

In the Future, We'll All Be Wearing Eileen Fisher

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by BRIDGET READ

On the drive to Eileen Fisher from New York City, the trees almost made me cry. Green, green trees, light ones and dark ones, big and small (I could clearly stand to brush up on my dendrology), becoming more densely packed and joyously leafy as we zoomed up the Hudson. The brand's headquarters in Irvington, New York, are only a little over an hour away from the city, but the change in air quality says further. Manhattan has trees, of course; but most of them are organized and lonely, like lampposts. "These trees!" I wanted to scream, Lorax-style, as we got closer to *her*.

Eileen Fisher is a name that conjures peace. The kind you get from living somewhere with an abundance of trees, and from wearing elegant, unrestrictive fabrics. A few years ago, Janet Malcolm described Eileen Fisher's devotees, who have been flocking to her basic, flowing clothes since 1984, as "the cult of the interestingly plain." I call it sartorially unburdened.

When I first moved to New York, I went to a party with a coworker where we met a girl who worked at Eileen Fisher, in the corporate office on Fifth Avenue. My friend and I were publishing assistants at the time, working far more hours than for what we were paid, for people who made several times more money than we did. We wore Eileen Fisher, known between us as simply "Eileen," which we bought at Century 21, or with gift cards our bosses gave us as birthday presents. Tasteful trousers, silk box tops, and linen dresses made us feel more in control and dignified than our circumstances allowed us to be. When we met this woman, who had escaped our industry, creaking along in lean times, for a job *at* Eileen, we said to each other, "That could be us one day."

Five years later, my former coworker really does work at Eileen Fisher, after searching fruitlessly for a promotion as an editor. Janet Malcolm might be surprised at this trajectory; in addition to a cult, she also

described Eileen Fisher—wearers as “women of a certain age and class—professors, editors, psychotherapists, lawyers, administrators—for whom the hiding of vanity is an inner necessity.” In her estimation, editors *wear* Eileen Fisher; they don’t go to work for her. Maybe that used to be true. A certain stereotype that your mom shops at Eileen Fisher endures. But what about Eileen’s younger customers, a small but devoted cadre of Gen-X and millennial women who, yes, aspire to the intelligentsia but for whom economic precarity has made that work increasingly inaccessible? There are a number of high-end labels that now evoke the clean, minimalist style that Fisher is known for—The Row and Jil Sander come to mind—but none offer it at Eileen Fisher’s more reasonable price point. For the younger set, “the hiding of vanity” isn’t so much the issue—the issue is whether or not one can afford to be vain at all.

And then there is the allure of Eileen herself. Elusive and shy, known by her signature gray bob and dark-rimmed glasses, Fisher bucks the grating “girlboss” management style that has boomed in the last few years—despite, of course, having an eponymous, largely women-run brand that has made her a millionaire. In an era in which women are *still* trying to figure out how to work and live and look, Eileen the concept has become a kind of refuge, a mantra. And the fashion world is finally catching on. My trip to Irvington on a morning in April was prompted by the announcement that Fisher will be honored with the CFDA’s Positive Change Award on June 3 for her commitment to sustainability.

Nowhere is Eileen’s rise in relevancy more evident than in the brand’s environmentalism, a longtime priority that has suddenly come into vogue as the fashion business scrambles to adapt to mounting evidence that it is one of the world’s worst climate change offenders. Textile production creates 1.2 billion tons of greenhouse gas emissions annually, according to a recent study by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation. And that’s only going up; 25.5 billion pounds of reusable textiles are thrown away each year (70 pounds per person).

Eileen Fisher is at least a decade ahead of the pack, founding its first recycling project, then called “Green Eileen,” in 2009, which didn’t just take your old clothes and send them to a landfill (a rampant “eco-friendly” initiative that is anything but). It took them back and resold

them at a discount, cleaned or repaired. Recycling programs like it are starting to crop up at the world's largest retailers like H&M, but Eileen Fisher's, now called Renew, isn't just a side hustle, or an appeasement to tree-hugging types. In 2018, \$3 million of Eileen's \$500 million in revenue came from Renew—and she wants it to become way more. Last year, the brand collaborated with downtown cool-kid brand Public School on a line of upcycled garments, including a felted cap. Among the trees, I arrived at the Tiny Factory, the former warehouse out of which the Renew program is based, in the car Eileen had sent for me. The brick building is on a commercial street near the pristine houses and front yards of Irvington (the white picket fences here are literal); a few miles downtown and on the river is the Lab Store, where EF customers can buy items from regular collections as well as Renew pieces. Just minutes up the water from there is Eileen's house and home office, like a real-life Nancy Meyers film set that I happened to know is modeled off of a traditional farmhouse, which I was, lamentably, not invited to see.

I was there to tour the Tiny Factory, and to meet *the* Eileen—and I was ludicrously stressed, having left my favorite pair of elastic waist Eileen pants at my boyfriend's apartment, as if she would be able to tell. That's the thing about Eileen Fisher—you really only need one of each of the things you like from her. “We get back garments that are 30 years old,” I was told by Carolina Bedoya, the chic, bespectacled employee who is currently the company's resale recycling manager, who took me around. The space was clean and brightly lit, though so full of material that we seemed to be actually inside one of those bags you drop off at Goodwill every six months.

Boxes of returned items come in from Eileen Fisher stores, around 2,000 pieces a week (a little less than in Seattle, the other Renew base); the boxes are then opened and sorted. A woman and man were quietly handling items on tables in the factory as we walked by—they supposedly know the material so well that they can tell linen, cotton, and wool blends simply by touch. Sorting happens by level of damage, then by fabrication, color, and item type, depending on the needs of Carmen Gama, a Mexican designer based in New York who heads the Renew clothing line, and who was one of three winners of the CFDA's inaugural Eileen Fisher Social Innovator fellowship in 2016. Bedoya

explained that Eileen Fisher clothes are more suited to recycling than others because they have long been ethically sourced, organic, and free of the harmful dyes that would make it difficult to clean them en masse, and reconstitute them.

During the 10 years it's been in operation, the take-back system has become a complicated, high-tech enterprise. Garments are either cleaned and resold as is, sold with a flaw, overdyed by an artist in Seattle to hide discoloration, or stripped and made into something else entirely. Huge amounts of data are collected and analyzed. For example, it takes 2.5 pairs of linen pants to make a box top. "We're always keeping track of information that could be looped back into the main line to make better decisions at the design point," Bedoya said. "How is the fabric after years of use? What can we do at the design stage to extend the life cycle, to extend the quality of the product so that people will hold onto them longer?"

But making clothing is only one part of the Renew program nowadays. Everything *else* Eileen Fisher is doing with old clothes, which happens in another room in the Tiny Factory, exists at the new frontier of recycling. Bedoya passed me off to Sigi Ahl, a tall, willowy German woman in an impeccable white shirt who was Eileen Fisher's first employee. The two met in Soho in the '90s when Eileen was just starting out. Ahl is an artist and children's book author who helped develop DesignWork, part of the company's attempt to be 100 percent sustainable by 2020 that was announced four years ago. She showed me the giant felting machine that enables her to turn Eileen Fisher clothes into bucket hats, bags, acoustic panels, wall fixtures, and pieces of art.

The machine is sort of like a giant toaster; fabric is piled in layers and fed onto a slowly moving belt, once it is free of zippers, buttons, and the like. Then, inside, 1,000 needles pump quickly in and out of the fabric so ruthlessly that it all becomes one. The result is gorgeous, and industrial: The felt is thick, with a dot-like pattern, the color of the new fabric saturated yet blended. You can even see, in some cases, the light outline of a shirt or pair of pants, an imprint of what used to be.

The machine enables Renew staff to use every bit of fabric, down to scraps, to make something that would otherwise likely be created from virgin textile stock. Eliminating any and all waste textiles from the loop, pre- and postconsumer—that’s what will make Eileen Fisher truly circular, and what fashion at large needs to achieve to stop producing so much waste, and to stop wasting energy. Of course, the process is in its earliest stages. The Tiny Factory has just one large felting machine, which was custom-made in China in collaboration with an engineer.

As the machine was being noisily demonstrated, Eileen appeared. Very small, wearing the coziest black cashmere sweater I have ever seen, cotton pants, and felted shoes (non-Eileen), and her skin makeup-free and luminous, she shook my hand with hers. “Cool,” she said, when she saw the machine doing its thing. As Ahl explained how the felted pieces could be made into textiles for homes and stores, restaurants, and other commercial spaces, Eileen eagerly nodded, sometimes chiming in. “We sold almost every piece there in Milan,” Ahl said about their recent exhibition installment of Waste No More, the name for the art and design initiative of Renew. “It was supposed to go to the Netherlands, and we had nothing to send them.” Impressed, Eileen said, “I didn’t know you were making that decision. People probably won’t take notice of the whole system unless it’s selling.”

We went to another room where more of the felting products were on display, stunning against the brick walls of the factory. As we looked around, Eileen enthused about nearly everything: “Isn’t that beautiful? Isn’t that incredible?” In a smaller room off that one, all the felted wall hangings were in gentle shades of white, as were the pillows on the white armchairs arranged in a circle around a light wooden coffee table. It had the aura of a spa waiting room, or an expensive therapist’s office. One of Eileen’s publicists offered me a glass of water before the two of us sat down to talk. “Eileen, do you have your water?” the publicist asked. We all had our water.

I wanted to know about Eileen’s 20s. “In the nicest way possible, it’s very hard to imagine you being younger than 30,” I told her. She laughed. But she was, in fact, once in her 20s, having just moved to the

city from Illinois to become an interior designer. “What was I wearing?” she said. “Well, first of all, I didn’t have a budget. I was a struggling designer. So I just roamed around looking for simple things.” When did she start dressing like Eileen Fisher? She told me that was a funny question, one of a litany of affirmations I received during our conversation. She only started making clothes when she traveled to Japan with a Japanese boyfriend, with whom she was working and living, and was inspired by the simple, elegant draping of kimonos. “I saw a picture of him the other day, digging out old pictures. He was cute,” she said. Eileen has a calming, quiet voice that belies a kind of manic curiosity; she talks with her hands, often clasping them together excitedly when describing about something she’s into.

The Japanese boyfriend didn’t last, but Eileen Fisher was born out of the four pieces she designed and sold at her first New York boutique show. She never wanted to be a boss. “I wanted to be in business doing what I loved,” she recalled. “I wanted to be able to make a living. I saw a lot of people living in Soho, who were artists and they had day jobs. I wanted to be one. I wanted to work and live in what I wanted to do.” She lived in Soho and Tribeca, eventually marrying David Zwiebel, who also worked in retail and joined the company. They divorced in the late ’90s, but share two children, Zack and Sasha, now adults.

The contradiction between Eileen’s undeniable financial success and her relaxed attitude toward profit is fascinating. Her leadership style is reluctant. She only recently agreed to call herself a CEO, and the highest ranks of the company form a “leadership circle.” The women’s collective vibe of EF’s management verges on corniness, but is now at the vanguard of workplace trends. Movements like the Fight for 15 and Times Up have shone a light on the pitfalls of lean-in-style, ruthless corporate leadership, even if it’s by a woman. Would she ever call herself a boss bitch? “No, no, no,” Eileen said, horrified. “I worked at Burger King and some other restaurants when I was young, and I didn’t like that power-over feeling. I liked working together. I’m from a big family, seven kids, six girls. So we did everything kind of fluidly together. And I guess I wanted to re-create the sisterhood somehow, or something like that.”

The sisterhood translates, financially, to profit sharing and employee part-ownership, aspects of the company that, I told her, are nearly socialist—another millennial appeal. She seemed intrigued. “There’s something interesting there.” Fisher is not a socialist, but she wants benevolent things out of capitalism, if that’s possible. Says Fisher: “I think business in general is a huge opportunity to *change* business, because business was set up by men. And, nothing wrong with that, but—well, maybe something wrong—but we have a lot of issues in that the top 1 percent have way too much money and it’s not spread across. I think, through business, we have a huge opportunity to share profits and not just give the money to the people at the top.”

Eileen resists cashing in on the sudden currency of “women-owned companies” in refreshing ways. She doesn’t share much on social media, despite engaging in all the most Instagram-friendly of self-care practices: kundalini yoga, meditation, breath work. She has been open about her belief in the powers of therapy. “I’m always trying to kind of get rid of stuff from the past, or all my lack of competence, or my negativity or whatever is going on for me. And so I’m constantly in a process of evolution, of learning more about myself and trying to be better, do better,” she said. Eileen Fisher’s corporate office has hosted on-site astrologers. Her at-home chef Keiko makes her sushi many nights a week (“Sometimes she makes Indian”), and other times, Fisher’s boyfriend makes dinner. “He’s a simple cook,” she offered (and nothing more). She had just had a myofascial treatment, which she helped me understand by explaining, “Your issues are in your tissues.” And she is “interested in energy”—Eileen Fisher could be the next Goop if she wanted, I told her, it would only take a podcast or a skin-care line. “Um, I don’t know if I’m lazy or what,” she said, pondering. “I think, ‘Oh, just more work.’”

So, if not a lifestyle brand, what will bring the youth to the church of Eileen? “I’ve been struggling thinking about this,” she said. I told her I like Eileen Fisher because the simplicity of the clothes mean I don’t have to worry about them, even while I love them. It feels astonishingly good as a young person, especially a woman, not to feel like your only value is as a consumer, at the whim of constantly changing trends, attuned to every new “drop” and “edit.”

I *like* shopping where my mom shops. “That’s good,” she mused. “If

the young customers could see the line the way customers saw it when we first opened our stores . . . then they would understand it more. Over the years, we evolved, and added a lot of different things. So we're in this kind of stripping down, simplifying, come-back-to-our-core timelessness. And we can appeal to the next generation around the essence of who we are, and around our sustainability work.” The idea of a uniform is attractive—the core of Eileen Fisher’s basics is a line called The System—because it is freeing, even if the pieces you’re buying are more expensive than so-called fast fashion. Because, ideally, you’re buying less of them. You can see this ethos emulated now in cheaper, digital-born brands like Everlane, and Cuyana, which also foreground transparency. “You want it to be fun and cool, but simple, so that it’s not so much about the clothes, right? It becomes about who you are.”

Fisher believes young people will demand more and more that what they buy is sustainably made. For one thing, most of us can’t actually buy all that much. Eileen Fisher’s discounted recycled lines seem perfectly pitched, if she can get us in the door. “The early days for me, I had kids and it was about simplifying, simplifying,” Fisher remembered. “I was spending too much time shopping, too much time putting myself together. I wanted to make it simple for me and for others. . . . I think that young people want it simple again.” And she thinks optimistically that soon companies will be unable to get away with unethical practices, environmental and humanitarian, as sourcing data becomes more consumer-facing: “It’s going to be transparent. You’re going to be able to go up to a garment and know exactly where it was made, where the fabric came from, how sustainable that factory is, or how much water they use. You’re going to be able to find that all out, hopefully within five years. And the companies that aren’t doing the good work are going to be caught out.”

I had been nervous to pose one question to her: Is it enough? How can Eileen Fisher help fix an entire planet of wasteful and exploited people? When so much of how we live our lives is centered around buying things, how do we make a sea change that fundamentally alters how we consider *stuff*? This is where Eileen’s small but mighty vision finds its limits. “We’re really struggling with how to actually make it

work,” she said, not somber, but more serious. She has read the latest IPCC report from the U.N.; she accepts that we have 12 years (now closer to 10) to mitigate the worst, most apocalyptic effects of a warming planet. The confusion in the company’s various environmental initiatives’s names—DesignWork, or Renew, or Remade, or Waste No More—is an indicator that it does not have yet have the textile crisis solved. Getting fully circular is one thing; the company has amended its 2020 Vision, a set of 20 goals across eight social and environmental priority areas, to allow that some will be achieved in 2025, or even 2030. Scaling circular practices would be superhuman.

Eileen might not be radical: Her sushi chef, for one thing, is not the greenest amenity, nor is the fact that she drives the few minutes between Irvington company sites. (“I’m always late,” she says.) She struggles with deciding when to voice her political convictions, despite her company’s commitments to environmental ethics and to women-focused electoral efforts. “This is a painful—these are conversations that are going on,” she said. “You know, how to step out in terms of my own sense of my own politics . . . there’s a part of me that really wants to stand up and say, “We support the Green New Deal. We don’t even know what it is, but we support it!” But we try to coax the big brands to come along to take baby steps. We don’t want people to feel put off by us.”

“How do we be more unifying and inclusive *and* we take a strong stand?” she asked herself before giving a long sigh. She said her friend Rose Macario, the CEO of Patagonia, a fellow B-Corp company, is always trying to get her to speak out more. “It’s important we are not polarizing as much as possible. . . . Although, Green New Deal, come on.” I got the sense that she will welcome the revolution, at least, when it comes. She has an admirable amount of faith in young people, and will happily dress us for the barricades. Her daughter, now in grad school at Yale for architecture, she told me, always recycled an item out of her tiny Brooklyn closet for every Eileen Fisher product she took home.

I hated that I had to go back to New York. There is something utopian about the remade items in the Eileen Fisher felting room—they’re hopeful, even joyful, despite being, essentially, clothes for the

apocalypse. Things made out of what we already have when there's nothing left to use from scratch. I was sent back to the city with a gray felted glasses case. Eileen Fisher is for your mom, for you, and for whatever the hell is coming next. "We're not so newsworthy in our simple clothes," Eileen said. "But we are, I think, in our concept."