

{ DESIGNERS }



Photographs by NICOLE LAMOTTE

RACKS of apparel, top, and surfboards are displayed at the new H. Merrick of California boutique.

Hanging 10, going strong

As her brand marks a milestone, designer Heidi Merrick opens a flagship store.

By INGRID SCHMIDT

In celebration of her fashion brand's 10th anniversary, designer Heidi Merrick opened the doors to her flagship H. Merrick of California boutique last month at 115 W. 9th St. in downtown Los Angeles.

"I did not intend to do this with my life," said Merrick, who pretty much grew up at Channel Island Surfboards, the ultimately California-cool Santa Barbara business founded in 1969 by her parents, Al and Terry Merrick.

"When they opened the shop, there was a sign that said, 'Custom-Made Surfboards & Clothing,'" said the 41-year-old designer who lives in Silver Lake with her husband and two children and owns a 55-acre apple farm close to surf spot Rincon Pointe, where she enjoys riding the waves. "My mom sat in front sewing board shorts and Hawaiian-print shirts, while my dad was in the back shaping surfboards. Starting when I was 9 years old until I went to college, I did the buying with my mom, ordering from [brands like] Quiksilver."

Though Merrick didn't design for Channel Island, she did collaborate with her mother to create her own prom dress and, in 2003, her wedding gown.

"At my wedding, my friends said, 'You are totally wasting your life; you need to make dresses,'" said Merrick. "So I went to Los Angeles Trade Tech College to learn how to make patterns and sew. I started out as Heidi Merrick Dresses in a closet-sized [300-square-foot] office in the Cooper [Design Space] building [in L.A.], and then I moved to an upper floor in this [other] building eight years ago."

Merrick runs production entirely in-house despite the high costs of making clothes in the U.S. and uses leftover fabric for her home decor pieces. Every item from her label is created on-site in the downtown studio by herself and a team of six, including three sewers and a cutter.

"I realize that the margins for 'made in America' just don't compete; what I make for \$70 cost, others make for \$10.50 and sell at a higher price point," said Merrick. "Something needs to change. My parents taught me to run a sleek, honest business and do things from the ground up. So I've tried to put that same sort of ethic into what I do."

Merrick's line has a relaxed vibe; think sequined



HEIDI MERRICK keeps production of her line entirely in-house.

sweatshirts, easy oversized "muscle tee" sleeves on dresses, and button-free blazers designed to be worn open.

The brand has expanded into a full ready-to-wear collection including T-shirts and blouses, skirts, trousers, swimwear and outerwear (from \$75 for a tank top to \$935 for a long wool flannel coat) as well as home and beauty items.

The new home collection features sequined, embroidered or vegan leather pillows (\$95 to \$225), tea towels (two for \$25), beach towels (\$65) and napkins (four or five for \$25, depending on size) — all crafted from leftover fashion fabrics. Silk pajama sets (\$295) and robes (\$550), also cut from repurposed fabrics, can be monogrammed in the store during atelier hours (1 to 3 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays), when Merrick is available for fittings and custom gown orders. The boutique also peddles vintage Moroccan wedding blankets (\$550 each) and a made-to-order teak canopy bed by L.A.-based MASHstudios (\$4,400).

Merrick will soon introduce a signature soy candle (\$45) with notes of sage, lavender and wood that smells like California chaparral. Up next are 2017 collaborations with California-based natural beauty brands Sea Bottle and Earth Tu Face. Menswear pieces, board shorts and T-shirts, are also in the works.

The aesthetic of the store circles back to Merrick's surfer roots. Her brother, Britt, who has taken over design at Channel Island Surfboards from their father, created a series of sculptural, lacquered surfboards (\$1,750 to \$1,850) in colors to match Merrick's fall/winter 2016 fashion collection, a boutique exclusive. Walls are also adorned with blown-up photos of Merrick's favorite Pacific beach haunts (framed prints start at \$350), a collaboration with local photographer Sharon Montrose.

image@latimes.com

Hot clicks from heel to Web

Shoe designer Sophia Webster has hit it big with distinct styles that connect with the social-media set.

By KAREN YOSSMAN

LONDON — British shoe designer Sophia Webster has barely had time to catch her breath, let alone grab breakfast, when she bursts into her spacious new offices in a hip part of East London on a chilly fall morning following a late-running doctor's appointment.

As she strides across the room in jeans, a mint green cardigan and a pair of her own gem-encrusted Jessie mule sneakers ("I probably shouldn't wear them with socks but they're so comfy," she confesses), an assistant is quickly dispatched to get Webster a cookie for a much-needed energy boost.

Such a frenetic schedule isn't surprising given that Webster, who set up her eponymous company in 2012, just a couple of years after graduating from college, produces eight shoe collections a year as well as two children's collections and four bag collections, all of which she balances alongside her marriage to former electrical engineer Bobby Stockley, who is now the company's chief executive, and caring for the couple's daughter Bibi, 2.

Webster is just 31 — although make-up-free and with her Rapunzel-like locks gathered into a side plait she looks even younger, especially when perched at the large, glass desk in her enormous, white corner office.

The room is sparsely decorated (she only recently moved in), save for a Sophia Webster Barbie Doll that sits on the window ledge behind her, from a collaboration with Mattel last year, and a full-sized chandelier — complete with 12 glass flamingos — dangling overhead. "I've just always liked flamingos. They're like a mascot," she says of the birds, which feature regularly in her designs. "When I started drawing shoes I started drawing them on flamingo legs."

It was at art college, during a life drawing class, that Webster first became obsessed with footwear. She went on to complete a degree at London's Cordwainers, a specialist school for shoemaking whose alumni include Jimmy Choo and Nicholas Kirkwood. Then came a master's degree at the Royal College of Art.

Despite Webster's decidedly traditional training, she is best known for bright, whimsical designs such as her speech-bubble clutch bags and butterfly winged high heels, which have been worn by stars including Scarlett Johansson, Beyoncé and Jennifer Hudson. (The 2006 film "Dreamgirls" inspired Webster's spring/summer 2017 collection, which debuted at London Fashion Week in September.) Webster's shoes, which generally range from \$300 to \$1,000, are sold at retailers including Net-a-Porter, Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue.

Though most designers try to appear nonchalant about dressing marquee names, Webster freely admits: "It blows my mind to see big A-list



DAVID BROOK

SOPHIA WEBSTER, below, is best-known for her colorful and whimsical purse and shoe designs.



SHOES from the spring/summer 2017 collection.



Sophia Webster



Sophia Webster

THE DESIGNER'S speech-bubble clutch purses, like the one above, have become favorites with the celebrity crowd.

celebrities in my shoes."

Her most "pinch me" moment was probably when Gwen Stefani first wore a pair. "I was a big No Doubt fan growing up," Webster says, revealing that when she visited Disneyland during a vacation with her family earlier this year she made a pit stop at Stefani's childhood home in Anaheim.

Usually when she's in L.A., Webster says, she just wants "to chill," grabbing breakfast at Malibu Cafe and taking Bibi for pony rides in Griffith Park. But she acknowledges the city has become

a seminal location for fashion.

"We do a lot of business in L.A.," she says.

Webster opened her first stand-alone store in London earlier this year. She's already thinking of how to proceed in America. "Whether we start with a pop-up or go straight into a store I'm not sure, but it's definitely something I'd like to do soon," she says.

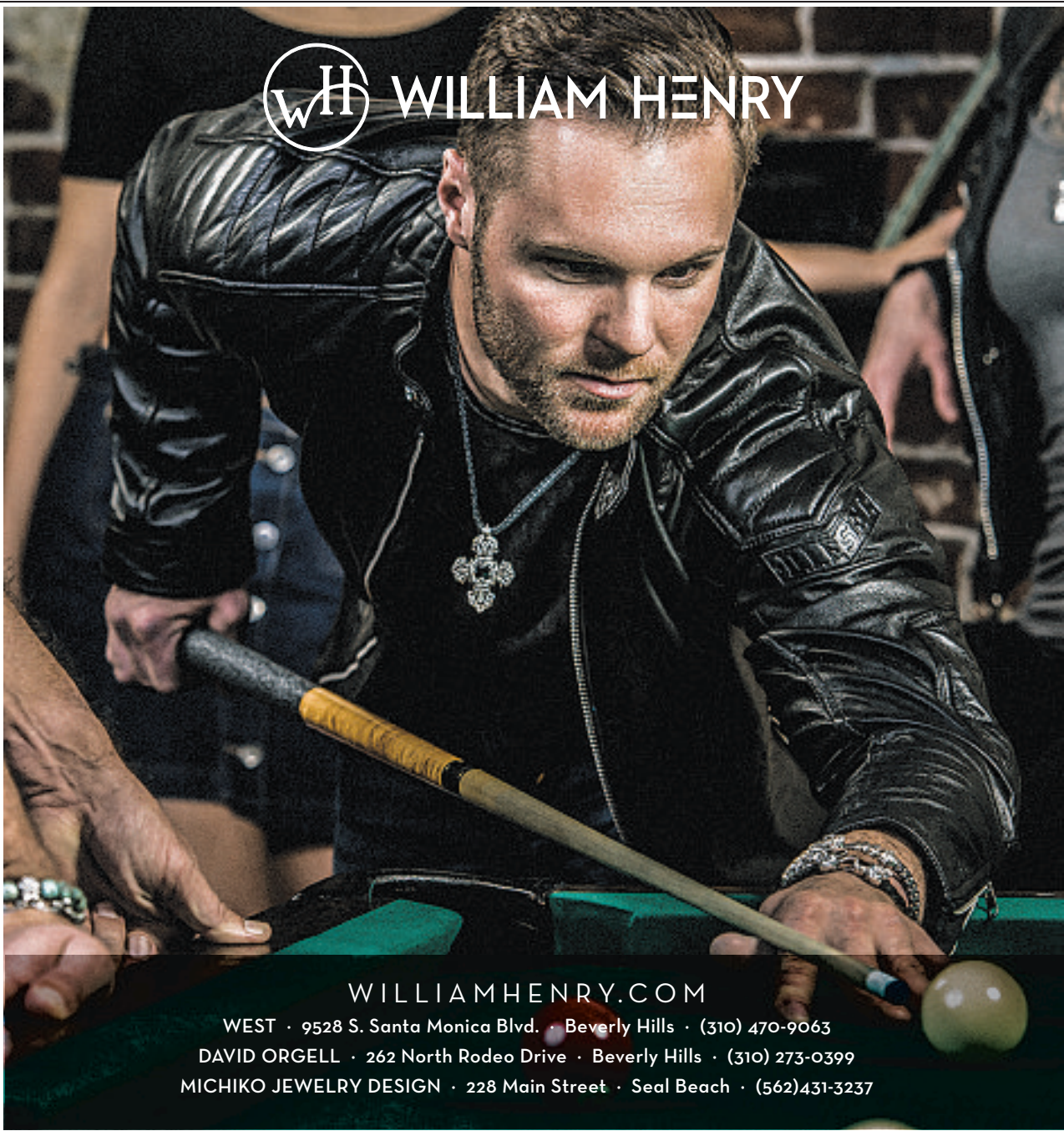
As a millennial, Webster uses social media as much for inspiration as communication. More old-school designers might be shocked to hear her admit that she sketched out her trademark speech-bubble purses "100% thinking about social media and Instagram."

The media saviness of her designs also means they're ideal red carpet fare in an age when there's a "shoe cam" lurking at every awards ceremony. When asked for red-carpet footwear tips, she replies: "You've got to think of it from a 360-degree [perspective]. So you've got, like, bows on the back or details in unexpected places."

Nudes, metallic and black work well, she suggests, with special details such as crystal-embellished fabrics and heels: "Anything that catches the camera flash."

With such an inherent understanding of the symbiotic relationship among fashion, media and celebrity, it won't be any surprise if she ends up as one of the more popular designers on the red carpet this season. She might just be a shoe-in.

image@latimes.com



WH

WILLIAM HENRY

WILLIAMHENRY.COM

WEST • 9528 S. Santa Monica Blvd. • Beverly Hills • (310) 470-9063

DAVID ORGELL • 262 North Rodeo Drive • Beverly Hills • (310) 273-0399

MICHIKO JEWELRY DESIGN • 228 Main Street • Seal Beach • (562) 431-3237