

Opal Fever

Opals might have garnered a bad reputation in recent years but a handful of Australian pioneers are pushing the stone's luxury potential to the rest of the world

When you think of opals, what comes to mind? Dodgy souvenir shops with obligatory boomerangs and tacky opal earrings targeted towards the Asian tourist market? Or contemporary pieces of jewellery designed for stylish customers who want to complement their expensive threads?

Bruce Tully hopes it's the latter. As one of only a handful of Aussies attempting to take opals to a luxury level, his pendants, rings, earrings and chokers are stunning opal fanatics and the uninitiated alike. But he's still got a battle on his hands when it comes to converting the disbelievers. "When people buy a diamond, they're thinking movie star stuff, Harry Winston and Tiffany's, that kind of thing," he says. "It's that romantic 'diamonds are forever' image. We've never had that. People think of souvenir shops and stuffed koalas. That's why I started making striking pieces – to make people sit up and take notice."

And people have certainly been doing that, especially since Bruce started combining left-of-field materials like crocodile skin with twisted bespoke design, including a stunning range of vampish chokers. But even more intriguing is the fact that Bruce came to the design business with zero experience. Originally a farmer, but hailing from a family that has been opal mining since the 1870s, Bruce decided to turn his back on milk and wool for a life glittering with precious gems. And, after winning a Churchill scholarship to study jewellery design in Florence, his creations won praise from Elisabetta Gucci, the great-granddaughter of the man who kick-started the Gucci empire: "I see very interesting, very completely different things. For me, it is the future. It is not classic, not modern but it is a very great character. I like very much."

High praise indeed, with Elisabetta also commenting that she found Bruce's designs deliciously 'femininely aggressive'. With high fashion's seal of approval, Bruce hopes that his company Depazzi can do for opals what the Paspaley's have done for pearls. And, with a Depazzi store opening in Brisbane, and more planned for overseas, he's definitely on his way.



Depazzi Australian saltwater crocodile leather choker with a Baroque South Sea pearl & Queensland Boulder opal set in 18ct yellow gold.

Another gem lover who has recognised opal's huge fashion potential is Kingsley Wallman who, along with his wife Genevieve, run Venerari, a Sydney jewellery business in the city's Strand Arcade. Most of the glass cases in his store are laden with contemporary opal designs – kidney-shaped opal cufflinks, delicate pendants and a fantastic 18-carat gold blind-hinged neckpiece complete with a Queensland sapphire in the clasp and a statement-making opal as the centrepiece.

Kingsley, who also hails from an opal mining family, tells me that his architect-trained wife designs the jewellery – which means they've met with some opposition from more traditional quarters of the business. It's just another battle to be fought in the modernisation of the opal. "Our jewellery makers sometimes tell me that they just can't make Genevieve's designs," he smiles. "When I ask them why, they tell me it's because jewellery just isn't made like that."

Kingsley is quietly confident, however, and says that at the moment it's the Europeans and Scandinavians who are appreciating his designs the most. "There's a revolution bubbling," he says, adding that 95 per cent of opals in jewellery come from Australia. "I'm determined to modernise opal and take it to the world." And, next year, he will be, when Venerari showcases its cutting-edge pieces at the Australian Design exhibition in London, with the intention of showcasing opals and modern Australian design.

So dump your diamonds – it's time to reclaim our national gemstone and embrace the opal. "It's really the time for opals. It's perfect in terms of fashion just now," adds Bruce. "They comes in so many different colours, with different moods, so they go with everything. Fiery reds, tranquil blues. No other stone has that personality. It's uniquely Australian." Let's just hope that one day soon Australians are saying opals are forever.

www.depazzi.com.au

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