



The golden rules

DIVORCE AND DIAMONDS

Bling can ease
a broken heart

FIRE POWER

Opals show a new flare

SPARKLE SECRETS



All fired up: Genevieve Lilley and Kingsley Wallman

Opals show a new flare

*A Sydney couple has a mission to rehabilitate the little-loved stone, writes **Damien Woolnough***

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WHEN Kingsley Wallman and his partner Genevieve Lilley told colleagues they were starting Venerari, a jewellery business based on a contemporary approach to opals, the response was unanimous.

"Everyone thought we were absolutely crazy," Wallman says. "People in the industry offered helpful suggestions, such as going out and burning money instead. Let's face it, the opal has a bad reputation."

There is something about the dark gemstone, however, that Wallman couldn't get out of his system. While driving through the Arizona desert with Lilley, winding down after a stint as a high-flying lawyer with a US telecommunications company, Wallman saw that his future was in his past.

"I had grown up in Australia around opals," he says.

"My father was a dermatologist with a sideline in opals that took over his life and my mother eventually ended up in the wholesale side of the business. "Basically, I grew up assessing opals at the kitchen table and visiting mines."

"OPALS ARE LIKE CARS. I CAN SELL YOU A BEATEN-UP HOLDEN OR A PORSCHE, LIKE THIS," WALLMAN SAYS, WAVING A THREATENING \$25,000 OPAL RING IN THE AIR

The rewards of a legal career took over until Wallman's desert epiphany.

"I saw a huge gap in the market for contemporising the opal," he says. The pair returned to Australia and Lilley, a respected architect, was thrust into the role of jewellery designer.

"I knew very little about making jewellery," she says. "But I relied on instinct and what I want from jewellery personally. I'm pretty tough on pieces, out at building sites or running around after kids, so I need jewellery that fits into my life. It has to be able to go with a suit or a T-shirt and jeans."

There was one other golden rule that Lilley implemented. "Under no circumstances will we make pieces with marsupials," she says. Wallman blames cheap koala brooches with flecks of poor quality stones for sending the opal into souvenir bins and disregard.

"In Europe and the US there's a healthy respect and love for high quality opals, but in Australia most people don't rate them. People are only beginning to understand that opals are like cars. I can sell you a beaten-up Holden or a Porsche, like this," Wallman says, waving a threatening \$25,000 opal ring in the air.

Since they opened the first Venerari

boutique in Sydney's Strand Arcade in 2004, their education of the local market has slowly delivered returns.

"We recently created a wedding ring for a man who works as a fire consultant for the department of parks," Lilley says. "He wanted a ring with four different coloured opals representing the different stages of fire. I think his unique request shows that the market is becoming more educated and seeking something individual from luxury goods."

Lilley is hopeful Australians will continue to move away from a more conservative approach to jewellery. "There was a time when a woman got a solitaire diamond for her engagement, a wedding ring, and if she squeezed out a few kids there was an eternity ring covered in a few diamond cuts as a reward," she says. "The rest of the money went on the pool, mortgage and school fees."

"Now we're seeing more women, like in Europe, not spending as much on the engagement ring but creating a wardrobe of pieces to be worn on different occasions."

Lilley's architectural approach has produced a range of asymmetric and slick pieces that divides visitors to their shop. "Ten per cent hate them, 10 per cent love them and the other 80 per cent are waiting for a hip magazine to tell them that they're all right to buy," she says.

"The real joy is that a large part of our business is private commissions. It's like architecture in that we get to know the client and their needs before embarking on the journey together."

Wallman would prefer that more people selected from the established range, because it takes less time to produce, but he is proud of the couture approach the business has taken.

"It's one of the reasons that we're in the Strand Arcade, which has a tradition for showcasing the best in fashion," he says.

"We feel that there is a strong link between fashion and jewellery. Australian fashion designers are now respected overseas. We want the same thing to happen with jewellery designers."

There was a moment last year when Lilley and Wallman were almost beaten down by the continued laughter of their colleagues. "We entered the Lightning Ridge Jewellery Design Awards and left with nothing," Lilley recounts.

"Pretty much everyone else won a prize that year but we didn't even get the door prize."

Revenge, however, came swiftly at the Jewellers Association of Australia Design Awards in August where Venerari entered two pieces anonymously. Their necklet with nine solid Queensland boulder opals and white gold ring with a three-carat boulder opal came first and second in the opal category.

"The first question I was asked was how I felt, and absolute disbelief was the answer," Lilley says, still waiting for the last laugh.

Louis Vuitton
charm bracelet



Venerari 18-carat white gold
emerald ring



Louis Vuitton ch

Once more
with feeling

FASHION EXTRA 5



Uno A Erre gold bracelets

Venerari 18-carat
yellow gold boulder
opal ring

Uno A Erre piece