

NO STONE UNTURNED

Be they rare seeds from Amazonian palm trees or blindingly incandescent diamonds, ALEXANDRA MOR can turn them into exquisite jewellery (with a story to tell). CHARMIAN LEONG finds out

Traditional Balinese carvings, 22k gold, baroque pearls, garnets, Balinese redwood, and a seed with the familiar creamy smoothness of ivory. All these make for a beautiful jewellery collection, to be sure, but not what we expect from Alexandra Mor. Best known for bold conspicuous designs adorned with large gemstones, Mor's style is generally well-suited to her fearlessly contemporary Manhattan fan base. So to say her new Tagua Seed collection is divergent would be a bit of an understatement.

Her inspiration was simple, albeit familiar. On a mission to regain her sense of self and to refill her well of creativity, she moved to Bali with her family in August 2016. During her time there, she was made aware of the ongoing ivory trade through a documentary titled *Let Elephants be Elephants*.

"I could not stop thinking about it...The killing for ivory was still going on. Something needed to be done," she recalls.

While many of us would be guilty of

(only) feeling bad about a tragedy for as long as it took to learn about it, Mor was actually moved to action. After a quick Google search, she discovered the tagua seed, which is quickly becoming known as "vegetable ivory", and ordered a batch from Ecuador. "The minute I held the seed in my hand, I knew it was the answer. It was such a primal feeling."

The collection has the works: Earrings, necklaces, bracelets and rings, all crafted with the help of local carvers and goldsmiths. Every piece resonates with her emotional investment and the culture of a society so far from home. "I had spent the past seven years in the heart of Manhattan working on my signature collections and growing the brand, but my own heart and identity were slipping away," she says. "From a frenetic economic centre to the fertile, lush environment of the emerald rice paddies, the journey was a call to adventure and purpose, and it cracked me open spiritually and emotionally."

And she's unfazed by sceptics who might think tagua seeds are a cheap alternative



to ivory. "The tagua seed is rare as it is only grown in clusters on palm trees in the Amazon and cannot be farmed or reproduced," she explains. "The old way of defining luxury is changing and more collectors are beginning to understand that the value of things reaches far beyond the individual. People are looking for things that are authentic and real."

Even when ethical education isn't squarely on her agenda, authenticity has always been Mor's game. She doesn't just peddle beautiful stones; she wants to immortalise stories in them. "Consumers want to know that the story behind a piece of fine jewellery isn't made up," she says. "An important part of my business is bespoke. We start talking about jewellery but very quickly, it becomes a conversation about life."

Her own life didn't begin surrounded by glistening jewels. She was exposed to the world of handcrafted design by her French couturier-mother. Mor thought that was her path too, and even got accepted into a high fashion school of design in Israel with a scholarship. She changed her mind and decided to pursue film studies in New York instead. But all it took was one jewellery making class to show her where her passion really lay. In 2010 she launched her first collection at international auction house Phillips de Pury.

Her accomplishments, despite building her brand in just a little over seven years, aren't anything to sniff at. Her clients include actress Kate Winslet and socialite Olivia Palermo, as well as countless unnameable collectors. In 2012 she teamed up with ethical mining company Gemfields to create a ring with 0.84ct of diamonds that culminated in the spectacle of a 26.12-ct elevated sugarloaf cabochon emerald.

"The design was inspired by a



From left: Tagua seeds; Alexandra Mor; Wood and gold ring set with tagua seed and a pearl

Opposite page: Making of the carved black wood and tagua seed Subang earring; finishing touches to a cuff featuring carved tagua seeds

conversation with one of my top collectors who wanted a floating gem ring for his wife, months before the Gemfields project. That was put on hold but the idea was always alive in my mind. When I saw the Gemfields' emerald, I knew what it needed."

Mor has never found it difficult to part with any of her pieces, regardless of how much fun it was to work on. "On the contrary, it is always a pleasure to get a piece to a collector and know that I will always be a part of their journey and memories." ■

