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Fashion's New Freedom

Designer Aaron Potts prefers to use the word 'unisex' rather than 'gender' when it comes to designing his brand, A.Potts.

By Sarah Fones

The term "unisex" dates from the 1960s, when the neologism started gaining traction in the fashion space. From the Latin *unus*, "uni" simply means "one." Conceptually, it is most readily associated with Austrian-born American designer Rudi Gernreich, who pioneered the idea of a modern, avant-garde wardrobe suitable for both men and women. Gernreich is also the man Aaron Potts arguably considers his greatest influence. Describing the clothing he creates as "unisex"—as opposed to, say, "gender neutral"—is an homage of sorts, the New York–based Potts explains.

While Gernreich sought to blur the lines between genders, Potts, who designs under the label A.Potts, primarily looks to bring a diverse coalition of consumers and creatives together. "I think of being 'united' in multiple ways—across gender, across age, across size, across all those boundaries that have sort of separated us,"he says. "That's why I use 'unisex.' I don't know if it sounds old-fashioned. I just like it."

A Parsons graduate, Potts first interned with Marc Jacobs at Perry Ellis and Donna Karan at DKNY (Karan was his senior critic at Parsons) before stints working at Anne Klein, Ellen Tracy, Badgley Mischka, and Victoria's Secret. In 2018 he decided to launch his own label, but that wasn't always the plan. It took a cross-country move and a brutal layoff just six months into a job to get him back to New York and into wellness mode. He went to the gym, took up yoga, started eating better, and floated in sensory deprivation tanks,

all the while working on his résumé and portfolio. Still, things weren't clicking, and it begged the question: What did he really want to do?

It turns out Potts's self-care practice—and inherent creativity—led to an answer. "I started making things for myself, like these oversize overalls, very kind of Patrick Kelly-ish," he recalls. "I was doing these oversize tunics and dashikis... drop-crotch pants, and just really simple shapes in cool, summery fabrics." Predictably, people took notice and started asking about the new designs. But the a-ha moment really came when Potts found himself standing in front of his closet. While other garments had been pushed to the sides, the pieces he'd recently made—the ones he found himself returning to—lived right in the middle. He knew then he'd be designing under his own label.

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Starting small and being independent allowed Potts to take a multifaceted approach to sustainability. He produces to order with little to no overage and does so locally in the Garment District. "Part of the discussion of sustainability for me is also about engaging with minority-owned businesses and minority creatives," Potts says. Most of the people he employs and works with are women, part of the BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities, or immigrants. Many are intersectional in these groups.

Potts says he wanted to foster an inclusive community from the onset, "one that was about real acceptance and diversity and creative collaboration—not the sort of crazy, ego-driven insanity that fashion can be sometimes." Potts still counts a handful of fellow Black Detroit-born designers as some of his closest friends. Among them is Tracy Reese, whose fashion illustrations a teacher shared with him back in high school. After moving to New York, Potts connected with Reese, sewing buttons for her fashion show.

For Spring 2023, Potts featured the voluminous, movement-driven pieces he's become known for along with newer, distinctly body-con silhouettes, all in shades like lilac, olive, sky blue, and acid lime (Gernreich's loose, vibrantly hued caftans and figure-clinging knits come to mind). Baggy A-line dresses, waist-cinched zip-up jumpsuits, flowing, tiered maxiskirts, and airy, embellished ponchos populate the collection. Potts says that cumulatively, the clothing comprises three distinct, seasonless "layers."

First come the base articles—pull-on pants that can be dressed up or down, for example, or a casual jacket layered either atop a tank or a hearty knit depending upon the weather. Typically rendered in clean, crisp fabrics, these pieces wear and pack well, Potts says. The second layer consists of color and texture to help tell the season's story. For spring it's cool and earthy tones, plus black and white, punctuated by eyelets and fringe. "Then the third layer is what we call 'everyday editorial,'" Potts adds. "So that's those high-emotion moments that make you feel like you're wearing something out of a magazine—something straight off the runway but done in a way that is still practical to wear and has a sense of comfort."

People are finding things that they like in each of the three layers, Potts explains, whether it's a fashionable staple they can wear over and over, an eye-catching piece perfect for an upcoming vacation, or simply items that allow them to gain five pounds and not have to sacrifice swaths of their wardrobe. The picture is more nuanced for retail buyers (purchasing on behalf of a store), however. While the concept of gender is increasingly fluid, much of mainstream fashion remains remarkably static. To be salable to the broader commercial public and thus, profitable to companies large and small, clothing necessarily gets categorized. Most often, this manifests as garments designed for either men or women (or at least marketed as such). Despite the incentives to maintain these binaries, there's been a rebuke of the status quo. Increasingly,

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consumers have become more amenable to the idea of gender-neutral clothing, choosing something simply because they like it. In other words, opting not for men's or women's clothes, but for clothes.

"As much as we all in the artistic world love the idea of unisex, what I'm finding is that when it comes to wholesale, the structure is still very much how it was in terms of women's lines and men's lines," Potts says. Thus, it takes a degree of strategizing in terms of showroom presentation, coupled with runway, editorial, and celebrity styling. "There is a reality of how stores function," Potts adds. "So we have to be conscious of that—and we can still tell our story of inclusivity in our own way, through our own channels."

Above all, Potts focuses on crafting flattering silhouettes for different bodies. Unisex can't be boiled down to just putting a boy in a dress or a girl in a tailored suit, he says. Doing so would simply reinforce what types of clothing have traditionally been "for" men or women. Plus, women have basically been doing the unisex thing all along—grabbing an oversize sweatshirt, slipping into a pair of boyfriend jeans, and pairing them with an Oxford button-up and loafers. Seeing someone wearing something that doesn't neatly conform with gender convention is neither laudably revolutionary nor cause for pearl-clutching, he notes.

Potts ultimately takes a broad, informed view of clothing and its capabilities. He thinks about shapes, and the different effects of those shapes on various bodies—how they'll look on someone with a more masculine build, or on someone curvy, or tall. "But the thing that connects all of it is this artistic spirit," he says. "So I try to pull out the gender and make it about that." Gernreich, for his part, was a touch more philosophical: "Unisex reveals nature, our common humanity. It doesn't hide or confuse it."

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