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jewels

When a solicitor and an architect discovered a passion for opals and other colourful gemstones, designer jewellery boutique Venerari was born. From their charming Paddington terrace, Kingsley Wallman and Genevieve Lilley discuss design, career changes, and why diamonds aren't always a girl's best friend

By Clare Kerley



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They were drawn to Paddington by the sense of community it holds. "We love being ten minutes from the city and ten minutes from the beach," says Genevieve. "And Paddington has a real 'village' feel to it. There's a post office, bakery, bank, school. It's lovely."



“To me, it's all sculpture, just different scales”

◀ Opals are not usually thought of as a chic, stylish stone. We are used to seeing them set in the handles of souvenir teaspoons from Lightning Ridge, or shaped into smiling kangaroos for tourists to buy from Darling Harbour. And the thought of an opal in place of that all-important diamond in an engagement ring is unheard of. Well, almost.

Kingsley Wallman and Genevieve Lilley are doing their best change Australia's reluctance to embrace opals for the precious gemstones they are, through their three-year-old business, Venerari.

Tucked away in the Strand Arcade, Venerari (the Latin verb meaning to "revere or adore") has been selling unique jewellery collections and colourful one-offs with great success, and the Paddington-dwelling couple couldn't be happier.

Originally a corporate lawyer, Kingsley had always held a fascination with opals. His father, a dermatologist by profession, had a side interest mining opals in Queensland.

"His little hobby turned into a business, which subsequently my mother got involved with. So she ran the business, an opal mining, wholesale and export business, while he continued his medical practice.

"I had a passing interest, but didn't realise how great an interest I had until I gave up law and had to find something to do with my time."

When the multinational telecommunications company Kingsley worked for was sold, he found himself out of a job. Never one to be deterred by a hiccup such as this, he threw himself into studying gemmology and jewellery valuation and emerged highly qualified in both areas.

"I retrained as a gemmologist, which took three years, after I gave up law. Very few jewellers have a gemmological degree. The reason for that, I suspect, is that most jewellers in Australia only deal in diamonds. They don't touch coloured gemstones. A diamond is pretty basic, you know. It's white, and comes in a few different shapes and sizes. So you design your jewelry and drop the diamonds in. Couldn't be any simpler. Opals and coloured gemstones are extremely different."

Not wishing to compete with the already-crowded diamond market, and far more interested in the overlooked beauty of the 'Australian stone,' Venerari was born, and has been a key player in bespoke jewellery ever since. ▶



The starry ceiling of Venerari's landmark Sydney store

Some of Venerari's latest gem jewellery collection



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Their newly redesigned clean-look kitchen

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◀ Genevieve is Venerari's principal designer. An internationally renowned architect, she draws parallels between her sleek, modern building designs, and her striking jewellery creations.

"To me, it's all sculpture, just different scales," she laughs.

And it's certainly easy to see similarities between the clean flowing lines of Venerari's unusual collections and the sweeping linear feel of the couple's renovated Paddington terrace, also designed by Genevieve. Once a dilapidated wreck of a building, complete with rotting kitchen floor and no toilet, it's now a bright and airy family home, with light wooden floors, pristine white walls and a wonderfully kooky collection of art.

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Perched above the living area is a giant portrait of Prince Charles, made of colourful pom poms and bits of crocheted wool, done by "a crazy Rastafarian artist from London."

Shimmering in the study area is a piece of art made from black glitter, and a stark cream and white canvas overlooks the master bedroom. What is also striking is the neatness of the house – unusual for a family with two children under the age of five. It's clear to an outsider that these two like order and precision, tempered with a sense of fun.

They were drawn to Paddington by the sense of community it holds. "We love being ten minutes from the city and ten minutes from the beach," says Genevieve. "And Paddington has a real 'village' feel to it. There's a post office, bakery, bank, school. It's lovely."

"And the grandparents are two streets away," laughs Kingsley. "That's what clinched it."

Genevieve is still very much a working architect. In fact, on the third level of the Strand is the Venerari workshop, alongside her architectural firm. Down one side of the space, jewellers work with their metals and stones to carefully construct Genevieve's designs for Venerari, while down the other side, architectural staff pore over drawings and blueprints.

"Architects and jewellers in the one space can get a bit noisy sometimes," she admits. "And both sides have to be tolerant of the fact that, by nature of deadline, I have to lurch sideways out of one career into another."

While keeping her days busy, Genevieve revels in the balance between the two jobs. "For me, the mix makes it a much richer experience. It just works," she says.

PASSION

It's obvious that both Kingsley and Genevieve have an absolute passion for the work they do – evident in their burgeoning popularity amongst those looking for fine jewellery that's a little left of centre. Venerari has a huge client base overseas of wealthy professionals seeking something completely different to what most jewellers have to offer.

"They come from London, Tokyo, LA and New York. They're some of our biggest commissions," says Genevieve. "They have an inherent need to seek out what is new and interesting. They love the fact that they've discovered something that is unknown and unattainable where they're from."

"And they have more money," chimes in Kingsley. "What people don't realise is that opal is far more valuable than diamonds or anything else."

Slowly but surely, the couple are changing the way Australians view this misunderstood gem. No longer just the domain of "tourist taff" (in Genevieve's words), this shimmering, colourful and varied stone, set in Venerari's unique designs, has recently graced the pages of high fashion magazines, such as *Vogue*.

"We love working with coloured gems and opals," says Kingsley. "But if someone really wanted a white diamond engagement ring, we could do that too. We just prefer to steer away from the stock standard."