

COYOTE + OAK

VOLUME I

WWW.COYOTEANDOAK.COM

A PRINTED MAGAZINE, CREATED BY AND SHOWCASING CALIFORNIA ARTISTS AND ENTREPRENEURS.
FOLLOW ALONG ON THE JOURNEY ON INSTAGRAM AT @COYOTEANDOAK

BLACKWATER BOUTIQUE

Electric Ladyland

STORY BY KRISTEN CHANAIWA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMANDA ADAM



"When my mom was 21, she was living in New Jersey and decided to quit her job, sell everything, and move to California," says Erica Hamilton, artist and new creative director of San Luis Obispo's *Blackwater*. These are the stories which most impacted the store's recent metamorphosis from the former *H & G Boutique* to what it is today.

"[My mother] told me stories about how she smoked opium with Indian tribes in Arizona. It's just so nomadic and cool, and free-spirited. That attitude, that lifestyle— the story of her driving across the country? It was this whole experience she told me about that always stuck with me."

At a point when life seemed to be working against Erica, inspiration arrived with perfect timing.

She's a talented painter, and a former art student, currently at odds with her chosen medium. She dropped out of school in the middle of her third semester at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena a few years ago, and left feeling lost and let down. Learning to look at art with a critical eye had sapped her love for it, and she hasn't painted in over a year.

"I was just like 'fuck this'. It was just too many people trying to tell me what is art and what isn't art. I hated that. I do it now, and I hate that." She'd love to paint again, but she's afraid of what she'll think.

Already feeling mixed emotions about her talents, Erica then lived through the pain of her grandmother's death and, for a while, it was a rough road.

Instead of giving up art entirely though, she kept the faith, stuck to her belief that everything was happening for a reason, and took an emotional journey of her own. She caught her creative stride again with the reopening of the downtown boutique.

She managed to find her way during the three-month relocation last

spring, and in finding a more authentic version of herself, she also discovered a new direction in which to take the business.

"It was in those three months that I shut myself away from everybody, and really kept to myself. I learned a lot about myself, and I think that was an important process."

Erica's used *Blackwater* as a pivot to create art in a new form, and has transformed her storefront into what she describes as the "cooler older sister" of the trend-focused shops that have flooded the market today.

"I have put all of my creative flow into the store, and I try to incorporate a more artistic element."

Imbued with the spirit of her mother's coming-of-age, *Blackwater* offers much more than racks of disposable fashion. Her fondness for the 1970s has served as a guidepost, and the store, dubbed after the Doobie Brothers song of the same name, is mixed with Erica's visionary style and belief in Magic, to create something entirely unique.

The trials and tribulations of her mid-twenties awakening served as a spiritual growth spurt, and the knowledge and understanding she's gained have resulted in a love of the esoteric, and an interest in the occult. Her intensely personal connection to mysticism is evident in every corner of the shop.

"I think that the world of Magic needs to be exposed in a good light, and not a silly light either. It's definitely something that [influences] our store."

Garnering inspiration from the trinkets and oddities she discovers in the curiosity shops of San Francisco and Portland, she's changed her mind about what the fashion shopping experience can be.

There are tarot cards, tapestries and sage for sale, alongside vintage skirts, kimonos, and fringed handbags. A believer in the healing power of crystals and smudging, she cleanses the space

with palo santo each morning; even the store's grand re-opening event included astrology readings and henna tattoos, for her more open-minded and curious shoppers.

Erica is responsible for all creative aspects of running the business, from merchandising and design, to photographing the inventory and maintaining the store's social media accounts. And it's all done with an eye toward the artistic, and with the sanctity of all people in mind.

As she's evolved, so too has *Blackwater*, and the store has become bigger than just a business— it's become an avenue for a contribution to a social movement. Committed to creating a place where all are welcome, Erica makes an effort to leave no one behind. Here is the place where everyone can be the cooler older sister. It's "unapologetic fashion".

The store's all-inclusive nature attracts a wide variety of customers. Her regulars include everyone from a father, who shops crystals and scarves for his four-year-old daughter, to a 98-year-old woman, who purchases the same garments modeled by the college-age women on *Blackwater's* website. And Erica aims to make the store accessible to an even broader range of shoppers in the future— men, women, and those who identify otherwise.

"I would love us to have a more unisex vibe. I feel like there's not really a space in San Luis Obispo for the [LG-BTQA] community to shop or hang out or anything."

To avoid exclusion, Erica even makes a point never to use gender-specific pronouns in her marketing and social media campaigns. The doors of *Blackwater* are open to everyone.

"I think it's [imperative]. I feel for [people] and I understand."

[cont'd on page 35]





PHOTOGRAPHY // AMANDA ADAM
STYLING // ERICA HAMILTON
MODEL // CHRISTIAN MARIE
WARDROBE // MINKPINK, LOVESTRENGTH, YRU
SHOES, TIGERLILY, BLACKWATER

YOU CAN FIND BLACKWATER ONLINE AT
WWW.SHOPBLACKWATER.COM AND ON
INSTAGRAM @SHOPBLACKWATER



LEFT // Erica Hamilton, creative director of San Luis Obispo's *Blackwater*

These days, Erica is more present and aware. She's conscious of the kind of energy she puts into the world, and does her best to make sure it's all good. Her warm nature and the self-acceptance she shows herself welcome others to be true to themselves as well.

There's always a desire to expand, to make the store somewhere people spend time doing more than shopping. She dreams of a larger space, where patrons can stay for a while, and take time for self-care.

Her original perspective on fashion and business has overflowed, and fills the space with magic, good vibes and, most important to Erica, art.

Although she'd love to return to the easel someday, it seems Erica has found a way to satisfy her creative urges, in the behind-the-scenes work of running the store. For now, she's right where she wants to be, feeling creative and whole at Blackwater.

"It's like a giant art installation, that always needs updating." 