



# Poppy King,

## The Disruptor

Words BAZE MPINJA

Kylie Jenner may have broken the Internet with her Lip Kit, but she's certainly not the first teenager to make a splash in the beauty industry. In 1992, when the World Wide Web was in its infancy, a plucky, 18-year-old Poppy King launched her own line of lipsticks in Melbourne, Australia. Her motivation wasn't fame or fortune; it was a desire to make the kind of retro colors and textures she saw in old Hollywood films.

With her petite frame, blonde curls and fair skin, King identified more with the aesthetic of 1940s actresses than the beauty ideals that were being fed to her. "When I was growing up in Australia in the 1970s and '80s, the idea of beauty was very beach-focused—very tanned and athletic," she says. "I didn't fit that mold at all. I'm not a typical-looking Australian in any way, shape or form. When I started watching classic films, I began to think my face, body type and everything would fit in better there. I started dressing more vintage-y on the weekends and got into matte lipstick." The shades she wanted were hard to find among the fuchsias and frost finishes that ruled the '80s, so King created her own. A lip-focused company made perfect sense for her. "I love handbags, shoes, lipsticks—all the icons of being female, but in a strong way," King says. "I like them as self-expression versus conformity."

The collection—simply called Poppy—was a hit. The company lasted until 2002, the year that King relocated to New York City to work with Estée Lauder (she left the company three years later). Although the novelty of having such a young entrepreneur heading up the brand likely helped to fuel its success, King's personal connection to it no doubt played a major role as well. She wears her passion for beauty on her designer sleeve, and it's hard not to be enticed by it and the confidence she exudes.

King learned how to be accepting of herself from her glamorous mother, Rachele King, now in her 70s, who worked in the fashion industry and also didn't quite fit in. As King describes her: "She didn't look like the other mothers. She had a black bob, very pale skin and wore blood-red lipstick. She looked like Louise Brooks." King's father died when she was very young, leaving her mother to raise her and her older brother alone. She never remarried, but often entertained her many creative-type friends at home. "The people I was hanging out with as a kid were artists, writers and filmmakers," King remembers. "It was a conducive environment to thinking outside the box and not giving in to social norms." Her somewhat unconventional upbringing is partly what gave her the confidence to create a space in the market for herself, and other women seeking alternatives to the same-old, same-old makeup out there.

Now King is 43, a bona fide New Yorker (albeit one with an Australian accent) and happily running Lipstick Queen, another beloved lip-oriented brand, which she launched in 2006. For someone who has been immersed in the beauty business for over 25 years, King has somehow managed to avoid drinking the Kool-Aid. She's not about shamelessly undermining a woman's confidence to make a buck. She couldn't care less about celebs. ("When someone asks me which celebrity I admire, I go blank. It doesn't interest me.") This is a woman who has strong, potentially unpopular opinions and she's not afraid to share them. A keen observer and a vocal critic of Big Beauty, King is perfectly at ease wading into the thorny issues that most high-profile industry figures don't typically discuss so candidly on the

record. Her bluntness is startling at times, and certainly refreshing.

One of her major gripes about the current beauty landscape is its lack of diversity. "It's still overwhelmingly Caucasian and lacking in ethnicity. I can't bear it. I find it such an indictment on the industry when they have to be congratulated for having a Chinese model or a black model. I mean, it's 2016," King says with palpable disgust. "This narrow definition of beauty that we see over and over again—a beauty that I don't fit and a lot of women don't fit—it's not necessarily because that's what women find beautiful. It's because that's what sells products. The more people feel disenfranchised, the more they need to try to fit in. But I think that's going to have to change because the population is changing. Unfortunately, that's what it's going to take."

So what is she personally doing about it in the meantime? "My way of being in the industry, not of the industry, is to not use the trigger of aspiration, but imagination," King says. "I base my products on what I feel is interesting and missing from the market, and definitely what I feel can work for different ethnicities and skin types, not just for a Caucasian person." She eschews models, relying mostly on graphic art and illustrations for Lipstick Queen packaging, website and promo materials.

Inclusiveness is important to King, not just when it comes to race, but age as well. "It's distressing the way that the beauty industry puts pressure on women to stop the clock," she says. "Women's bodies go through so many changes—more so than men's—yet we're the ones that are supposed to stay perfect. But the idea of youth as the height of beauty is a very American thing. I don't think it's the case in Europe or other countries. Here, every second ad is for anti-aging cream. We're told to hold onto youth at any cost, when for many women, it's not their best time. That's not when they've figured out what really works for them."

Whether it's perfect eyebrows, wrinkle-free skin or the right kind of curls, the traditional tactics brands have used to keep women on an endless and costly quest for perfection (ads, celebrity ambassadors, non-stop product launches) have pretty much stayed the same. Meanwhile, the world has not. "The customer is more in charge these days because of social media," King says. "Advertising is not as powerful as peer-to-peer advertising and that's something that has the industry really concerned and perplexed."

The shift in power is a double-edged sword. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram allow customers to demand integrity from beauty behemoths. They can call out brands for things like airbrushing mishaps or tone-deaf ad campaigns, with the accusations quickly picked up by the big industry websites and blogs. However, these same outlets that give consumers agency can make women, whether "real" or famous, vulnerable to hurtful, sexist attacks on their appearance. It's a side effect of the "narcissistic bubble" King believes social media has created.

"Everybody is promoting themselves and crafting the image of a perfect life," she says. "The need for validation and perfection has turned beauty into a spectator sport where people can comment anonymously online. But I have faith that just like anything that's done to excess, the pendulum will swing back a bit." With authentic leaders like King leading the charge, it just might happen sooner than we think.

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