



The darker side of dazzle

The ethics of the jewellery trade are murky and the environmental impact potentially devastating, but some in the industry are making a concerted effort to source sustainable and ethical gems and precious metals.

Words by Sue White

If there's an upside to the current global economic meltdown – and there may be a few – perhaps it's that the 'bling' bubble has finally burst. Since last year, the jewel-encrusted have become slightly more discreet about flashing their rocks; over-the-top is officially sooooo 2008.

Finances aside, there are serious environmental and ethical questions around the jewellery industry. A peek behind the scenes is shocking. Do you love the gleam of gold? The release of cyanide in the extraction process is just the tip of an environmentally dirty iceberg. Dazzled by shiny gems? Much of the fiddly work cutting and polishing the world's precious stones, such as rubies and sapphires, is done by children.

There is a profound disconnect between where a metal or stone is sourced and how it finally adorns our fingers, wrist or neck. Digging for answers (no pun intended), you get a sense that from the environmental to the ethical, the big picture is worryingly bleak.

"There are a lot of problems with jewellery," says Cameron Neil, from Fairtrade Labelling Australia and New Zealand (FTLANZ). "There is good stuff going on, but there aren't large amounts of good news."

"In the industry, nearly every stage has an environmentally detrimental impact," says Ben Manning of Utopian Creations. The Adelaide-based jeweller makes every effort to ensure his products are people, planet and animal friendly.

"To start with, metals are mined from the ground. For every wedding ring, 20 tonnes of waste are produced, and large amounts of land need to be cleared for the mine, which can lead to a breakdown of the ecology in the area," he says.

One of the UK's first ethical jewellers, Greg Valerio, from Cred Jewellery, believes it's wrong for the industry to continue this way. "We cannot sell a product which carries a luxury tag and is romanced and sold exclusively as a luxury, aspirational commodity, yet is 100 per cent dependent on the most environmentally damaging and polluting industry in the world."

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But the concerns aren't purely environmental, not by a long stretch. When Queensland jeweller Melinda Nugent first learned about the issues of child labour and practices of jewel cutting factories, her ethical radar went on high alert.

"I realised I was involved in something I couldn't stomach. In India child labour is used for cutting work," she says. "Children are so young that the rods and cones in their eyes are not fully developed, and because they are doing such close work for hours, their eye development is interrupted. Many children are blind by twelve."

"Sustainable" and "ethical" jewellery may be two different beasts, but the terms are often used interchangeably, perhaps partly due to the times we live in: the fair trade movement is gaining increased market acceptance at the very time we are struggling to address global environmental challenges. It is inevitable, then, that for many people, humanitarian and environmental considerations are increasingly intertwined. "To me, they are one and the same," says Manning.

In purely ethical terms, decrying conflict diamonds is a no-brainer for most of us. These diamonds are sold by rebel groups (most famously in Sierra Leone) to fund terrorist activities, human rights abuses, or the purchase of guns.

A few years before Leonardo DiCaprio portrayed a diamond smuggler on the big screen in *Blood Diamond*, global concern

G TIP: Join the campaign to clean up the gold industry at www.nodirtygold.org.

about conflict diamonds led to the Kimberley Process, a certification scheme aiming to ensure the diamond trade does not fund violence. While 75 countries have signed up – including major diamond producers, exporters and importers – many in the industry believe that the non-legally binding status of the process isn't strong enough to eradicate the problem entirely.

The 700-plus manufacturers, retailers and wholesalers who make up the membership of the Jewellery Association of Australia (JAA), also sign an additional annual ethical agreement, says JAA CEO, Ian Hadassin.

"It says they will always implement the World Jewellery Federation system of procedures to prevent trade in conflict diamonds, and make every effort not to deal with companies that use child labour, fail to provide adequate occupational health and safety conditions, or do not respect the environment."

Admirable goals, but as Hadassin himself readily admits, Australian jewellers wanting to do the right thing soon discover the enormity of the task. "Finding out if companies use child labour is very difficult. The importer sells stones locally, and the retailer

The fashionista's perspective

"I find the level of awareness among precious jewellery consumers is pretty low. There is a feeling they don't really want to know."

There is a very small shift towards ethical fine jewellery, but when compared with the revolutions in consumer trends in food, cosmetics and most recently clothing for fair trade or organics, it is negligible.

I have always wished one of the rap stars who promote bling would get behind the cause – Kanye West made a good start with his 2005 song "Diamonds from Sierra Leone".

Not only could it make a difference for younger consumers: it is Africans who suffer most from the vile trade in conflict diamonds and also in diamond mining generally.

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won't know where they come from. Most of Australia's stones [come] from China and what happens there we don't know."

Hadassin likes to think that most of JAA's members do the right thing, but when asked directly how a retailer (or the JAA) would know, he is honest: "It's an impossible task...it's virtually impossible for us to monitor."

The industry lacks large-scale systems to trace where your jewellery comes from. Unless your retailer has put in substantial effort to verify ethical origins (see "Vote with your wallet", p59), it all comes down to individual honesty. A wholesaler may say their product comes from a factory operating under humanitarian conditions, but there's no onus of proof.

Even the question of "What is ethical jewellery?" is not easily answered, because, as with all ethical inquiries, the answer is subjective and addresses a huge range of issues. »





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Ethical sources

Gold

- The Association for Responsible Mining (www.communitymining.com) provides an ethical source of gold, mainly from Latin America (used by Cred Jewellery).
- Look out for an upcoming agreement that will allow fair trade gold to be certified and sold internationally.
- Utopian Creations use recycled gold from old mobile phones and computers. Ethical Jewellery Australia recycles the gold shavings from other jewellers.

Silver

- Recycled silver is out there but most jewellers don't collect it.
- Utopian Creations source their recycled silver from photographic and X-ray waste, as well as recovering copper from old mobile phone chargers.

Gemstones

- At the time of writing, there are no guaranteed ethical sources for precious stones such as sapphires (mined in Kashmir, Burma, Madagascar and Sri Lanka), rubies (from Thailand, Cambodia and Afghanistan) and aquamarines (from Sri Lanka, Russia and Brazil). There are no fair trade regulations in place and small children are often employed to cut and polish the stones.
- Diamonds have come under particular scrutiny and there are now more ethical options available – look for diamonds mined and cut in Australia.

» At Cred Jewellery, it took Valerio and his business partner *eight years* to track down a source of gold they were convinced was sourced responsibly. "The jewellery industry as a whole is amazingly un-transparent. It's very, very secretive. But the Holy Grail for us was to get transparency. We had to know where our materials were coming from," he says.

Valerio ended up sourcing his ethically produced gold from South America, but encountered derision from industry colleagues when they heard he wanted to let customers know exactly where their wedding rings came from. "Nobody in the UK was doing this in 1996. Everybody thought we were completely bonkers."

Not only did Valerio prove the naysayers wrong, but his partnership with the Alliance for Responsible Mining (ARM)



has allowed him to work directly with small-scale miners who use good labour practices that actually improve the social and environmental conditions in the communities where they mine.

"In Colombia we've witnessed community miners taking over old disused mines left by the large-scale companies, going back over those sites to reclaim what [was] left of the gold deposits, and reforesting. They are clearing up all the mess the big companies left when they left Colombia because of the violence."

With Cred Jewellery's wedding rings now sought after by couples across the UK and further afield, Valerio's long-held vision to see fair trade gold on the market may soon become a reality.

"ARM and the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation (FLO) are currently working together to bring a fair trade gold to the international market, hopefully in 2010," he says.

Nugent's business, Ethical Jewellery Australia, is based on commitment rings (of the wedding, engagement and you-are-really-important-to-me-but-this-is-not-an-offer-of-marriage kind). Her unease about the diamond industry has meant a long slog to come up with a product she is happy with.

To allay her environmental concerns, Nugent buys from a refiner monitored by the US Environmental Protection Agency, sources Australian diamonds so she can ensure they are conflict free, and makes her own jewellery from recycled metals rather than buying from overseas to avoid child labour issues. "You can't do mass produced stuff in the way we're currently doing it," she admits.

Buying tips for the concerned consumer

1. Ask questions
2. Buy from people you believe in
3. Avoid conflict diamonds (and ideally have them Australian-cut)
4. Buy vintage
5. Buy recycled

"Boycotting isn't the answer," says Cameron Neil from FTLANZ. "There are poor people dependent on this for their livelihoods. The question is always: what is the basis for the claims being made? Are we doing more than just reducing harm? Is my purchase actually making a positive difference to the community?"



While Manning, Valerio and Nugent all happily report that demand from consumers is growing rapidly, Cameron Neil from FTLANZ says it's unsurprising that ethical and sustainable jewellers choose to address production issues first and foremost.

"Small operators tend to look at solutions around manufacture – how it's put together, fair wages – rather than extraction, which really has to involve the bigger players," he says.

Ultimately, the key to changing unethical processes lies with demand. Yolande Kyngdon, an honours student in the Faculty of International Studies at the University of NSW in Sydney, is currently conducting research on the feasibility of fair trade diamonds (see box below on how to participate).

"I worked for a diamond merchant and it became clear that there wasn't a section of the market dealing with ethical consumption. It spurred me on," she says.

Vote with your wallet

www.utopiancreations.com.au
www.maddesigns.org.au
www.credjewellery.com
www.ethicaljewels.com.au
www.oxfamshop.org.au

Get involved

University of NSW researcher Yolande Kyngdon is looking for people to participate in a short online survey about fair trade diamonds: www.fairtraderesearch.com

If she's correct, and if projects like the FLO/ARM partnership on fair trade gold take off, the big guys may finally start listening:

"The idea would be to give consumers a chance to vote with their dollars, and to raise awareness, which in turn puts pressure on bigger business to change," says Neil.

Until then, Kyngdon's own solution to the issue is simple, but radical: "I just don't wear jewellery." **G**

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"I've had a lot of opposition from other retailers, from people saying, 'You can't do it.' I've proved them wrong and it is getting easier, because people care more," she says.

Manning, who aims to avoid harm to people, planet or animals as a result of his business, has yet to find a diamond source he believes in. "Argyle Diamonds may be OK environmentally in Australia, but they are owned by Rio Tinto and you're just helping their profits in other parts of the world where there are no controls," he says. (See Green Business, p88, for info on steps being taken by Rio Tinto to reduce its environmental impact).

He's also unimpressed by Canadian diamonds, which are often touted as being 'conflict-free,' he says. But the raw products are mined out of the ground in a sub-arctic environment, Manning points out, by trucking everything in and increasing the rate of permafrost melt.

Manning spent five years investigating every stage of the jewellery process to make sure products matched his ethics on environmental, humanitarian and animal welfare grounds.

"I am only person selling 100-per-cent sterling recycled silver, which I get mainly from photographic and X-ray waste, while the copper I use is from mobile phone chargers collected by Mobile Muster," he says. Manning also sells to other jewellers the sustainable supplies he's worked so hard to source, and is a proponent of industry education.

"Our industry really lags behind in this stuff, I think, because of our links to mining. It's satisfying to be able to have an impact."



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Utopian Creations is offering one lucky **G** reader the chance to win this gorgeous recycled sterling silver pendant and matching pair of earrings from the Cocoon range, valued at \$260. To be in the running, email your name, address, phone number and the word 'Cocoon' by 10 June 2009 to competitions@gmagazine.com.au, or post to G Magazine's Utopian Creations Competition, Locked Bag 5555, St Leonards NSW 1590.

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