Neutral Ground is on a mission to make vintage modern — and more inclusive

Online boutique in Oakland is a bright spot in many ways, starting with its founder

By Kimberly Zerkel | Jan. 1, 2021 | San Francisco Chronicle

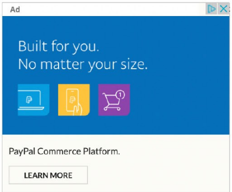
During a holiday season that will leave many worrying about health, safety and finances, it may seem silly to mourn something as frivolous as the party dress. But sequin-bedecked, richly colored frocks are yet another bit of sparkle and joy that Bay Area residents, hunkering down at home, are going without.

Perhaps instead of sacrificing party-ready looks completely, it's simply time to try something new. Or, at least, new to you. Alysha Cassis-Shaw is the owner and curator of Neutral Ground, an Oakland vintage clothing brand. She thinks this is the ideal time to skip the brand-new, mass-produced trend piece and treat yourself to something timeless but no less glam. To prove her point, she picked out some trend-free, celebration-ready looks from Neutral Ground for a festive photo shoot inside St. Joseph's Arts Society in San Francisco.

Neutral Ground is an online boutique focused on designer vintage clothing in neutral colors. For a festive photo shoot, founder Alysha Cassis-Shaw, right, selected timeless looks for the days when we can party again. | Katie Thompson

Cassis-Shaw is one of the lucky few whose businesses seem somewhat tailor-made for the pandemic era. When she founded Neutral Ground in 2017, she skipped brick-and-mortar in favor of an online store and shoppable social media feed — both of which have gained considerably more eyes over the last year. Her preference for neutral hues makes for a collection that is easy to mix and match, one that doesn't scream "vintage" as much as whisper it.

"Neutral colors are just really easy to incorporate into your wardrobe," Cassis-Shaw says, "and they're colors that don't correspond to trend. If purple is the color of the summer, or chartreuse or whatever, then you're not going to want to wear it next year. Where if it's chocolate brown or copper, you can wear it season after season. Getting people to keep things in their wardrobe longer, wear them season after season, that's also part of the thought process in my curation."



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Having a more timeless wardrobe, she says, keeps consumers from partaking in fast fashion, a major driver in global carbon emissions. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, the fashion industry is responsible for more carbon emissions than all international flights and maritime shipping combined.

“Neutral colors are just really easy to incorporate into your wardrobe,” Cassis-Shaw says. | Katie Thompson

Cassis-Shaw is one of the many voices in the fashion industry asking shoppers to revisit their preconceptions about vintage clothing.

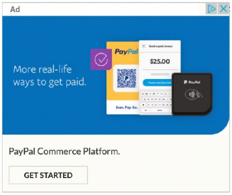
“Vintage is a modern way to dress,” she says. “It’s not costume, it’s not dress-up.”

When Cassis-Shaw moved to the Bay Area from New York in 2014, the entrepreneur and curator realized that this was a misunderstanding that needed to be addressed. “There’s a lot of vintage where people are doing faded T-shirts and jeans, or they’re doing bohemian and hippie. That’s fine, but it can look very era specific, when there are so many avenues to explore.” Because Cassis-Shaw has a background in high-end fashion — she was a design assistant at Halston before doing embroidery work for labels like Oscar de la Renta, Gucci and Tom Ford — she wanted to bring some glamour to her own spin on consignment.

But that glamour came with a caveat. Cassis-Shaw knew she wanted to create a space where beautiful, high-quality clothing was more accessible to all. “I felt like, with a number of brands I was working with, their customers were not people I was relating with in any way, shape or form. They were living lifestyles that I was like, what is this, who is this, who is spending $15,000 on a gown?”

Cassis-Shaw realized while working at high-end fashion brands that their garments were inaccessible to many. A desire to help a broader clientele find well-crafted, sustainable and enduring pieces finally led her to take on vintage and consignment as a full-time job. | Katie Thompson

It was this desire to help a broader clientele find well-crafted, sustainable and enduring pieces that finally led her to take on vintage and consignment as a full-time job. In 2017, she founded Neutral Ground in Oakland. “Too much of what’s happening in the sustainability movement isn’t accessible to people. It’s exclusive and expensive. Vintage is sustainable, but generally far more affordable. People can’t and won't change their spending habits if everything is a $500 hemp tunic,” she says with a laugh.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In creating Neutral Ground, Cassis-Shaw is also addressing the lack of representation among vintage curators. As a Black woman in the vintage space, she says, “You just don’t see a lot of us. We’re here and we have a unique perspective. ... You’re losing out when you’re not incorporating Black people and context into that story.”

When asked what can be done to shine a light on the many BIPOC individuals who make up the fashion and vintage community, Cassis-Shaw understands that one of the first steps is networking. “Hey, I know you, and I’m bringing you in. ... You don’t have money for a website? OK, let’s find someone for you who can develop a website.”

Cassis-Shaw in a party-ready look from Neutral Ground. | Katie Thompson

Pooling resources and supporting one another has led to the entrepreneur growing her own brand as well as other Black-owned vintage brands through a monthly virtual sale called "LA to the Bay," for example.

Sustainability, accessibility and inclusivity are important parts of Cassis-Shaw's vision, but the heartbeat of her work is a desire for self-expression and individuality.

"It's like we're all going to wear these three brands or five brands that we all agree are 'the brand to wear' and it's almost like a uniform," she laments. "There's been this move away from individuality and expressing yourself. And I think that vintage turns that on its head. We're not all going to wear the same Everlane pair of pants or Madewell whatever. I think it's a way to express individuality and say, no, I'm not a cog in a wheel."

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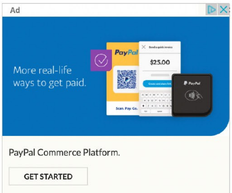

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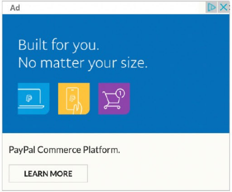
Alysha Cassis-Shaw recommends reading up on San Francisco's Office of Racial Equity and its director, Shakirah Simley. "She's a friend, vintage lover and food justice advocate," Cassis-Shaw says. "In a rapidly gentrifying Bay Area, with housing costs that are off the charts, a homelessness problem that's growing and an ever-shrinking Black population, I am encouraged that there is meaningful Black leadership that wants to address these issues and then some. Shakirah comes from a progressive, grassroots, rabble-rousing background and often women like her do not get seats at the decision-making table. She is a local leader to watch. As we focus on voting power and think about the kinds of people we want to usher along who will hold onto their values, not be swayed by moneyed interests and take the people's issues with them as they move up and on, she is someone I have 100% faith in."

About this story

This story was produced in partnership with Represent Collaborative (Rep Co), a media initiative focused on issues of racial and social justice that works to produce stories about Black and brown communities. Learn more at www.representcollaborative.com



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