



TAD ERICSON AND ERIKA FORTNER AT KEVEN CRAFT RITUALS (LEFT); FORTNER'S SKINCARE LINE



ART & CRAFT

Brooklyn transplants with Eugene ties set up a modern-day apothecary and gallery downtown

The day after Erika Fortner graduated from art school in New York, she headed straight to Berlin to work on a \$5 million 80-foot long mural for banking behemoth Goldman Sachs.

She wasn't alone; Fortner was one of about 30 art assistants in the employ of abstract painter Julie Mehretu, a 2005 MacArthur "genius" grant awardee who Goldman Sachs commissioned in 2007 to create "Mural."

The team holed up in Mehretu's massive Berlin studio for the project, which was featured in an episode of the PBS program *Art21*— you can watch Fortner, clothes splattered in paint, spraying finish on the painting.

Even though Fortner's BFA from Brooklyn's Pratt Institute was in painting, Mehretu had hired Fortner for her background in furniture finishing, which she had picked up from her father, a cabinetmaker.

"I brought some high-end automotive finishing guns to the process," Fortner says, sitting in her current live-work space in Eugene. Fortner also did polishing and sanding, giving Mehretu's paintings a "super smooth technical surface."

The process wreaked havoc on Fortner's skin.

"The surface that she worked with had glass silica in it, so it's kind of like concrete work," chimes in Tad Ericson, Fortner's fiancé. "It would dry out her hands and the surfaces — because they were multi-million-dollar museum pieces — she had to wash [her hands] on a regular basis."

"My hands would crack," Fortner adds. "They would burn and nothing would work and I was dying."

"You tried everything," Ericson says.

During this period, Fortner's sister was diagnosed with cancer, and Fortner says she became vigilant about chemicals she was exposed to.

After returning to New York, Fortner decided the only thing left for her to do was develop a skincare line.

Fortner and Ericson tell me this while sitting in their shop (they live upstairs), Keven Craft Rituals, on W. 7th Avenue across the street from the Hunky Dory smokeshop downtown. It's a hot day smack in the middle of July, and

Fortner, with her mermaid-long sandy teal hair dreaded past her belly, is very pregnant, like nine-months-and-counting pregnant (she has since given birth to a daughter, Freya).

In fact, the couple left New York because they did not want to raise a child there.

"I said, 'I will never have a baby in New York, never,'" recalls Fortner — who grew up outside Los Angeles — citing the expense, hauling strollers up apartment stairs and one poignant memory of a neighbor girl restricted to riding a Razor scooter on a tiny patch of concrete.

Eugene is a far cry from New York and Los Angeles, but it wasn't a random choice for either Fortner or Ericson. Her parents met in Eugene in the late '70s. Her mother, Geri Dickenson, graduated from the University of Oregon's Department of Architecture and her father, Jas "James" Fortner, hung out with Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters and worked at The Cabinet Factory.

Ericson's nieces and aunt, who is now a fiber artist in Coos Bay, lived here for 15 years.

About a year ago, the couple opened the shop in Eugene for Keven Craft Rituals (Keven is Old Norse for "communal," they say) — a sort of New Age artisanal apothecary with a Brooklyn edge. There is something magical and bespoke about the space in an old blue house; perhaps that's because Ericson used to design displays for Urban Outfitters in New York. "All the wood in here is from St. Vinnies, so we upcycled all the furniture pieces," Ericson says.

On this summer afternoon, the shop is ripe with the mingling aromas of primrose, ylang ylang and peat, scents emanating from the skincare line Fortner developed from scratch, which includes everything from face serums and rescue balm to beard oil. There are also healing crystals and tarot cards.

As the shop's mission statement says: "Our products are both conceptual and usable, and play with the ideas of the metaphysical as well as inherent properties of natural materials."

Currently, Fortner is developing baby wipes.

"I've been making things for a really long time,"

she says. "I want them to be eco-friendly; I want them to be really good quality; I want them to have the best ingredients; I want them to be handmade; I want them to actually have a secondary or third purpose."

Fortner makes everything by hand onsite; she and Ericson even design packaging and cut their own labels.

Relocating to Eugene hasn't all been a bed of primroses. Ericson, a creative media specialist who has worked for Vevo and done editing work on music videos for the likes of Kanye West's "Mercy" and Jimmy Eat World's "My Best Theory," has struggled to find full-time work in town.

Then there's the neighborhood, near WOW Hall and the 24-hour Chevron, a known hot spot for street kids, heroin and crime (full disclosure: This is my neighborhood, too). Directly next door to the shop is a Lane County methadone clinic.

Often they've had to shoo people demonstrating all sorts of unsavory and illegal behavior from their shop's porch or yard; frequently people who are not customers use the parking spots designated for their business. They've contacted the police, they say, but the response is usually: Not much to be done about it.

They worry about the environment driving customers away, but they have hope.

"This corner has the potential to be a really cool area," Fortner says. "For us, it's definitely about quality of life, revitalizing an area."

The duo want to become more involved in the local art scene, which is why Keven Craft Rituals doubles as an art gallery where Fortner can hang her large-format conceptual oil paintings alongside local artists and artisans such as Joslyn Alana, Cayla Davis and Jen "Tweedlebyrd" Moss.

"There are so many talented people here," Fortner says. "There's such a pool of creative people."

"That was one of the things we were really happy about when we showed up here — how much creativity is here," Ericson adds.

Look for Keven Craft Rituals on upcoming art walks at 268 W. 7th Avenue. For more information, visit kevencraftrituals.com.



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