

hina Mornin

HONGKONG, SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 1989

Lab-made gemstones ruffle feathers

By RICHARD ROY

TOM Chatham doesn't only sell emeralds. He grows them. It is only a matter of time before he clobbers the emerald and ruby gemstone industry in the same way Kokichi Mikimoto did to natural pearls.

Needless to say, the natural gemstone trade loathes Mr Chatham, his company Chatham Created Gems, and everything about them, a loathing quite evident yesterday at the Hongkong Jewellery and Watch Fair where Chatham had a stand.

Chatham Created Gems are not "synthetics". The emeralds have the same chemico-mineral composition — alumina, beryllia and silica — as the natural emerald found in the earth.

All Mr Chatham's father, Carroll, did was to crack the secret of how to put them together the same way nature does, but in a laboratory.

If Mr Chatham's emeralds and rubies overcome the bad-mouthing of the natural gemstone and jewellery traders, he stands to make not millions, but billions, limited only by production capacity.

They won't overcome that engineered opprobrium until what happens to emeralds and rubies. They'll become harder and harder to obtain, astronomically expensive to mine, until they are virtually of extinction rarity.

Not even Union Carbide, Carborundum or W.R. Grace could tempt Chatham to reveal the secret of the fusion medium, and all their and others' efforts to break it down in their own laboratories have failed.

Only one other company, Japan's Inomari, a Kyocera subsidiary which bought out Pier Gilson's Swiss firm, can produce the



Tom Chatham with a laboratory-made emerald rough at the Hongkong Jewellery and Watch Fair yesterday.

same end-product. They aren't selling the secret either.

Mr Chatham is churning out top-grade "eye-clean" emeralds from his San Francisco laboratory at US\$500 a carat. Natural emeralds are trading at US\$15,000 a carat this month.

Chatham, which became a going concern in 1938, grows 1.5 million carats of emeralds a year and 700,000 carats of rough rubies.

It uses Dallas Gems of Tsim Sha Tsui and a new factory in Bangkok for faceting and setting work.

Ninety per cent of its sales are to the US market where, Mr Chatham said, "it's not so much us versus them (the natural gemstone trade) as that we have created a market segment they can't touch".

"It's been a constant battle to offset the misinformation that is perpetrated by

the natural stone industry.

"The biggest battle was not the chemistry, but explaining the process to an unbelieving public and a paranoid natural gemstone trade."

When Mr Chatham's father first took his stones to New York's Fifth Avenue jewellers such as Tiffanys and Van Cleef, they called the police when they saw what he had.

After four years of litigation, a US Federal Court acknowledged the synthetic label as a misrepresentation of the stone Chatham produces.

To Chatham's detractors in the gemstone world, who think their entire business will be ruined by the lab-grows, Mr Chatham reminds them that the natural pearl trade thought the same when Mr Mikimoto came along in 1911 with his cultured pearl.

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