South China Morning Post

FASHION

Razzle dazzle

Bling is never out of style for British jeweller Butler & Wilson, writes **Francesca Fearon**

Butler & Wilson's vibrant pieces include (from top left) red lips on a chain, an eye mask, a fantasy necklace, a gem-studded clutch and an eye pendant

Be warned. Put on a pair of sunglasses before you step into a Butler & Wilson shop, because you could easily be blinded by the sparkling jewels on display. Giant multicoloured gem necklaces fit for a queen; twinkling animal brooches; clutch bags covered in big gemstones and skulls; and diamond-white tiaras dazzle so brilliantly under the spotlights that you need to shade your eyes.

Butler & Wilson's sweetie-bright gems are every child's fantasy come true, although women have been snapping up their bold, witty and often shocking costume jewellery for more than four decades. Celebrities ranging from the late Princess Diana to Elle MacPherson have been photographed in their jewels.

Tomorrow, Hong Kong will get its fair share of the bling when designer and co-founder Simon Wilson launches the brand at On Pedder. Also on show will be images and special pieces taken from the brand's 40-year-old archive, along with one-of-a-kind pieces that up until now were available only at the brand's London boutiques.

"I have always had this connection with China: the clothes I wear are Chinese-inspired, my home is Chinese style, and I think it is also about fate," he says of the project. "You should go where your head tells you to go."

Wilson talks non-stop, in enthusiastic half-started, half-finished sentences. We are sitting in his office above his shop in London's South Molten Street, surrounded by books, jewels and vintage clothes (another feature of the business). He has been producing the collection in China and Thailand for more than 20 years and spends so much time in Asia he even has a Thai godson.

"China is now what it was like here [in Britain] in the 1980s. I get this incredible energy from the Chinese I work with. They want to work, they are ambitious – I love all that and I know that I am meant to be there."

Despite his connection with Asia, the brand is thoroughly British. Wilson first entered the jewellery business with his partner Nicky Butler (who has since moved to Los Angeles although he remains a director) in 1969 selling antique jewellery in Antiquarius, a vintage market in Chelsea's King's Road. Wilson discovered his flair for design in the 1970s when the antique art deco jewels they specialised in became harder to source. He started to create art nouveau-style enamel butterflies and art deco jewels using Swarovski crystals.

Ideally you buy jewellery because you love it. Jewellery is about fantasy accessorising

Simon Wilson (above), designer and co-founder of Butler & Wilson

At the time, decorative jewellery made of glass (or paste as it was known) and base metals was regarded rather sniffily as tat. For the brand, however, costume jewellery was as chic and fabulous as the real thing. "We treated it as fashion, and it was way ahead of its time," Wilson says.

In 1983, years before celebrity endorsements became the norm, Catherine Deneuve appeared on a giant billboard outside their Fulham Road shop, which they opened in 1972. She was in London making *The Hunger* with David Bowie and Butler & Wilson supplied the jewellery for the film. When the actress visited the store Wilson asked if she would be photographed for the billboard, and she agreed – for free. This started a tradition: Charlotte Rampling, Jerry Hall and Faye Dunaway have all graced the billboard.

In the 1980s Butler & Wilson produced a range of jewellery for Giorgio Armani, but it was the Princess of Wales who kept them in the headlines, purchasing witty little teddy bear brooches and decorative earrings.

"She would come in with just one security guy and we would leave her to shop. She would pick up a pair of earrings, try them on and turn to another shopper and ask what they thought and they would look at her in awe," Wilson says. "It was her way of being normal and wearing stuff that was fun."

Unfortunately in the 1990s the business almost disappeared when grunge became fashionable.

"Everything went minimalist – and we never did subtle. Everyone went around in shell suits and couldn't be bothered to dress up. They forgot that it is jewellery that gives you your individuality."

Wilson found a niche and went on to design tiaras, which "saved my business", he says. The fashion for statement pieces in recent years was also a boost. Nowadays there are Crown Jewel necklaces, red-lip pendants and lizard brooches.

"I have never been involved in that fashion thing of what's in, what's out. Ideally you buy jewellery because you love it. Jewellery is about fantasy accessorising, they make a statement about who you are," he says.

Wilson's inspirations over the years have been varied, ranging from military regalia, skulls and flowers to the interiors of Buckingham Palace – a collection he designed when the palace was opened to the public in 1994.

Butler & Wilson used to be stocked in department stores such as Harrods and Joyce boutiques, and is now sold on QVC, the British television shopping channel. Wilson also has his two shops where his taste for divine diamante decadence is echoed by what we see on the catwalks of Lanvin, Christian Dior and Dolce & Gabbana, although his is somewhat gaudier. He is more inclined to do special collaborations such as the project with On Pedder.

Now with the business thriving again, the 65-year-old designer is too full of inspiration and energy to consider retiring.

"I wouldn't know what to do with myself ... watch morning television? Go on a cruise? I've done all the holidaying and partying I want to do."