

LOVE AND SEX: INNER SHINE

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Reflective Images digs deep for beauty.



Conflict diamonds. Dirty gold. Blood rubies.

These terms reflect the not-so-secret dirty secrets of the jewelry industry, a multibillion-dollar sector that, for the most part, has yet to develop strong guidelines to ensure that the bling around your neck didn't come at the expense of people and land on another continent.

The film *Blood Diamonds* helped spur media interest and public awareness about conflict diamonds. But the 'ethical jewelry' movement extends beyond one region and one gem. It is concerned with all the factors, from the effect of mining on land to the conditions of the people who do that mining.

For Marc Choyt, president of Santa Fe's Reflective Images, the seeds of desire to transform the industry began in 1995 when he and his wife, Helen Chantler, founded the jewelry company out of their home.

Choyt was a teacher at the Santa Fe Indian School and Chantler was a bench jeweler at the time.

"We had both traveled a lot internationally," Choyt, who volunteered in an orphanage in Haiti for two

years, says. "I was interested in business from the angle of social entrepreneurship, as a means of creating good in the world. Helen, too, had these ideals. We wanted to create a model that was different from other businesses, a model that could benefit the community and do no harm to the ecology."



Choyt describes their initial attempts as 'spotty' because "When you're starting out, to implement your ideals, you have to compromise. But it always bothered us that the jewelry sector is a very toxic sector, toxic to the environment and in terms of how it's treated people around the world, specifically, and more recently, around issues that have come up, such as blood diamonds and dirty gold."

As the company's president, Choyt leads the company's marketing and social activism components. At home, this means providing the 10-person staff with competitive wages, health care and retirement benefits; using wind and solar power; and offsetting carbon emissions from both production and travel by donating to river restoration projects.

At the global level, Choyt's blog, www.fairjewelry.org, is one of the leading online resources for following the issue of ethical jewelry. The company also created a system known as FRE: Fair, Responsible, Ecological. This system, radical in the industry, promotes complete transparency by allowing consumers to source potential jewelry purchases from Reflective Images on the company's Web site (www.celticjewelry.com/fre.php). For example, a customer considering buying a Capris Watch Locket can look up the working conditions under which the locket was made, the source of the gold and the silver in the piece, as well as those components of the piece for which the company cannot vouch.

Choyt has documented this practice of transparency in a recently published e-book, *The Ethical Jewelry Handbook*, to help other jewelers interested in adopting the FRE system.

And, within a year, Reflective Images will be one of two US companies to offer third-party fair-trade gold wedding rings from the UK.

Reflective Images' line is built on a Celtic design motif that reflects Chantler's upbringing; She was born in the UK, but spent her teenage years in Southeast Asia. The jewelry uses Southwestern techniques, well suited to European tribal design, but also draws inspiration from indigenous and ancient cultures throughout the world.

"Jewelry," Choyt believes, "is a highly emotional purchase that has deep symbolism for people. It represents, basically, some of the highest aspirations we're capable of. How can it be that the jewelry sector can allow the production of a ring to produce tons of toxic waste from the mining of gold, or the death of 3.7 million Africans in the blood diamond conflict, for which no one in the sector has ever been held responsible?"

Choyt's concerns were crystallized several years ago when he attended a jewelry trade show in Las Vegas, Nev. The film *Blood Diamond* had been recently released and a meeting on the topic was attended by more than 700 people. In another room, a discussion about fair trade was only attended by 30 or 40 people, mostly press.

"That level of disconnect was astonishing," Choyt, for whom diamonds comprise less than 10 percent of his business, says. "Because the whole blood diamond issue is really an issue of fair trade and economic justice." Last October, Choyt and others met at the Madison Dialogue Ethical Jewelry Summit at the World Bank in Washington, DC, to discuss everything from issues of mining and recycled metals to creating a third-party certification for fair-trade jewelry.

"There are 100 million people around the world who are artisan miners, some poor, usually living in rural areas with limited resources," he says. "If it were possible that these miners could extract in a way that was environmentally sound and in a way that they were given fair wages, it could have a major impact as a development initiative around the world. It could transform tens of millions of people's lives; that's what this is about. It's about connecting the person here in Santa Fe purchasing a piece of jewelry with the person in Africa at the mining cooperative in Tanzania, who is actually mining the stone."

In the case of *Reflective Images*, it's about allowing people to buy jewelry made from recycled metals, with sourced stones, made by local craftspeople who are paid well by a local business.

Although it's unusual for small-business owners to travel, as Choyt and Chantler do, to Asia to visit directly with suppliers, it's a natural outgrowth of their commitment to doing good in the world; after the 2004 Asian tsunami, for example, the couple went to Sri Lanka to build houses. For Choyt, public service was ingrained in him as a child growing up in a household where his father was an early pioneer in the civil rights movement; his volunteer work in 1985 in Haiti orphanages further coalesced his commitment.

"The reason why people in Haiti are so poor is directly related to why I live in such abundance and wealth," he says. "So I always consider my work in that context, but also in the context of nature and my love for the natural environment. What is my debt to natural existence?" he says.

Despite his high ideals, Choyt realizes that his goals for *Reflective Images*, and for transforming the jewelry sector as a whole, are far off; maybe even, in some cases, unachievable. But that doesn't stop him.

"For myself, I've made a decision that I'm going to work for positive social change in every way that I can, regardless of what's going on. And everybody can do this. I happen to be in the jewelry sector, so that's where my work is. I personally have the goal of making it socially unacceptable to purchase jewelry that isn't made with recycled or fair-trade products. And it should be socially unacceptable, given what jewelry represents."

Part of making that happen, Choyt believes, is transforming the marketing of jewelry itself.

"The marketing of jewelry has disconnected the purchaser from its true cost," he says. "Ever since '*Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend*,' it's all about seduction. But what we're trying to do is create more of a spiritual sparkle."

Reflective Images

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