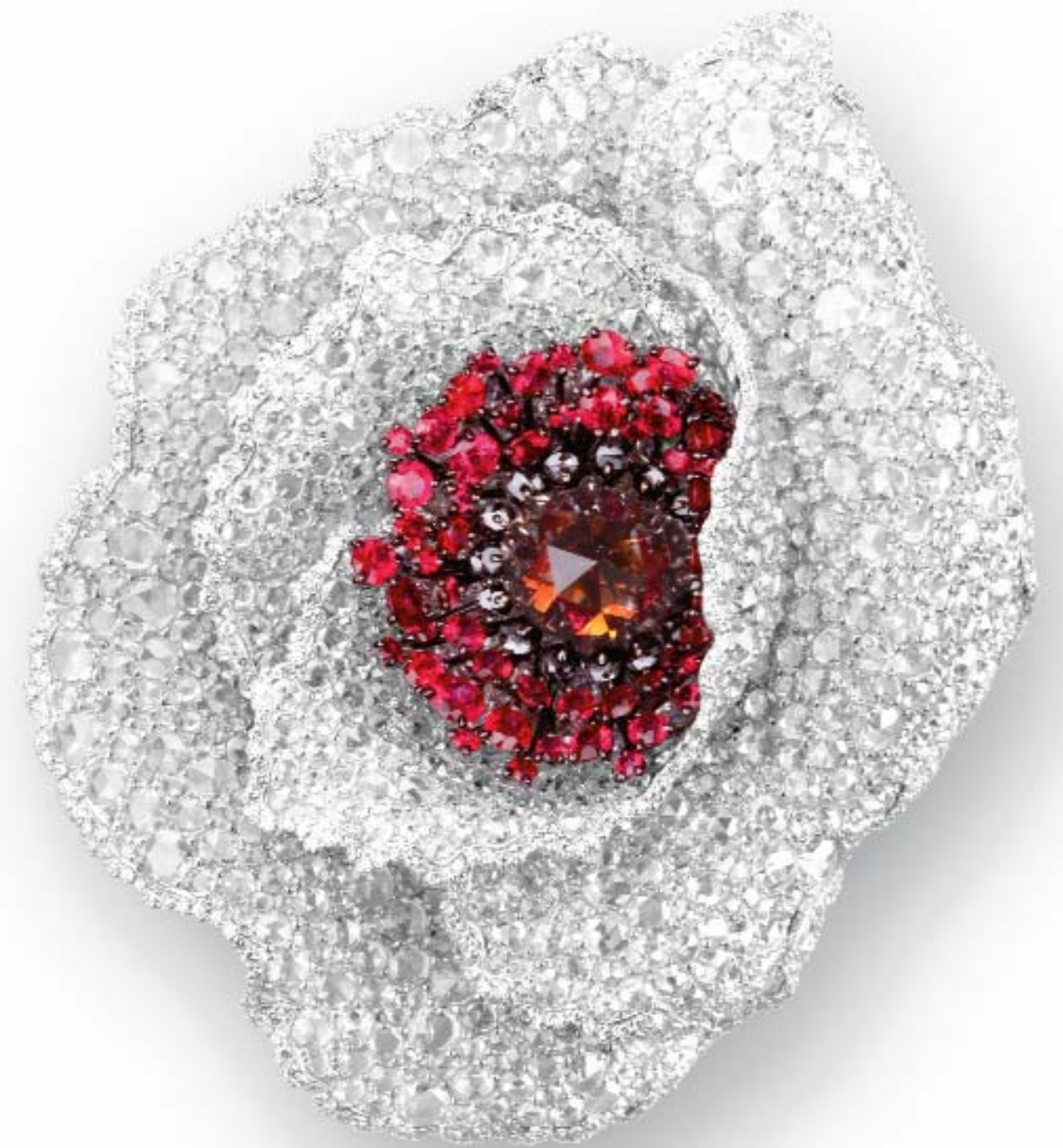
This well-travelled and straight-talking person has always lived between Western and Eastern influences. She studied sociology at the University of Toronto before returning to Hong Kong, where she became and intern with the diamond importers Siu Man-cheuk.

Michelle Ong started creating her own jewellery when she couldn’t find any pieces she wanted to wear. Her jewels were admired by her many friends, who asked her to make pieces for them. From this beginning she has developed her inimitable style of intensely feminine and delicate jewels.

PREVIOUS PAGE: The Vine Brooch – black and white diamond, silver, white gold, platinum

LEFT: Byzantine Cross Pendant – blue-green sapphire, rhodolite, garnet, citrine, fire opal, amethyst, grey diamond tablets, white diamond, silver, platinum, white gold

OPPOSITE: Poppy Brooch – ruby, dark brown, black and white diamond, white gold





Pear Clip/Brooch – yellow, brown and white diamond, white and yellow gold

Pomegranate Clip/Brooch – yellow, brown and white diamond, ruby, white and yellow gold



The Partnership

“Michelle dreams her dream and Avi implements it.”

Sam Clarke – curator for ‘Michelle Ong’s Carnet’ retrospective at Asia House, London 2011

A chance meeting with Avi Nagar at a Diamond Importers Association dinner brought about a business partnership that has lasted for nearly thirty years. Theirs is a partnership that against all the odds in this intensely competitive market has stood the test of time. In 1985 they launched their first company, Dorera, which gave them a platform from which to create jewels for wholesale. It also gave them the opportunity to find their real identity and the chance to experiment with different materials and gemstones. Slowly Michelle Ong’s exquisite sense of style started to take shape and they launched Carnet as a platform for Ong’s designs in Hong Kong in 1998.

Michelle Ong creates and Avi Nagar makes this possible by taking charge of the business aspects.

“I love dealing with the problems; I like to make a decision because otherwise the problem will become two!” Avi Nagar

The magic of their partnership is based on respect and a strong foundation. Both are absolutely clear about their respective roles: they are both interested in the work that the other half of the partnership does, but without encroaching on it.

“A partnership is how much each of us can put into the partnership, not take from the partnership. If you take from a partnership you create a vacuum, if you put into a partnership you don’t have time to see how much the other is putting in. if I can put a maximum 24 hours in and she can put one hour, this is an equal partnership because she is putting as much as she can; you are too busy to look at what the other is doing. If you know what you want to reach, what you want to get out of it, you can go forward.” Avi Nagar

Inspiration

“My jewellery is an intensely personal expression of myself.”

“I actually don’t look for inspiration, ideas find me. I like strong colour contrasts that give life, fluidity and movement to a piece.”

For Ong, her inspiration can be sparked from the slightest thing, she can just sit looking up at clouds watching them change shape as they move across the sky or it could be the outline of a shadow or a building that sparks an idea. Clouds, which represent good luck in the Orient, feature regularly in Ong’s jewels, as do natural forms.

“Everything is deliberate. I want a piece to breath and to have layers to the eye; you don’t want to get tired of it. It is the little details that make you love it, you look at it again and you see that that little bit is different.”

Her attention to detail is an inspiration in itself, she looks to changing the effect of a piece by creating small differences to an otherwise repetitive theme.

Her fruits show such detail, from her *Pear* clip to her *Pomegranate* brooches, which represents fertility in China. The *Open Pomegranate* brooch showing the seeds signifies ‘one hundred seeds, one hundred children’ and is often given to newly weds. The rose-cut white diamond leaves and the brown diamond stalk (note the brown marquise rose-cut diamond at the tip of the stalk) serve as a foil for the magnificent fruit with its ruby seeds in a sea of small pavé-set white diamonds. The yellow skin of the pomegranate is pavé-set with an array of different sized and different coloured diamonds. The complexity of this setting is that the diamonds of varying sizes need to be balanced with each other without leaving any spaces and the colours need to be evenly spread without the effect looking in anyway deliberate; the impression must be harmonious.

Many ideas come from her passion for food. She admires the chef’s talent. She can be inspired by how food is presented: the mixing of the colours and the textures of food are important stimuli. As with many designers she always has a notebook close at hand to scribble down an idea or a detail.

“I think that traditional Chinese motifs translate beautifully into jewellery and antique lacy effects can be exquisite.”

Ong’s Lace necklaces are a direct inspiration from her love of textiles especially those of the lightest weave; her jewels conjure up images of lace, tatting and crochet work. For the *Dream Lace* necklace, the diamond ‘stitching’ is held in place using a succession of rose-cut diamond ‘knots’ between lines of rose-cut diamond drops, which catch the light as the wearer moves. The mastery of this simple repetitive and graduated design is that the diamonds are individually set, making the necklace extremely supple, thus giving an illusion of softly draping lace. This workmanship is such that the necklace moulds itself to adorn the wearer’s shoulders and neck creating a jewel that references back to the origins of the word “neck-lace”.

“When a lady buys a necklace each one has different shoulders, up and down. You have to fix the beginning, it is like a dress, you can take it like a piece of fabric, it flows like water.” Avi Nagar

Ong takes great care to check each of her necklaces and chokers. Each necklace must fit “like a second skin” and should never sag because of wrongly placed links or from simply being too heavy. Each person has differently shaped shoulders, just as people have different fingerprints, creating challenges for a jewellery designer who does not necessarily know who is going to wear the necklace they have created.

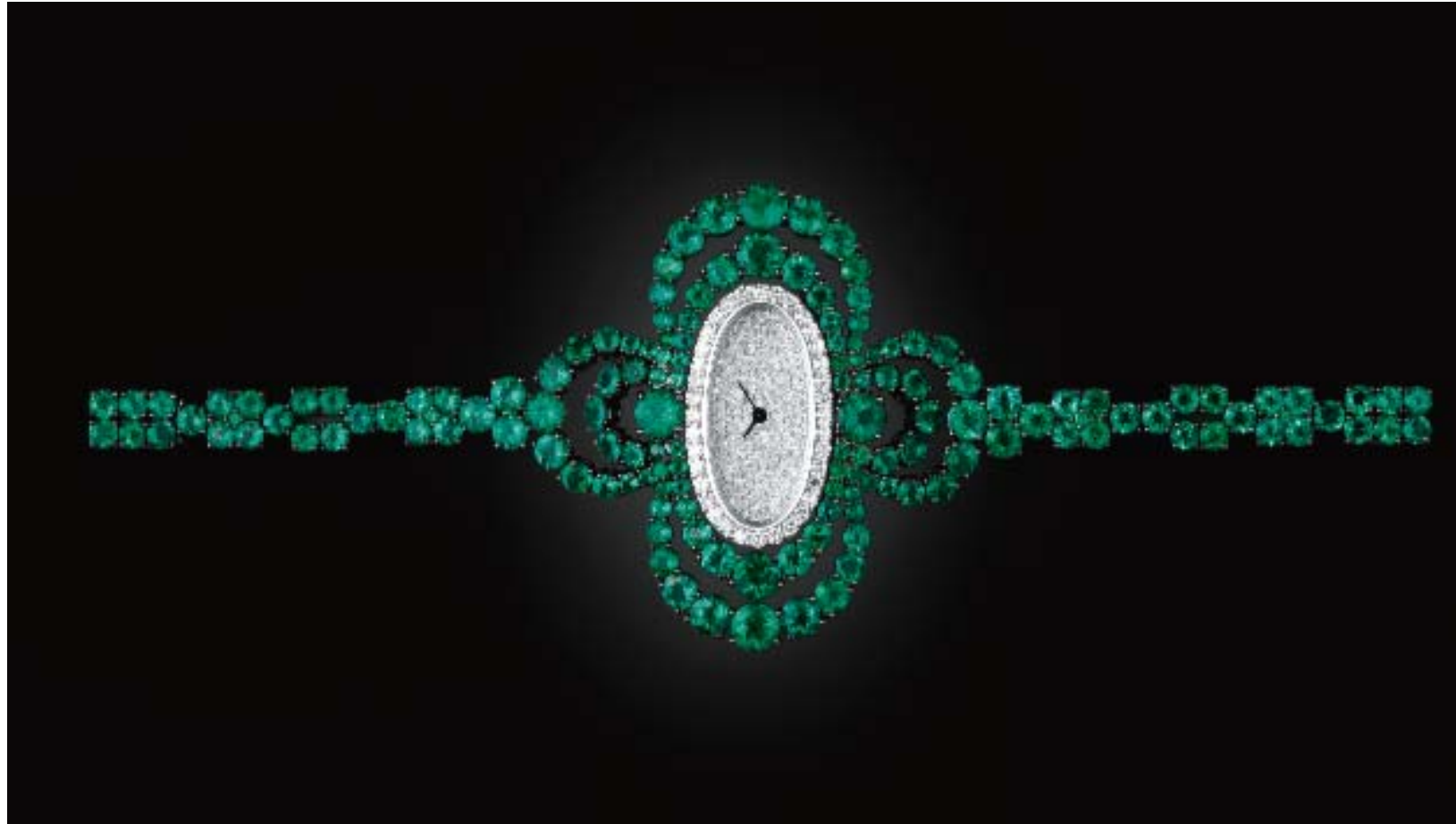
For the *Organdie Collar* necklace, Ong has chosen a more complicated tatting pattern that recalls the forms of 18th-century jewels with its bows and trefoil diamond lobes or shamrock tatting of old. The stunning complexity of this design is highlighted by a pattern of white rose-cut diamond bows drawn together by a series of deep brown/red briolette diamond ‘crochet’ links.



Dream Lace Necklace – white diamond, platinum

Organdie Collar Necklace – white and brown diamonds, white gold





Wristwatch – emerald, white diamond, white gold

Tree of Life Brooch – jadeite, white diamond, white gold



Ong weaves these exquisite ‘fabrics’ conscious of their delicacy and their position between the Occident and the Orient; the Asian view of beauty and fragility are synonymous. Her magnificent jade and white diamond necklace takes its cue from the wonderful jewels of the Belle Époque as well as using the traditional beauty of Imperial green jadeite and the mastery of its carving. She uses six triple hoops, each cut from one piece of Imperial jadeite, to catch the triple diamond swags as they rise from the large central jadeite ring, to drape around the wearer’s neck. This wonderfully refreshing way of using a traditional bangle adds a contemporary air to the alluring lace-like necklace. The diamond flowerheads are repeated in small green jadeite discs with a single diamond set at the centre. Just as the diamond girandole-style drops help highlight the central pendant of pear-shaped rose-cut diamond drops, they draw the eye to the harmony and balance of the entire necklace.

An extension of Ong’s fabric-like jewellery are her delicate wristwatches that take their inspiration from *passementerie*, ribbons and geometric shapes as in this emerald-set wristwatch. The oval face is set with tiny white diamonds.

Chinese motifs pop up repeatedly in her work: the ‘Tree of life’, clouds and dragons. For the *Tree of Life* brooch she takes an ordinary disc of green jadeite and transforms it into a jewel of mystery. Note how the pavé-set diamond branches echo the curves of the different colours of jade within the disc. It has been done so effectively that without careful observation it would not be noticed and yet it is vital for the harmony of the piece as a whole.

Belle Époque Necklace – Imperial green jadeite (jade), white diamond, white gold





Inclusions

Ong uses the inclusions within gemstones to create a jewel that would not have the same power if the gemstones were without these imperfections. Large flat grey diamond slices crop up in some of her pieces. Very often they are used to create a contrast with the cleaner purer diamonds with which she has combined them. She is happy to use monochromatic schemes in many of her creations to quite extraordinary effect; she can use white diamond throughout a piece relying on the soft intimate brilliance of rose-cuts to enhance the charm of the jewel. This use of the more traditional older rose-cut diamonds is a signature theme that runs through many of her pieces, thus avoiding the sharper and brighter light of more modern cuts.

Calligraphy is an art that has been a constant passion of Ong's, and which she uses in her own distinctive manner. For the *Musical Note* clip her interpretation of the bold strokes of the calligrapher's brush creates a lightness that is mindful of rising smoke. Whatever the interpretation, the oval rose-cut diamond drop creates a focal point from which the eye travels up the narrowing and widening diamond-set path. The clever use of larger round and pear-shaped rose-cut diamonds creates a balance to the brooch. The whole effect is highlighted with a second narrower line of flowing diamonds that shadow the knotted meandering path of the larger rose-cut diamonds.

Ong's *Chandelier* earrings have an equally ethereal quality; she uses scallop shapes and stylised forms of the Eiffel Tower to create large yet light earrings that frame the face following the gentle curve of the cheek and neck creating lace-like fans of light and colour. The *Chandelier* earrings are set in such a way as to allow the jewels to be viewed from every angle.

The raw structural aspect of this pair of ear pendants lending them an 'Arts and Crafts' allure is due to its metallic coloured twisted rope-like skeleton. The twelve rope-like circles are arranged in a crescent shape joined by knots made of black diamond beads and decorated at the centre by rose-cut diamonds and small black diamond drops. The yellow claw settings create a contrast to the black gold, recalling tiny needlework stitches. The quatrefoil motif at the top recalls Chinese architectural references as much as it recalls Western references of Gothic revival and Renaissance architecture. The quatrefoil is a reference to the four happinesses in Chinese lore and the four evangelists from the Bible.

Ong enjoys using just black and white colours in many of her pieces. Black in ancient Chinese lore was regarded as the king of all colours corresponding to water as well as Heaven. She likes the stark contrast between the black and the white, perhaps taking after her interest in calligraphy and its monochromatic colour scheme. The scallop-shaped ear pendants are decorated with Eastern shapes, depicted in white diamonds. The scrolls, which form the outline of the scallops, are supported by a fan of black diamond faceted beads and rose-cut diamond openwork motifs. The clever use of black diamonds with their sharp lustre contrasts with the soft light of the white rose-cut diamonds. So simple, yet so elegant.

One of Ong's great signature designs is for her playful diamond and gold bouncing magic hoop earrings.

"I emphasise a lot of fluidity and being light, I don't believe that you have to suffer to wear a piece."

LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM:
Musical Note Clip – white diamond, white gold

Chandelier Earrings – black and white diamond, yellow gold, rhodium-plated black gold

Golden Hoop Earrings – yellow diamond, rhodium-plated black gold

OPPOSITE: Scallop Ear Pendants – black and white diamond, white gold





Peony Clip/Brooch – ruby, diamond bead, white diamond, platinum, titanium

Blossom Clip/Brooch – ruby beads, ruby, white diamond beads, white diamond, platinum, titanium



Ong has been using titanium since 1992, when she used it for two feather brooches. The search for a material that was both light and strong brought her into contact with titanium before most jewellers were even thinking of using it. (Ong had heard about its use in heart surgery for stents from her cardiologist husband). Living in a hot climate also meant that women wear more delicate fabrics, such as silk, so brooches have to be light.

“I love big pieces but we still want it light on the blouse.”

Passionate about flowers, she uses large blossoms creating great effects with volume. This couldn’t be achieved with heavier metals such as gold or platinum. Titanium covers all the bases: it is light, strong and has a wide range of colours once oxidised. Ong uses the titanium colours with a particular emphasis on the blue and pink hues to highlight pink sapphires, rubies and spinels or as a contrast underlining her selection of gemstones. In her *Blossom* brooch the electric blue titanium is an excellent foil for the pavé-set rubies. The titanium petals’ curves and sculptural forms are accentuated by the lines of ruby bead stamens moving in all directions giving an illusion of movement to the flower. The rose-cut diamonds are set in platinum and gracefully follow the forms that the petals take with small briolette diamond beads at the very centre giving the brooch its focal point.

Colour

The magnificent purple and blue flower brooch mixes many of Ong’s favourite themes. The ruby and purple sapphire flowers are set in titanium, the rubies contrasting with the blue metal and the sapphires’ purple colour are highlighted by the use of purple titanium. The intensely blue sapphires are accentuated by the use of blue titanium. The rose-cut white diamond flower is set at the centre with an oval rubellite and black diamond bead stamens. The large amethyst is set amongst a multitude of white diamond discs and the buds are all set with briolette amethysts and topaz and pavé-set sapphires. The clever use of black diamond stalks helps create a quiet harmony in the brooch. If Ong had used white diamonds for the same stalks the harmony would not have been the same, it would have been more present and would not have achieved the low key allure that Ong had set out to attain.

Ong loves strong tones and yet her colours are always in harmony and never strike a strident note.

“Purple is my favourite colour. Colour combinations are not deliberate, when I do a piece I don’t think where it comes from, I see what matches the tone. Purple – there are so many tones, and green – there are so many kinds of green. I just want something that is contrasting but yet doesn’t scream at you. I am a very instinctive person.”

Purple and Blue Flower Brooch – white and black diamond, ruby, blue, pink and purple sapphire, amethyst, rubellite and topaz, titanium





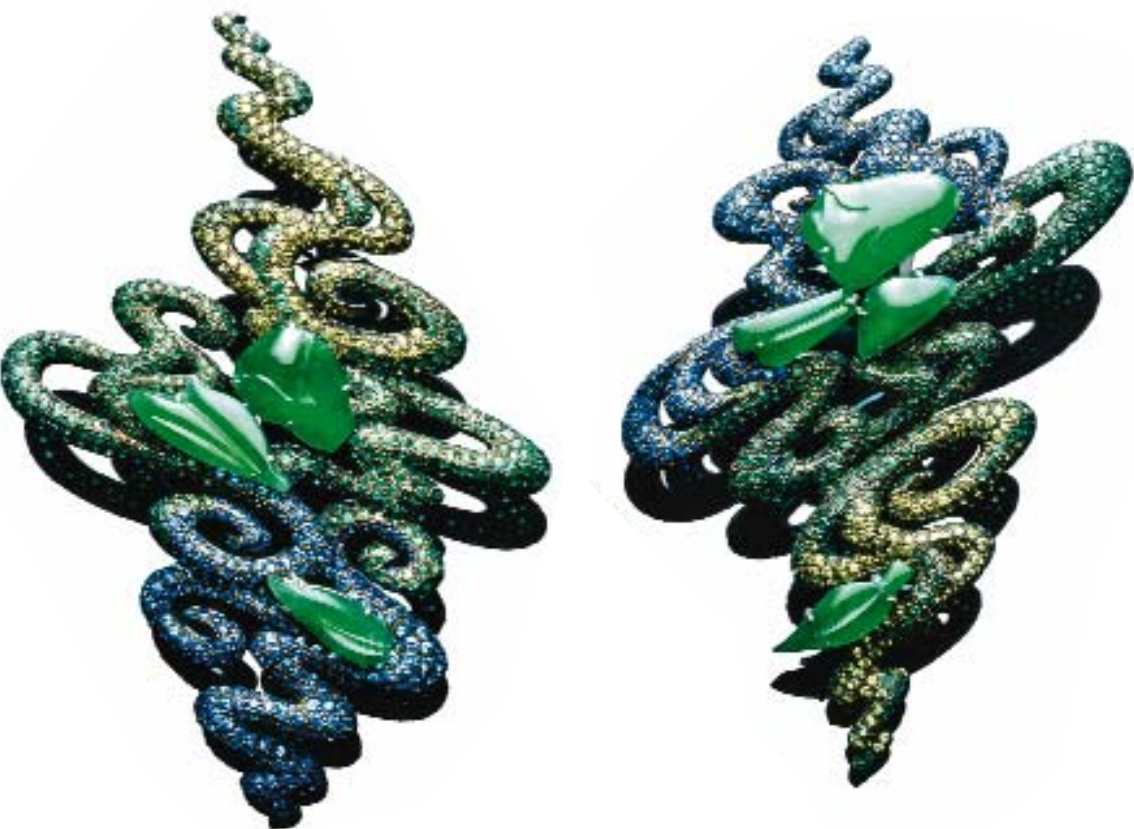
Ocean Heart Ring – grey diamond, Paraiba tourmaline, platinum



ABOVE: Forbidden Fruit Pendant – pink tourmaline, emerald, yellow diamond, white diamond, ruby, pink sapphire, amethyst, titanium, white gold

RIGHT: Dragon Clouds Brooches – jadeite, emerald, blue sapphire, garnet, silver, platinum

OPPOSITE PAGE: Teardrop Pendant – fancy yellow diamond, white diamond, platinum, yellow gold



This said, some combinations arise frequently in her work: purple and green; pale reds with greens... Some colour combinations are due to her deliberate choice of gemstones. For instance, when she uses Paraiba tourmalines their electric sea green/blue colour can be quite harsh, yet with a clever use of grey diamonds the colour combination creates a balanced and tempered character.

Other combinations that she has used with Paraiba tourmalines have been amethyst, emerald and pink sapphire. Grey jade with similarly coloured grey diamonds is another example of her ability to marry colour and gemstones: the colour combinations giving to one stone without taking anything away from the other.

White, grey and lavender jade find their way into many of her creations as well as the intense green jade that she combines with gemstones of all colours. The pavé-set blue sapphire, garnet and emerald cloud-like scrolls of her *Dragon Clouds* brooches are set with falling carved green stylised leaves. They may appear to have landed quite by chance, but ignore at your peril the deliberate attention to detail that is Michelle Ong’s signature; look at these long jade leaves and how they have all been placed on the same axis as the movement of the scrolls in order to create a harmony that would otherwise have been lacking.

Ong has been known to set large pink tourmalines (rubellites) where traditionally Imperial green jadeite (jade) plaques would normally be expected. This is an interesting idea, giving the jewel a surprising and contemporary charm.

This gift for combining colours or non-colours is also apparent in her diamond rings where large rose-cut diamonds are set within an openwork of diamond scrolls. Geometrical lines and shapes create a nuanced ‘monochromatic’ theme with different cuts to enhance the interest of the jewels. Her use of different cuts also creates different depths and textures for many of her pieces.





The workshop

Nagar and Ong have between 12 and 15 craftsmen working with them, they also have cutters who recut many of the gemstones that Avi Nagar purchases. Once Nagar bought a lot of over 5,000cts of small brown diamonds knowing that amongst them Ong would find the many warm red-gold colours of which she was so fond. Ong used them in several of her lace necklaces with many of the briolettes being especially re-cut. The cutter's job is one of precision as the drilled hole for the briolette must not be too small and nor too large or the hole will wear the gold away with time. This precision cutting is done using laser. Ong is in constant communication with her craftsmen as with each stage details may need to be changed: the mould might not be just right, the colour combinations may not be correct... So it is vital that Ong is present for each stage of the process. She freely admits her drawing is not the best and delegates the task of technical drawings to someone else. If required, she will make a model of what she is looking for to help the craftsman understand. Once the sketch has been finalised, a feasibility study will be made to determine the cost and technical problems that might be encountered. Ong's attention to detail is evident in the enjoyment the wearer of a Carnet piece experiences: her cuffs and bracelets, for instance, are carefully crafted so that nothing catches on the clothing, anything that is likely to be a problem faces away from the body.

Each jewel can take many months to complete, however, the lace necklaces can take up to five years. It is important to understand that stones of matching colour can take time to collect and the painstaking setting of each stone must be executed with extreme care. The craftsmen are encouraged to take their time and not rush to complete a job.

"To work with great care means he doesn't work fast."
 Avi Nagar

Michelle Ong's work is instinctive; she thinks only about the artistic value of the gemstones she uses, never their monetary value. That side of the business is for her partner to deal with; his job is to make Ong's creations possible.

Rings – fancy yellow diamond, yellow and white diamond, platinum, yellow gold

