THE RADAR FASHION

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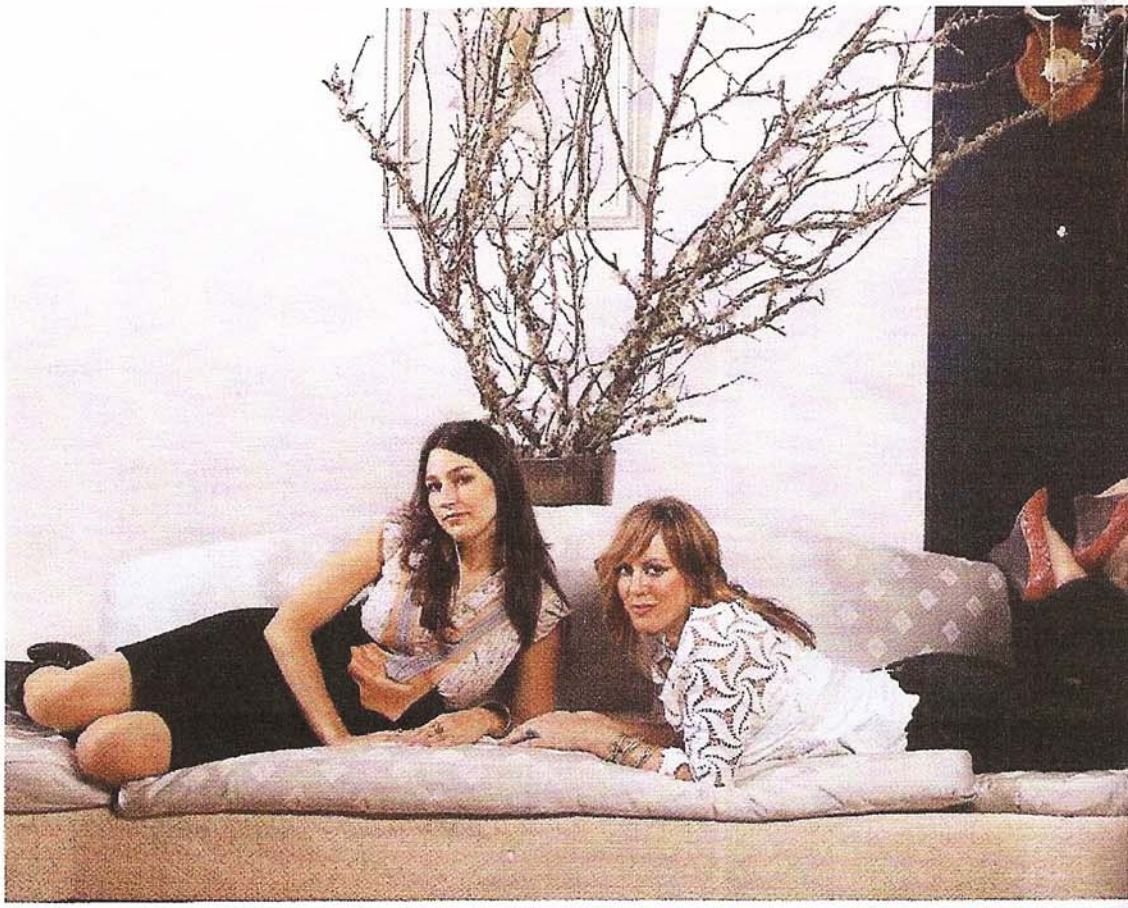

Elizabeth Del Castillo and Kelly Whi

SHOP GIRLS *The Lincoln Park boutique circuit gets re-wired*

When most girlfriends talk about college, their tales are all too typical: carefree days in cafes and drunken nights in dark, smoky bars. Not Elizabeth Del Castillo and Kelly Whitesell, the designer-owner duo behind the new Eskell boutique.

When these 27-year-old best friends-cum-entrepreneurs reminisce about their days at Indiana University, where they were both enrolled in the Design Program, every story starts or ends with a sewing project. They talk about being holed up with their sewing machines for days on end, not getting sleep for three nights straight, showing up on one another's doorstep with an unfinished garment, and how, ultimately, sewing created a bond between them much stronger than they shared in high school (they grew up in separate small towns outside Gary).

Which is why, four years later, when Del Castillo lost her job at Spiegel and Whitesell was selling real estate (with a degree from FIT), they were determined to turn their friendship into a thriving business. Dark-haired Del Castillo seems more prim—the sweet, feminine one of the two. "I love vintage fabrics," she says. A vivacious messy-haired bottle-blond with an impromptu tattoo of a pair of scissors underneath her forearm, Whitesell definitely has the edge. They complement each other, admire one another's distinct traits and seamlessly finish one another's sentences. That's why their partnership works so well. "You should see us shopping together," says Whitesell. "We're tornados." As for the store: "We're young, we're gung-ho, and we're ready to do it," she adds.

Decorated in their self-described "biker-deco-western style" with thrifted cowhide rugs, antler display fixtures, grandma's postcards and a cash wrap homemade from quilted fabric and grommets, the uncharacteristic Lincoln Park boutique could easily pass for a hipster's haunt in Brook True to their motley mixes and eccentric detailing is an armloac interesting clothing. H. Fredriksson's slinky dresses and oversized sl feature screenprinted designs from her own photographs. Tamara C Hawaiian shifts and breezy tunics possess a decidedly Lilly Pulitzer-me '50s-housecoat chic. Judi Rosen, who's responsible for '80s poofy tees, s high-waisted stretch denim and pimped-out cheerleader-esque letter jac is Whitesell's favorite. "She's the shit...she's almost too cool," says White Their prettified, yet raw collection also includes M. Carter T-shirts, H Hobby cotton garters and layered charm necklaces by In God We Tru

But the biggest seller of all comes as an encouraging, if not thril surprise: their own eponymous clothing label, Eskell—which, if haven't figured it out, is a combination of both their names. It's DIY right. Every piece is one-of-a-kind, collectively designed and cre from inception to hanger. Just peek into the studio in the back o store—a working mess of sewing machines, shelves of fabric, i spools of thread and tape measures. They pull out unusual vintage p of birds in flight, the perfect gray suede and a metallic trim they can't to use. And though they're definitely fabric-obsessed, (they'll anywhere from Mood Fabrics in New York to bargain bins at Jo Fabrics), it doesn't mean they pay less attention to technique. The p is in the shirttail flare of a nylon sleeveless tube dress, the perfect tucking of a wool-gabardine skirt or silver sequined trim around a pa pockets. "We put our heart and soul into every little detail," says Castillo. "It's very disturbing," quips Whitesell. Au contraire, Eskell actually quite endearing. ■ *953 W. Webster Ave., 773.477.9390*