

Watches & Jewellery

**Technique** Austy Lee's multicultural designs and his melding of traditional and modern techniques start to draw a bigger crowd, writes *Kate Youde*

# 'Jewellery is still boring in this moment'

**A**usty Lee works through the night sketching one-off creations. "I have many customers who keep coming to make something new so I need to draw five to 10 designs every single night," he says.

The Hong Kong jewellery designer catches about five hours' sleep in the morning before heading to one of his two boutiques in the city. "I have had no holiday for five years," he says.

While this work/life balance is probably not to be recommended, there is a sense when meeting Lee that he might not want it any other way. The prolific creative, who finds he is at his most productive in the early hours, also designs his own clothes, shoes and spectacles.

Lee was one of five "new" designers featured at GemGeneve in May. It was the first appearance of his brand at a jewellery show outside Asia. Now, with plans under way to grow the number of international stockists for his designs, he may have to burn even more midnight oil.

A former graphic designer who studied product design, Lee trained in jewellery design with Swiss house Adler in Hong Kong before working as chief

designer for local jeweller Wendy Yue. He launched his eponymous brand in 2017 to showcase his own "crazy" and "joyful" fine jewellery.

Over the past six years, he has designed more than 6,000 unique jewels, made in Hong Kong. The bold pieces stand out not only because of Lee's use of coloured gemstones and jade but also because of his way of melding traditional and modern techniques.

Having learnt from his uncle, who was experienced in repairing antiques, his contemporary jewels often incorporate antique objects such as Japanese lacquerware and netsuke – small Japanese sculptures. He uses traditional techniques such as the Japanese Maki-e and Shakudo lacquer techniques, and the Shibayama art of inlay for creating designs on abalone shell and mother of pearl. But Lee embraces the modern, too: his 18-carat gold pieces are plated with colour rhodium to create eye-catching hues. "I like chunky, complicated details [and] edgy things," he says.

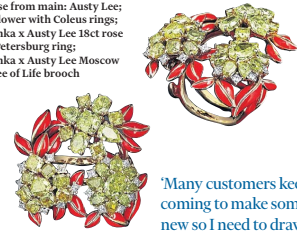
His Buddhist faith is a source of inspiration for Lee, whose pieces all have a story behind them. "Buddhism is a spiritual exercise, through meditation



taking my mind to a whole new level, brainstorming new ideas every day," he says. "I like painting and admiring thangkas [paintings on cotton or silk depicting subjects, including Buddhist deities and mandalas] because the different geometric proportions and colour combinations are very inspiring and inspiring to me."

His debut collection, *Psychedelic Light*, drew on mandalas – geometric, symbolic designs representing the universe that are used in meditation. Lee, whose recent collection *Ghost*

Clockwise from main: Austy Lee; golden flower with Coleus rings; Annoushka x Austy Lee 18ct rose gold St Petersburg ring; Annoushka x Austy Lee Moscow ring; Tree of Life brooch



'Many customers keep coming to make something new so I need to draw five to 10 designs every night'

with customers thinking his designs were costume pieces. Despite the high profiles of Chinese jewellery artist Wallace Chan and Taiwanese jewellery designer Cindy Chao – both known for their colourful statement pieces – Lee thinks that, in general, "jewellery is still boring in this moment", with consumers opting for well-known brands because of marketing. "I want this kind of choice to be popular," he says.

His designs are gaining traction. Annoushka Ducas, founder of British jewellery brand Annoushka, has stocked Lee's pieces in her retail spaces in London department stores Harrods, Harvey Nichols and Liberty since 2018 – his only bricks-and-mortar stockist outside Asia. She believes "people are definitely more aware of him", but Ducas says her staff have educated clients so they appreciate Lee's approach, with British customers tending not to understand coloured rhodium and being "less brave" with large and colourful jewellery. Lee's designs appeal particularly to customers from the Middle East, she finds.

"[Lee's work] is so unique and recognizable, and the techniques that he uses really push the boundary," says Ducas, who collaborated with Lee on four cocktail rings for her Touch Wood collection in 2020.

International auction houses Phillips and Bonhams have offered Lee's jewellery in sales in Hong Kong over the past few years. Online marketplace iSDBs and Dubai-based platform Theodore and C started stocking his designs last year.

Lee says contacts he made at GemGeneve may lead to him collaborating with other brands and that his presence at the fair helped boost international sales, which are up 20-25 per cent year on year. Sales outside Hong Kong account for about 50 per cent of Lee's business, compared to 10 per cent a few years ago. Already stocked by retailers in Japan, the Philippines and Singapore, the brand is now working with department store Lane Crawford to sell pieces in Chengdu and Beijing, China, next month. Separate negotiations are under way with stores in New York and Paris.

Expansion could add to his heavy workload. But Lee, who has 11 employees excluding his studio, does not want to hire anyone to help with design. "If you want to buy Austy Lee, you want Austy Lee," he argues.

## School of jewellery opens in Shanghai

L'École, School of Jewelry Arts, supported by Van Cleef & Arpels, which opened a new campus in Shanghai this week, has staged a programme of events to coincide with Golden Week in China. A new Middle East hub is to open in Dubai the week of November 20 with an exhibition, *Garden of Emeralds*, and a lecture series ahead of the launch of courses and workshops from April next year. The jewellery education organisation is opening a third new base, its second in Paris, at Hôtel de Mercy-Argenteau today. This location features an exhibition space, a library and a bookshop dedicated to titles on jewellery.

### Going green

Sotbehy's is offering key jade pieces in its Magnificent Jewels sale in Hong Kong today. A jadeite and diamond necklace (c 1990s), set with 29 graduated jadeite beads with a translucent green colour, is expected to fetch HK\$18m-HK\$28m (\$2.3m-\$3.58m), while the imperial Blossom jadeite and diamond parure (c 2000) (right) is estimated at HK\$26.8m-HK\$38m. This latter set includes 12 highly translucent jadeite cabochons of intense emerald green colour mounted on a necklace, with a further three cabochons mounted on a pair of earrings and a ring. Some of the cabochons are imperial green in colour, the most coveted hue for jadeite.

### Opal splendour

Boghossian is unveiling new opal jewels in its Hong Kong boutique this autumn in response to rising customer demand for unusual stones. The Opal Opulence mini capsule collection's three pieces all feature black opals. One pair of asymmetrical earrings with diamonds comprises two black opals and two rare black opals, while a second pair features two Australian black opals with uncommon shades of orange. The jeweller has emphasised the vibrant

hues by setting these stones atop two citrines and beside spessartine. A ring features a 7.9-carat cushion-shaped black opal surrounded by white opal beads, diamonds and demantoids.

### Making an impression

Chinese jeweller Feng is unveiling 12 one-of-a-kind pieces at the FAB Paris art fair, being held at Grand Palais Éphémère, on November 22-26. The designs showcase her signature use of coloured gemstones and diamonds to mimic an Impressionist painting, and her Floating Set technique that allows light to pass through stones. Her new Pink Anthurium brooch is a variation on the same theme as the Blue Anthurium brooch acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in May. The titanium and 18-carat gold piece features spinels, double rose-cut morganites, tsavorites, chrysoberyl, yellow sapphires and white diamonds.

### More is more

An exhibition at Boucheron's new flagship store in Ginza, Tokyo, will highlight the creative know-how behind the French house's high jewellery. The shop, which opened last month, has a four-floor Innovation Lab that gives customers insight into the techniques, materials and processes behind designs. The exhibition will celebrate the brand's latest More is More collection until November 21, before focusing on pieces from previous collections until January 31. These include two Eternal Flowers rings from Nature Triomphante (2018), which feature real petals, and a bracelet from Contemplation (2020) made with aerogel, a material used by Nasa.

### Rare rolling stones

Bonhams is offering five pieces by Kat Florence in its Hong Kong Jewels and Jadeite sale on November 25. Known for her use of rare stones, the jewellery designer's diamond ring with a central internally flawless 2.03-carat light pink diamond (top) is expected to fetch HK\$650,000-HK\$950,000, while a pendant with a 33.37-carat Paraíba tourmaline and diamonds is estimated

at HK\$95,000-HK\$150,000. A highlight of the 150-lot sale is an unsigned platinum and 18-carat yellow gold bracelet set with 31.88 carats of Columbian emeralds and 24.81 carats of diamonds. It is estimated to achieve HK\$4.8m-HK\$5.8m.

### Wax lyrical

A wax sculpture by Cindy Chao will be on display in the Louvre museum in Paris on November 24. The Taiwanese jewellery designer tutored a course in volume setting and lost-wax casting, a technique for which she is known, at the city's Haute École de joaillerie last month. Chao, founder of her eponymous brand Cindy Chao The Art Jewel, created a wax carving for a piece of jewellery with input from her 28 students. It will be shown in the art gallery by the painting that inspired it, "Death of the Virgin" (1601-1606) by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

### PAD in London

Objet d'Emotion by Valery Demure will show the work of Tokyo atelier Hum at PAD London, October 10-15. The Japanese brand's new 15-piece Industrial Diamond collection, being launched at the art and design fair in Berkeley Square, features lab-grown diamonds sourced from California producer Diamond Foundry. The designs include three one-of-a-kind platinum rings with central stones of approximately one carat and side stones that are either brown or white diamonds. Other exhibitors showing jewellery include Indian jewellery designer Neha Dani, German house Hemmerle, British creator Glenn Spiro and Elisabetta Cipriani, whose eponymous London gallery specialises in jewellery by artists.

### A charmed life

British jewellery brand Annoushka is launching a bespoke design service in its two Hong Kong stores on October 16. My Life in Charms, which has been available in the UK for a number of years, allows customers to commission personalised 18-carat gold charms. The brand's audio podcast, My Life in Seven Charms, in which company founder Annoushka Ducas interviews high-profile women and creates charms that reflect their life stories, will now be accompanied by video content with subtitles in Chinese. The jeweller will also offer its wider bespoke design service for all jewellery.