

FASHIONABLE / DESIRABLE / SUSTAINABLE

by Olivier Dupon

Cannes Film Festival 2013, cameras flash as Marion Cotillard makes her way onto the red carpet. Her graphic Dior 'Cruise 2014' gown paired with a towering up'do and stunning Chopard jewels turn heads. Follow umpteen rave reviews on the blogosphere about the stunning actress' appearance; less reported though was the fact that the micro-paved earrings and cuffs she wore were from the *Green Carpet* collection, Chopard's initiative to implement a transition towards ethically-sound jewellery. It comes as no surprise Ms Cotillard agreed to launch the *Green Carpet* project since the French actress has long been a vocal advocate for sustainability. What could pass as ironic though, is that on the day, she was promoting the movie 'Blood Ties'. No pun intended, however one cannot help thinking, taken out of its context, how perfect the movie title is to name the devastating practices (or lack of good practises) of the jewellery industry, and to a broader extent that of the Fashion world.

Yet this could all slowly but surely change thanks to the tenacity of an ever-growing number of designers and thinkers who have decided to tackle sustainability head on. The Cannes unveiling of the Chopard *Green Carpet* series was the result Caroline Scheufele, co-president and creative director at Chopard teaming with Livia Firth, founder of the *Green Carpet Challenge* and creative director of ECO AGE Ltd, the London-based unique brand and corporate consulting firm working at the cutting age of sustainability. Nicola Giuggioli, founder and CEO set up ECO AGE Ltd in 2009 in London: 'Sustainability has always been something that I have been passionate about. I decided to set up my business when I realised that, regardless of the many sustainable solutions and practices developed in the last few decades, most were not known, used or even considered despite having excellent business cases and highly improving the quality of the work environment and output', he says. It just takes the realisation that responsible actions can go hand-in-hand with profitable economic outcomes. One does not exclude the other. ECO AGE's first step is to educate their clients – whose growing list includes luxury heavy weights, and consequently influential actors from the fashion sphere - and show them how a sustainable business is tightly linked to an efficient cost structure and even more efficient resource use which ultimately results in the increased profitability of the company and satisfaction of its customers. 'Once the first step is achieved we develop and implement strategically coherent Corporate Social Responsibilities policies. We

work across different business sectors and work on management systems, certifications, product design and development, marketing campaigns and brand enhancing initiatives’, Nicola adds, ‘I believe in a future of collaboration between businesses but also with institutions and NGOs so that we can start changing, at its core, an industry that has been for far too long, completely blind. We need a future of increased vertical integration, increased coherence in the management choices and ultimately increased productivity and profitability’. At the other end of the table is a client who is ready to pay premium prices for authentic luxury goods and as Nicola quips: ‘when you are paying incredibly high prices, you want to know that piece is special; you want to know the story behind it and I suspect you want to know that the piece you just bought to show your love to another person, is actually made with love and not blood!’.

Possibly none other than New York-based Peter Thum is more aware of this dichotomy. The founder of Fonderie47 and more recently Liberty United has indeed wholeheartedly confronted the proliferation of weapons through the ultimate upcycling challenge: removing AK47 assault rifles from African conflict zones (hence the name Fonderie47), and salvaging the components and metals resulting from their destruction. Expert craftsmen and designers then tailor precious watch and jewellery pieces using the recycled metals. To date, they have removed 32,000 assault rifles from circulation in Africa, and the impact has triggered even more profound positive repercussions: it has helped reduce violence against children and women, all the while stabilizing the economic frame of the benefiting communities. ‘People buy things about one hundred times as often as they make charitable donations. To me this seemed like an opportunity to create things that people want but which have a very clear social purpose. In the case of the things that I have created to date, the innovation centres on humans helping humans. The sustainability is about the shift in the customer’s focus from an existing brand to ours, and thus they effect a specific change in the world’, Peter declares.

It all started in 2001, when after working in Africa and meeting people who lacked access to safe water, Peter came up with the idea to create a bottled water brand where each bottle would allow the customer to provide safe water access to someone in need around the world: ‘this idea became Ethos Water, which was acquired by Starbucks in 2005 and to date has provided about \$7.4 million in funding to give about half a million people around the world water access. Working on Ethos led to my next company Fonderie 47, which in turn led to Liberty United’, he explains. The latter is a daunting and politically charged venture that Peter and his wife, Cara Buono, actress and humanitarian, have taken

head one. While nothing else seems to work and government efforts are thwarted by powerful lobbyists, Liberty United is positioned to address the issue upfront: gun accessibility and the surge in illegal rifles is out-of-control and plaguing America, so one way to shift what is a disaster into a burgeoning hope is to transform illegal guns and bullets from US cities into jewellery. It says a lot about the amplitude of the problem though, that a formula applied in African war zones is one of the last resort measures on US soil. 'Teaming with Giles&Brother designer, Philip Crangi, Liberty United's first collection includes gunmetal bangles, rings and necklaces that are each engraved with the gun serial number as well as the company's motto 'remade in the U.S.A' – a clever way to convey optimism, love for both artisanship and their country. 'Creating a company that uses its business to change a social problem seems to be particularly difficult. In my case, I seem to be interested in tackling extremely hard social issues that will require a great deal of change', Peter says, 'this increases the difficulty, because it means that minds and behaviour have to change a lot to make it work'.

In the UK, Gemfields, the world's largest producer of rare coloured gemstones, is another corporation contributing to the same change in perspective. For once it is a mining company - a fact that would seem antonymic to sustainability at first sight - and one that is set to be the role model for all mining companies. 'At Gemfields we take compliance with regulatory guidelines as a given, a starting point; however we aim to go much further. We are not interested in ticking boxes; we want to create a tangible, unarguable case for the benefits of corporate social responsibility. We want to be seen as good citizens of the world and, in particular, of the communities in which we operate', Ashleigh Stirling the company's communication and PR manager, says. Kagem is the emerald mine at the heart of Gemfields' operations, and is located in the Lufwanyama district of Zambia, several hundred miles north of the capital, Lusaka. It is a remote and poor part of the country, where employment is low and opportunities few. 'Here we are working closely with local community leaders, the government and select NGOs to ensure that our presence has the maximum, positive, impact on those who live in the area. We employ nearly 700 people at the mine and in ancillary jobs, have either built or provided material support to several community schools, opened a medical center and an HIV/Aids clinic, and started a very successful agricultural assistance program that has helped farmers to improve and diversify their crop yields; all of these projects are overseen by a full-time community project coordinator, employed by Gemfields to ensure their effective implementation', Ashleigh describes, 'moreover, none of the projects has been imposed on the community – they are only agreed on after consultation and discussion with all interested parties'. That is possibly the most innovative and powerful act a mining

company can implement, as they are usually and for good reasons, caricatured as ripping the resources of the region they operate in, siphoning the profits out the country and leaving permanent environmental damage after they leave. Gemfields is proof that none of that is a given. ‘The respect for the environment is central to Gemfields’ approach to sustainable mining practices. We use sophisticated tools and techniques allowing us to greatly reduce the impact of our activities on the environment; we don’t use any chemicals during the mining process; we collaborate with like-minded organizations that share our concerns, such as the World Land Trust, an international conservation NGO that buys, preserves and protects threatened habitats worldwide’, Ashleigh says. Gemfields supplies 20% of the world’s high quality emeralds, and amethysts from Zambia as well as rubies from Mozambique, and some major jewellery brands are clients as seen in the ‘Mila Kunis by Mario Sorrenti’ latest media campaign. One emerald and diamond necklace by Fabergé, in particular, is a spectacular ambassador of what Gemfields embodies: sustainability, responsibility and beauty, all rolled into one.

Further good news is that one does not need to break the bank to own covetable, sustainably made jewellery, and hereby pave the way for affordable ethical consumption as seen with the affordable Liberty United range. Sustainable practices are just starting to reach Luxury giants, whereas they have been the core philosophy of hordes of internationally lesser-known passionate designers for years now. There used to be a time when ‘eco-friendly’ fashion could resonate as functional, though ugly. Times have changed partly thanks to those designers who have reconciled good desirable design and environment-friendly credentials. They could blend in the ranks of any of the other great jewellery makers out there, if it was not for the one thing that sets them apart: their unabating commitment to ethics that is not brandished as the prime reason why one must absolutely buy their products, but as an inherent aspect of their holistic vision that enchants potential clients. Bottom line is that the design should be foremost good, and only then will sustainability come into consideration; however it almost always is the defining addition that helps seal the deal.

Back in 2005, Spanish-born, UK-based Arabel Lebrusan was travelling internationally as a freelance jewellery designer, getting to see the world of manufacture and to witness the lack of working condition standards within the industry, as a result. ‘I thought back then “I have to do something to change this and to raise awareness about these issues”’, she notes. One of the first Fairtrade gold licensees since 2011, Arabel focuses on two lines of action when implementing sustainability in her work: first, through the sourcing of the materials and second, through the techniques she uses. The former is all about the

question of securing the best supply sources: ‘it has been, and it still is, a very bumpy road. One of the first comments I got, and I still remember, was: “You sell your soul to the devil when you get into the jewellery business”. From that moment on, I knew I had to put a lot of hard work and ask lots of questions to guarantee my materials could be traceable. Consumers are becoming more sceptical about what IS versus what is NOT sustainable and ethical. Many brands out there are putting ethical tags to their products for marketing purposes, when they should not, and this is very detrimental for all of us. I believe clarity and not marketing tags are the way forward’, she says. Her ethical gemstones come from a company in the United States, diamonds from Canada and Fairtrade gold from Colombia. ‘Sustainability means that everything is more expensive: the processes of extracting materials from the ground, the processes of transforming those materials, how to assemble those materials and how to keep those materials segregated from the normal ones. However if we all would be doing the same, sustainable jewellery wouldn’t have to be more expensive’, she ponders. Cost is not the only parameter that influences the design process: ‘the fact that not all materials are available in an “ethical form” is a restriction that contributes to my creativity, against all odds: what I can use versus what I cannot use’, she says. The benefits of rejuvenating the filigree style so reminiscent of her Spanish roots in contemporary collections, as well as tapping into the huge bridal market with ethical wedding rings, are twofold: Arabel is able to establish a signature creative style that appeals to a large loyal audience all the while reifying the concept of meaningful on one of the most important occasions in people’s lives. ‘You are buying something valuable, which has not only monetary value but also emotional value, all the more for wedding bands: wouldn’t you prefer to know that all the materials and processes used to make it, have not damaged humans, societies, the environment and has helped to keep cultures and heritage alive?’ she asks.

The limited supply of sustainable resources (especially gemstones) is an obstacle that could sometimes derail the plans of a sustainably minded designer, and so it can be really time consuming – and a contraindication for any faint-hearted type – to identify the sources. Hattie Rickards is a British designer who knows this all too well. ‘My jewellery is not fully sustainable yet but I have decided to start by sourcing more sustainable gold and decided that the Fairtrade gold offered the most simple and scalable answer. Firstly I needed to source Fairtrade gold which took a lot of research but once I had found the mine, I then became one of the first 20 licensees of Fairtrade Gold in the UK so it was then a case of finding the manufacturers here in England who could import the Fairtrade gold and then produce my designs’, Hattie explains, ‘I have an incredibly close relationship with my makers. We are on the telephone most days and there are plenty of visits to the

workshop making sure that each step of the production is done precisely how I want it. This way I can incorporate that British sense of quality workmanship that is so wonderful into my work'. Besides there is significant progress being made and ethical jewellery supply chains are appearing - Fairtrade and Fairmined metals being one good example. Fairtrade gold comes at premium cost but this means that the miners receive a Fairtrade premium payment, which is democratically reinvested in community projects and improving miners' operations. This is calculated as 10% of the applicable LBMA (London Bullion Market Association) fixing. For Ecological Gold (gold extracted without the use of chemicals) this is calculated as 15% of the applicable LBMA fixing, premiums that Hattie absorbs within her margins so that it does not increase her final retail prices.

'The Fairtrade Foundation which has introduced the world's first independent ethical certification system for gold made the challenge easier. However initially it took a lot of research to find my source of gold, but even in the short space of time since then, the Fairtrade and Fairmined gold certification has been launched with great success, although too many people still don't know that Fairtrade gold exists. If we can all spread the word more, people will understand and start to help making a difference which is so desperately needed', she insists. Her gold is sourced from the Oro Verde mine in Columbia, which helps traditional gold and platinum mining communities to comply with environmental and social criteria. Each day, the families who have collectively owned the land for generations safely and sustainably pick the metals. The metal is mined using 'panning techniques' which involve extracting the gravel from the riverbeds during the summer months. 'Our gemstones are from India and Thailand and the diamonds are from Antwerp and Africa', she adds, 'we use both recycled gold and Fairtrade gold, specifically 18ct Fairtrade gold for my collection pieces and for some of my bespoke commissions. But I do get a lot of clients bringing old pieces of family jewellery that tend to be standard gold and we recycle the gold and put it towards a new design. This has become increasingly popular and I really enjoy working on these projects because it enables us to keep the sentimental value of the piece whilst being transformed into a piece that will be worn and loved'. Hattie has always been enthusiastic about jewellery so she studied for a BA Hons in Jewellery Design at Central Saint Martins College. It was on this course where she realised that she wanted to turn her passion for design and her unconventional sense of beauty into a career. 'Following this I spent five fascinating years working for another great British jewellery designer – Solange Azagury Partridge, where I learned about production and business. My final two years were spent helping set up her store on Madison Avenue in New York, which was an incredible experience. I returned from New York and realised it was time to launch my own

brand - Hattie Rickards Jewellery - which quickly drew an international clientele of jewellery connoisseurs and creative people in their quest for individual fine jewellery pieces', she says. To date, she has launched two collections and embarked on collaborations taking her to Afghanistan and Africa, and she was even awarded the 'Bright Young Gem of 2011' title from International Jewellery London. 'Also recently I was commissioned by the World Gold Council to make a cuff for the Ultimate Fashion Show in Cannes', she muses, 'through these early years of the business, I have learned where my real talent and interest lies - creating bespoke and personal pieces for individuals. So, in November 2012 we launched our bespoke service from HRJ London, which has been a huge success. Each time a client finds me, it is for something new and different. This is the challenge that I embrace and love'. The use of colours is her trademark and each of her collections has a key theme, such as 'Revealed' which takes its inspiration from the natural world with a playful twist that is demonstrated through dynamic and kinetic designs, whereas 'GEO' was inspired by connection, the idea of many becoming one. 'With jewellery it's the thought that counts. Research reveals that jewellery bought for a special occasion holds greater value and significance if it carries the Fairtrade Marks. Jewellery is an investment and to know that your particular piece has 100% traceable supply chain and that the miners are being paid a fair price is invaluable', she declares. 'My clients tend to range from 30 – 65 male and female. My work seems to attract a lot of architects but also varies from farmers to rock stars! They tend not to know of Fairtrade jewellery before they sit down with me but fortunately their morals are very similar which explains why they come to me and as soon as they are made aware, they don't seem to turn back! Even if the clients have never heard about Fairtrade gold before, as soon as they do, all the repeat purchases are produced out of Fairtrade gold. I believe it is the responsibility of both the designer and the customer to demand greater ethical visibility and responsibility from our suppliers – only that way can we help to shift the industry', Hattie concludes.

New York-based Natalie Frigo would completely agree, as this talented designer is herself a proponent of the absolute importance to know-what-you-buy. 'How great it is to own something that is cared for from start to finish. You will want to cherish it and it will become a part of your individual style. Something that is "fast fashion" you might not remember in a few months – where is the fun in that?' Natalie quips. 'In the short run, it is more expensive to have jewellery made locally and to ensure your stones are mined and cut from protected workers. But the alternative is not an option; why have something "beautiful" that harmed people along the way? I work with a certified green caster who only uses recycled metals. I source my gemstones from three dealers, all of whom are concerned

about transparency from mine to consumer. Also, my production is done in New York City', she details. Her epiphany for using sustainable materials came when she heard that mining one-ounce of freshly mined gold creates 20-30 tons of waste. 'Is that one of the craziest things you have ever heard?' she says, 'considering a gold ring is usually around ½ an ounce, it doesn't make sense that we don't change our mining practices. Once I started searching out recycled metals for jewellery, I found out about some of the problems with commercially produced stones (unsafe working conditions, children forced to work in near-slavery conditions as lapidaries because of their excellent eye sight, non-living wages, etc.); and when you think that recycled gold is absolutely indistinguishable from mined gold, it is easy to switch'. It is true that the issues in the jewellery industry are similar to the problems in the garment industry, so that the more transparency all around, the better it is for everyone involved. Interestingly Natalie also confirms that a pro-sustainability agenda affects the design process: 'it is always on my mind when I am designing because there are limitations with sustainable production. After I design something, I usually ask, "Now, how am I going to make this?"' For example, ethically sourced stones can cost anywhere from 2 times to 10 times more per carat than a standard commercial stone. Also, labour in New York City is more expensive than a lot of other places in the world, so, like most designers, how much a piece will cost from inception to finished product greatly influences your designs'. Small metal treasures Natalie used to admire as a child when she was visiting Chicago museums have turned out to be one leading inspiration of her intricate metalwork, and her Etruscan looking creations are nothing short of modern antiques.

Sometimes the events that lead towards sustainable jewellery design are nothing short of coincidence, or not. French cinematographer and film director, Ilan Teboul is a case in point. Although his father is a maître joaillier and fashion jewellery designer himself, scripts and cameras had always been Ilan's main passions and following his father's footsteps were not his main obsession, despite designing his first jewellery collection at age 12 during school holidays. This all changed the day he was shooting a documentary about illegal gold panning and discovered to his absolute horror that by using mercury, the ravages of the practice have extreme consequences: massive deforestation, poisoning of the water and ultimately no life can ever grow back on a soil contaminated with the substance. 'I immediately asked myself: how can one make sustainable and sound jewellery? Recycling appeared to be the best option and Little Pépité was born', he recalls, 'it was difficult at the beginning because the public would lack education on the topic and most retailers would consequently shy away from telling the customers the gold had been recycled! A silly taboo since most maîtres joailliers have been recycling

gold for years. With my father, we browse auction houses to purchase old jewellery pieces and work using *compte-poids* (weight accounts) with our suppliers. The gold may be cheaper to buy but its transformation makes it on par with non-recycled gold cost wise', he explains. The use of recycled works not only for the obvious ethical advantages, but also for Little Pépite's concept: 'through the brand, I try to educate people to the fact that over consumption of non-durable objects is a scourge. I am also very attuned to my carbon footprint: importing gold from afar, to transform it in my Paris workshop and then fly the finished pieces abroad, would not make any sense. That is why all my sourcing and production are based in Paris, unlike most other brands, with ethical credential or not, who subcontract abroad', he shares. Little Pépite creations are imbued in poetic grace: each piece is a construct of delicate lines and ravishing airiness. Less is more in desirable fashion. 'I focus on a certain purity of the design to confer timelessness. My father is very present during this stage as we brainstorm over the preliminary sketches sometimes for months until there is nothing left to change and the piece can join the collection', Ilan describes.

Akiko Fuchigami, the New York-based, Japanese designer behind AF HOUSE, shares this same environmental concern as a way of life beyond jewellery designing itself. 'In 2006 I started to use solid gold that can be recycled, however my shift to full sustainability has been gradual. Each time I see natural calamities in the world, every time I see pictures of wild animal suffering from climate change, every time I see uncontrollable behaviour of mass-production & consumption, I vow to implement sustainable changes in my life and work. This isn't perfect and it is very much a work in progress', Akiko shares. Notwithstanding the simplicity and small scale of the creations that are intrinsically Japanese in all their innocence and prettiness, one of the main decisions for such a 'low key' design is to have a minimal impact on the environment. It is also appropriate that the inspiration for most designs is animalistic: each little charm becomes a reminder that all living species beyond our own are precious and worth fighting for. 'For the Miniature Animal Collection, I keep it small and I use less material so as to have a minimum burden on the Earth. I also use more easily recyclable-material such as solid metal and lesser-disposable stones like diamonds. The main technique used is laser cutting and the diamonds come from Russia and Africa, and are cut in India. They are absolutely ethically mined, however it is still challenging to guarantee their origin', Akiko says, 'in general, I try not to waste, be humble and simply follow the rule of *Wabi Sabi*, the Japanese belief that beauty comes from a place of austerity and refinement. With this attitude, one can have compassion for the environment and I feel my work in the fashion industry is then balanced'. Akiko firmly believes that

the jewellery industry could go sustainable all the way, more easily than the fashion/garment industry in comparison, simply due to the fact that metals are highly recyclable. ‘We don’t have much time to save our planet and its creatures. The Fashion & Jewellery industries have huge power and they could help save them by choosing sustainable practises. So be stylish all the while demanding from these industries that they go to the next level’, Akiko defiantly suggests.

Surely it could sound all doom and gloom but we own the power to change things, no matter how cliché this may sound, it is a simple and reassuring truth. As Nicola Giuggioli from ECO AGE says: ‘governments have failed to realise that it is only through a major shift in our global economic system towards sustainable practices that we can find the solution to most of the problems facing our civilization today. But of course the actions required are often considered “political suicide” for those sitting at the very top of our administration system, so we ought to pressure them’. The change will be local for no better choice and one can rejoice about how great it is that we can now enjoy desirable products that do not wreck the planet. As we have seen, creativity can discriminate how it operates and that is a key issue. As these designers have decided to make responsible choices that are not detrimental to their creativity, we can also tune in and validate their efforts, because at the end the day, shifting to sustainable resources - fairtrade / fairmined gemstones and metals, recycled gold – and imposing ethical contributions – helping the communities at the source, banning techniques that inexorably destroy the environment – are foremost benevolent more than commercial actions: as we share just one planet, we will all benefit from it.

So next time you shop for a meaningful piece of jewellery, do some research, ask questions and go for the one that will make you feel **truly** better about yourself.