

Threading Lightly

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Paskho's Patrick Robinson on bringing jobs back to underserved communities and adhering to sustainable production practices.

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Patrick Robinson. Photo courtesy of Paskho

According to Lauren Bravo's book, *How to Break Up with Fast Fashion*, we only wear 10-20 percent of the clothes in our closets on a daily basis. Patrick Robinson—a designer who has transformed global brands such as Giorgio Armani, Perry Ellis, and the Gap—has made it his mission to change how we approach consumerism and our closets. *Worth* sat down with Robinson to discuss the deep-seated issues of exploitation and excess in the fashion industry and how his regenerative brand, Paskho, is changing fashion's landscape.

Growing up in southern California, Robinson was surrounded by surf culture from an early age. "I wanted to make surf shorts, and I wanted to run my own business," he says. After finding a successful niche in designing and selling board shorts to his peers, he matriculated at Parsons School of Design. "I think that my designs have always had a utilitarian bend to them," he says. "I, of course, cared about how the shorts looked, but more than anything, I wanted everyone and anyone to be able to wear them. It was very important to me that they bridge the divide between functional and fashionable."

After graduating from Parsons, Robinson was hired by Giorgio Armani to overhaul a failing business model. Over the course of his five-year tenure at Armani, Robinson transformed the brand's Le Collezioni line into an internationally profitable company. Still, in the infancy of his career, he had already made a striking name for himself as someone who not only understood design, but how to run a business. For over 25 years, Robinson helped haute-couture and other fashion brands to revamp and rethink their business models. "On paper, I was thriving," he explained. "I was making good money. I was running global businesses and leading design teams in Tokyo, London, New York. But I was also making more clothes than anyone on Earth could possibly wear."

"I felt like I was lying. I was talking out of both sides of my mouth. On the one hand, I believed in sustainability, ethical labor practices, and community. But neither my businesses nor my actions reflected that," he said. He knew that he needed to make a change, and thus Paskho was born. Paskho is a company that strives to create functional, fashionable clothes to combat the problems of waste and exploitation rampant in the fashion industry. After establishing the ethical foundations for the business, Robinson began to purchase leftover fabrics from factories.

"After seeing how much high-quality material goes to waste, that was the only way I could feel like I was adhering to my values," he explained. Still today, much of Paskho's fabrics are saved from landfills, emphasizing the crucial importance of conscious consumerism in today's world. "Not only are our production practices sustainable, but we create pieces of clothing that you want to wear everywhere: our clothes work in Heathrow Airport; they work on the side of a mountain; they work in the fanciest restaurant in Bologna," said Robinson.

The brand works to combat social inequalities across the United States by bringing jobs back to underserved communities while adhering to sustainable production practices. It is a business model that aims to bridge the gap between the production process and the consumer by bringing consistent, quality work to the talented Americans who work predominantly with their hands. In contrast to other businesses that took a financial hit during the pandemic, 2020 served as a catalyst for Paskho to hit the ground running with their signature Community-Made Maker program.

"The global economy came to a grinding halt. And something just clicked for me. There are so many Americans who are hungry for work and who already have the wonderful skills we need to sharpen our competitive advantage," said Robinson. "We really made it happen."

The first Makers in the Community-Made program were the talented Broadway costumers, seamstresses, and tailors who found themselves suddenly out of work during the pandemic. Paskho set up shop with eighteen Makers in New York City, allowing the brand to continue manufacturing and supplying clothes to consumers at the height of the pandemic when other companies could not do so. The second Maker community that Robinson established was in Gee's Bend, Alabama, a community with a remarkable and unusual tradition of quilting.

Although the community's quilts have been recognized as significant pieces of American art in exhibits at the Whitney and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the actual quilters themselves have remained in relative obscurity. They have seen little financial gain despite the art world's recognition.



Stella Pettway. Photo courtesy of Paskho

Through the work of Upstart Co-Lab, a foundation that aims to connect capital with creative minds making a difference, Robinson connected with the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, a nonprofit that works to promote the work of black artists from the American south. One year after launching the Community-Made program in New York, Paskho created its second sewing pod in Gee's Bend to provide the community's expert quilters with reliable salaries and work that recognizes their craft. In 2022, Paskho established its third pod in Eagle Butte on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota.

"Native American reservations are where some of the worst systemic inequalities are perpetrated," said Robinson. "I know that I can't fix these problems by myself. But I hope that I can make some difference by creating economic opportunity for our Makers and their communities."

By cutting out shipping processes, middlemen, and all the costs associated with manufacturing overseas, Paskho can turn a profit and pay its Makers and laborers a fair wage. The regenerative business model benefits everyone, from the Makers to the investors to the consumers. "Not only are we doing the right thing by putting talented Americans to work, but we actually have a strategic advantage over other companies," explained

Robinson. “Something that we’re working on today will be done in production in a week or less. Then we can start shipping directly to our consumers. I don’t have to wait or pay for a boat to take a shirt halfway around the world. We’re a much smarter, quicker company.” Though it took time for Paskho’s unusual regenerative model to gain traction at its inception, investors have seen that having the point of production so close to the consumer pays off quickly.

Paskho’s model provides real, measurable impacts such as job creation, increased economic opportunity for chronically underserved populations, and reduced environmental harm. There’s nothing political about the philosophy and ethos of Paskho. It’s a brand that is based on the simple value of treating one another and our planet with conscious consideration. Robinson wants us all to reflect on what it is that makes us happy and what it is that makes us fulfilled. “It’s not our things, it’s not our wealth. It’s the care that we give to the world and the people around us,” he said.

“We don’t need to give up beauty. We don’t need to give up our style or individualism. But we need to ask ourselves—how can I walk through this world more lightly?”