

Ex-MD shines at making jewellery

Carolyn Kan's label, Carrie K, has seen profits jump and is making inroads abroad

BY YASMINE YAHYA

IT WAS a huge gamble but entrepreneur Carolyn Kan's risky move to abandon a successful career to pursue her passion of making jewellery has certainly paid off.

Her label Carrie K has been in operation for less than three years but it has already caught the attention of a leading Japanese fashion retailer, with her pieces being sold in Tokyo.

In what she calls her "past life", Ms Kan, 39, was by all accounts a high-flier.

At just 29, she became the Singapore managing director of M&C Saatchi, making her one of a handful of women here to head a multinational advertising agency.

But Ms Kan realised her true calling was in making jewellery after an epiphany in Florence, Italy.

"In 2008, I took a year off from work and ended up in Florence, where I met a silversmith who taught me to make my first piece of jewellery," she recalls.

Never mind that the silversmith spoke no English, and Ms Kan spoke little Italian – the lessons were conducted via basic sign language.

"I made my first ring within a week. It was just one of those moments. It had been raining, and when I finished the last bit of polishing, the sun shone through and I just felt, 'Wow, this is what I want to do for the rest of my life!'"

Ms Kan returned to Singapore in July 2009 and founded Carrie K. That first year, she threw herself into learning more about the craft of jewellery design.

She enrolled in a course at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and travelled the world to learn about gems as well as find suppliers and artisans who could bring her designs to life.

This proved quite a challenge. "I was sourcing for things that were not so perfect, and it was really difficult because traditional jewellery is beautifully cut and symmetrical, whereas our style is really about celebrating imperfections rather than things that are flawless," she says.

Ms Kan had to go as far as Uruguay to find someone who could supply her with raw amethyst.

Amethyst suppliers usually cut away the bottom layers of brown and white from the mineral and sell only the purple portion, but Ms Kan wanted to make de-



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signs that included the gem in its pre-cut layered form.

She still designs all the jewellery in her collections, but makes only some of them herself in her studio in Bukit Timah Road.

The rest are made by a global network of artisans, from silversmiths in Thailand to leathersmiths in Turkey.

Once this network was settled, Ms Kan focused on distribution.

"We didn't want a shotgun approach. We wanted to be associated with the right kind of retailers. They have to appreciate things that are a little bit unconventional and be passionate about quality craftsmanship," she says.

REVELATION

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Ms Carolyn Kan, on how she stumbled onto jewellery making in Florence, Italy

Quintessential at Pacific Plaza was the first shop to stock Carrie K jewellery, with The Society of Black Sheep at Marina Bay Sands next.

Today, Carrie K is carried at six stores islandwide, including Strangelets in Tiong Bahru and Hansel at Mandarin Gallery.

And the business is growing at a blistering pace. In 2009, when the label was founded, Carrie K pulled in \$19,000 in sales. Last year, that jumped to \$211,000. All profits have been reinvested into growing the business, Ms Kan said.

She is now setting her sights on taking Carrie K overseas, a process that has involved participating in several trade shows over the past year, including the Paris Fashion Week.

It was there that she made contacts who introduced her to Mr Yuji Yamamoto, a Japanese businessman who runs a retail chain called Make One's Mark, which houses up-and-coming fashion talent under one roof and supports them through branding and retail management.

Mr Yamamoto is also famous for being the son of popular Japanese fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto, who created the Y-3 label.

He was in Singapore in November last year and visited Ms Kan's studio. Two days later, when he returned to Tokyo, he e-mailed her expressing his interest to sell Carrie K jewellery at Make One's Mark.

Ms Kan describes this as being a dream come true, to have her jewellery sold in Tokyo, although she also hopes to venture into more markets this year.

She is particularly interested in South Korea, and has received some expressions of interest from retailers in the Middle East.

✉ yasminey@sph.com.sg