

# BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS

The new designers revolutionising the jewellery industry. By *Jessica Diamond*

If you've bought yourself a piece of fine jewellery in the last couple of years, something that you love and wear all the time, I'm afraid you're complicit in a revolution. But change in this context is good. Over the last five years a plethora of brilliant, female-led, affordable fine jewellery brands have burst onto the scene and quickly gained traction. Gone are the days of simply shopping at the big household-name brands and definitely gone are the days of waiting for anyone else to buy you something.

This revolution is defined by an all-new style: minimalism is out and stacking is king. Think multiple rings, bracelets that extend up the wrist, and the #neckmess – an Instagram-led trend that sees multiple necklaces and chains curated by the wearer. Forget also any idea that fine jewellery is kept for special occasions. This new, relaxed style invites a sling-on and wear-anytime attitude. This is jewellery for all day, every day; a natural, easy extension of personal style for all ages.

Two Milan-based designers are at the forefront of this change – the eponymous brand Bea Bongiasca and Aliita, founded by Cynthia Vilchez Castiglioni. The former's signature pieces are vine rings, with brightly coloured enamel bands that twist around the finger and tipped with a gemstone, such as topaz or amethyst. With a starting price of £395, it invites the idea of wearing multiples that appear



to wind across the fingers.

Aliita's pieces are similarly accessible (with prices from £105) and, importantly, fun. Dinosaurs, champagne coupes and jellyfish are turned into rings and pendants, an aesthetic that Castiglioni describes as 'elegant with a touch of irony and fun'.

Similar in ethos but at a higher price point are jewellers Nadine Ghosn and Tatiana Van Lancker of Van Robot. Both have built businesses around highly contemporary, unexpected motifs, Ghosn with her hamburger rings (and most recently a collection inspired by Lego) and Van Lancker with bejewelled robots that she describes as 'sci-fi meets Art Deco'. Ghosn has eschewed conventional outlets and instead relies on a network of highly connected women: 'Many of my clients hear of me through word of mouth and this creates a positive and genuine trickle-down effect.' As a result, 80 per cent of her sales are women buying for themselves.

Otiumberg was founded by sisters Rosanna and Christie Wollenberg in 2016, largely in response to them being unable to find jewellery that they wanted to buy. Both had multiple ear piercings (another huge trend of the last five years)

**FROM ABOVE:** A model wears Bea Bongiasca jewellery; Otiumberg ribbon hoops, £190; Nadine Ghosn; Cynthia Vilchez Castiglioni of Aliita; Nadine Ghosn burger stacking set, \$13,860

and as a result designed an initial offering of ear huggies and hoops that have proved to be bestsellers (their gold vermeil chunky hoops retail for £100).

'Eighty-five per cent of our customer base is women,' says Rosanna, 'and in roughly the same age bracket as we are; in other words, we are our customer.' Last year's Ensemble collection in solid 9ct gold and diamonds has increased the Otiumberg price point (the most expensive is £1,755) but as their audience has grown older so their disposable income has increased exponentially.

The rise of the celebrity influencer has been key in driving this new fine jewellery wave. Bea Bongiasca's pieces are regularly seen on singer Dua Lipa, actor Florence Pugh and model Bella Hadid. Milanese brand Eéra's oh-so-cool padlock and key earrings, bracelets and anklets have a cult following and have been seen on January Jones and Sienna Miller. Its latest Oasis collection taps into the neon trend with pieces seemingly dip-dyed in electric shades of pink, orange and blue. Its aesthetic neatly sums up this new age of fine jewellery with utilitarian motifs reworked into covetable pieces that connect with a highly engaged, fashion-savvy audience.

Jewellery with a deeper, more esoteric meaning has also performed well in these unusual times. Almasika's signature pieces designed by its founder Catherine Sarr have resonated with customers looking for talismanic jewels – especially the gold cowrie shell necklaces and rings. Similarly, British brand NeverNot's eye pendants (in colourful enamels that can be customised) are the perfect intersection of lucky charm and playful, precious token.

While many retail sectors have slowed in the pandemic this new wave of designers has bucked the trend. As bricks and mortar sales tanked, online sales surged. Lucy Crowther, gemmologist and founder of bespoke and ready-to-wear coloured gemstone ring brand Minka, designs 'cocktail rings for every day'. Since the beginning of 2020 she's noticed many transactions coming through Instagram. 'I think because of lockdown people had more time on their hands. And after the year we've had, people are treating themselves too.'



**FROM ABOVE:** Almasika ruby medallion, £770; Romy Blanga and Chiara Capitani, founders of Eéra; Catherine Sarr of Almasika; Tatiana Van Lancker of Van Robot; Denim Van Robot pendant, £2,750; Natia Chkhartishvili and Nina Dzhokhadze of NeverNot; Minka 18ct yellow gold, mint green tourmaline and diamond ring, £8,500

Otiumberg noticed a similar spike. As Rosanna says, 'we realised that more than ever customers want to invest in well-made jewellery for everyday wear and to celebrate the small moments as well as the big ones. In 2020 we grew 90 per cent on the previous year.' Aliita reported a staggering 200 per cent increase in online sales from 2019 to 2020, proof if ever it were needed that the fine jewellery market is not just surviving, it's thriving.

With all these designers the underlying intention remains that these are pieces to keep. Although the act of adornment may have become less formal, less stylised and in many ways more personalised, don't think for one minute that these jewels aren't meant to be worn now and treasured forever. ■