



AN IMPERFECT WORLD

Lauren Kessler has mined her Diamond District roots for a coveted brand built on a passion for color, a puzzle maker's way with shapes, and a knack for finding beauty in unexpected places

BY REBECCA ASCHER-WALSH

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HERE ARE FEW things that offer the sybaritic delight of watching Lauren Kessler unload the contents of her safe. Bags of Australian opals and chunks of turquoise; slices of moonstones and labradorite; slivers of tourmaline and aquamarine, individually nestled in glass-topped boxes.

For the last 20 years, Kessler has found her inspiration in stones such as these for her Lauren K jewelry collection. The handcrafted, one-of-a-kind pieces—necklaces, earrings, and rings that are both elegant and eccentric—reflect the vibrancy of their maker.

IT'S A FAMILY THING

Kessler, a Florida native, comes by her trade naturally: Her great-grandfather was a jeweler, as was her grandfather, and she works out of their former New York City Diamond District offices, where one of their old scales sits framed on the windowsill. Kessler had just finished law school when her grandfather—whom she considered like a father—asked for help. He was 85 years old, and hoping she might spend some time working alongside him



Diya ring with 6.04 cts. t.w. Australian opal and 0.54 ct. t.w. diamonds in 18k gold, **\$7,975**; four-drop Joyce earrings with 27.78 cts. t.w. apatite and 0.07 ct. t.w. diamonds in 18k gold, **\$3,850**; **Lauren K**; info@laurenk.com; laurenk.com

Emily ring with 4.2 ct. emerald-cut African mint-green tourmaline and 1.05 cts. t.w. diamonds in 18k gold, **\$8,785**;
Emily ring with 9.54 ct. emerald-cut watermelon tourmaline and 1.06 cts. t.w. diamonds in 18k gold, **\$9,700**



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while she found a job. “That seemed like a good idea, given that I hadn’t even applied for a job,” Kessler says with a laugh.

A year into their partnership, Kessler’s grandfather died and she bought the business. While she was thrilled to be a young woman running her own show, she soon bridled at the constrictions of its focus on “the big three” (aka rubies, emeralds, and sapphires). “He was doing things like the Lady Di ring for places like Fortunoff and H.Stern in the Caribbean,” Kessler says. “Pieces like that are very pretty but they are what they are, and I knew that if I had a shot at being successful I had to do something I liked. And thank goodness I thought that, since most of the places he supplied are out of business now.”

COLOR & CHARACTER

For fun, Kessler made some stacking sapphire rings and showed them to a buyer at Saks Fifth Avenue when she was dropping off a few traditional pieces on consignment. “She said, ‘I love those; I’ll buy them for four stores and give you a purchase order,’” Kessler remembers. “I didn’t even know what a purchase order was! I had always sold on consignment.

Then Bloomingdale’s bought some of the rings, and I thought, If they’ll buy these, what else will they buy? I realized I’d better start to build a collection, because I couldn’t keep walking into these places with three rings.”

At first, Kessler focused on white gold and what she calls “perfect” colored stones. “White gold was really big then, and everything was white and Art Deco-y and blingy,” she remembers. But about seven years ago, she began embracing the aesthetic for which she is now known and celebrated—one that combines color with character.

“The stones that speak to me are imperfect,” she says. “I can appreciate a perfect emerald like anyone else, but that’s not me. I’m not a \$100,000 ring person. I’m not fussy, and I’m not fancy, *at all*. So I like that my earrings can go to a black-tie event, but they can also be worn easily with jeans and a T-shirt.” Indeed, Kessler’s most prominent accessory is a pair of funky blue eyeglasses. “The pieces I love and can’t live without I keep,” she says with a shrug. “But mostly you’re happy to find your pieces a nice home. You *want* them to find a home.”



Australian boulder opal with 0.06 ct. t.w. diamonds on 18-inch chain in 18k gold, **\$2,995**;
Sleeping Beauty turquoise heart with 0.06 ct. t.w. diamonds on 18-inch chain in 18k gold, **\$3,875**

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

Kessler's devoted clientele, which includes shoppers at Bergdorf Goodman and the other exclusive boutiques that carry her line, appreciate that they won't see what they're wearing on anyone else. Because of that one-of-a-kind quality, the Lauren K line is made up of pieces for the person who is comfortable with her status and doesn't need to project it with an obvious brand. "I don't love and I don't buy into that you have to carry the same bag as everyone else, as an example," says Kessler, who lives in Westchester County, N.Y., with her engineer husband and teenage daughter (her son is a freshman in college). "Cartier Love bracelets are gorgeous but they're not for everybody, and sometimes they don't reflect the people who are wearing them. But the great thing about jewelry is it doesn't matter that, for instance, not everyone's the same size. It's the ultimate leveler. Everyone can wear earrings!" (Everyone except, ironically, Kessler, who can't pierce her ears due to ear surgery. "I definitely have earring envy," she says.)

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Kessler doesn't keep track of how many pieces she makes a year, and she says she never worries about it. She designs by playing with the stones on her desk, seeing pieces take form in her head; occasionally she will sketch them for the craftspeople who turn them into wearable art. "I'm not really into museums or things like that for inspiration," she says. "But I could look at a sunset all day long, if the sun set all day long. And I love the sea." A photograph from a trip she and her family took to Yellowstone National Park, infused with blues, hangs in her office and was the impetus for a collection.

Otherwise, Kessler relies on the stones themselves and her own taste, since the vicissitudes of the market mean that there's no guaranteeing what will sell. She illustrates the point by pulling out a pair of dazzling earrings—exquisite pieces of tanzanite dangling from pavé diamonds. Despite being a favorite piece in the showroom and considered a "sure thing" by Kessler and her employees, the earrings failed to sell. She shrugs. "You just never know," she says. "Of course you always want to be on top of your game in terms of trying something new and experimenting, but it's so important to stay true to what you do. If someone says a certain stone is hot this year and I'm not drawn to it," she continues, "I'm probably not using it. Instead, I'll take a pass and let others do it well."

Meanwhile, she knows that new ideas will come to her simply by opening her safe-deposit box. "This year I'm really drawn to geometric shapes," she says, gesturing to a group of rings composed of straight-edged stones accented by diamonds. "And who knows what's next? I'm very stone-centric and I buy a lot, which isn't very financially responsible," she adds with a laugh. "But I don't ever run out of ideas. I never wanted a huge company. If I can do what I do, pay my employees, and make some money, then I'm good. It's that simple for me." **JCK**



Abstract emerald and Australian boulder opal Gemma earrings with rainbow moonstone and 0.33 ct. t.w. diamonds in 18k gold, **\$5,885**; free-form feldspar and Australian boulder opal Joyce earrings with 0.06 ct. t.w. diamond in 18k gold, **\$3,695**



Riley ring with 18.38 ct. pear-shaped natural pink tourmaline and 0.37 ct. t.w. diamonds in 18k rose gold; **\$4,370**