Eileen Fisher is arguably the leader in sustainable fashion. Since founding her eponymous brand in 1984 with a range of unfussy, Japanese-inspired wares, she has made it point to create pieces that stand the test of time, that forgoes trends altogether and, as of 2009, suppress the damaging affects that clothing manufacturers have on the environment.

Recently, the latter has become a central issue in the fashion industry, prompting many established companies to change their practices in the hopes of garnering a righteous reputation—one that is ecological and ethically sound. According to estimates by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), 25.5 billions pounds of reusable textiles are thrown away each year, occupying 5% of all landfill space. That’s an average of 70 pounds per citizen. And with the constant marketing of new styles each season, encouraging the masses to shop for more and more items, that hefty number doesn’t look like it will exponentially decrease anytime soon.
But now that consumers are increasingly well informed of these disparaging figures, brands are now sourcing biodegradable fabrics, producing less volume and making sure that their working conditions are up to par. To do otherwise could attract the wrath of the pitchfork-bearing masses, bringing about an onslaught of bad press, which can result in a decrease in sales.

For Fisher, however, growing profits year over years is seemingly not the end-result of striving to be as sustainable as possible. “She always knows that there is a right thing to do,” said Sigi Ahl, the creative director of DesignWork, a new branch of the brand. And even though she may not know the outcome, she knows she has to do it. She takes risks, which I find admirable.”
Such was the case when Ahl initiated DesignWork in 2015. In an effort to “upscale,” as she puts it, Ahl went to Fisher and asked her to invest in a felting machine, a technology primarily employed to create service textiles by the automotive industry that uses barbed needles to mesh fabrics together. The brand wouldn’t disclose the exact amount, but Business of Fashion reported that it cost $20,000. It is used to recycle what many would deem unusable: the scraps that were accumulating in abundance at its factories.

Indeed, Eileen Fisher makes it a point to utilize every bit of the fabrics it creates. It even buys back discarded garments from consumers for five dollars a pop, as part of its Renew initiative. Founded in 2009 and originally called Green Eileen, Renew takes these worn pieces and either resells them at reduced prices or creates new designs out of them. Over 4,000 articles of clothing get transported to the brand’s Tiny Factory in Irvington, New York every week, where they are sorted by wearability. If items don’t pass muster, they are handed to the lean Resewn team, headed by Carmen Gama, who is tasked with figuring out the best ways to well, renew, the old. Still, with all this salvaging, not everything can have a second life. Some materials are just too threadbare and small to be repurposed. Thus, the DesignWork arm was born to circumvent this problem.

“We have developed a design process that is, at the same time, also a construction process for creating felt,” Ahl explained. “At this point, we know what fabrics work and don’t work to create certain hues and patterns. It is really a development process of fabric construction. I initially didn’t want to create products. I just wanted to show the beauty of what can be done.”
With that in mind, and with a background in fine arts, Ahl started to piece together these scraps in a quilt-like manner to create large-scale works of art, or “wall works,” as she calls them. They were first displayed in an exhibit aptly titled “Waste No More” at Salone Internazionale del Mobile di Milano, the prestigious furniture and design trade fair, last April. According to her, the show received an overwhelming positive response, with “over 200 million impressions.” That said, after starting this endeavor and seeing what the machine was capable of doing, she became aware that this was not just a marketing tactic, but also a way carve out a new revenue stream for the company.

“It was a good move, in hindsight, to use artwork as an ambassador of what we can do with this fabric,” she continued. “Then, it was pretty clear, once we realized the potential, that this could be a widely applicable product. We are experts in clothing, but we realized that this fabric could be applied to a wide range of accessories, upholstery pillows and other home furnishings.”
Now, the pillows are currently sold at ABC Carpet & Home, with the aim of expanding to other retailers. And the wall works, which range from $500 to $15,000, have been commissioned by private collectors, hotels, office buildings, museums and other corporate institutions—including the Cooper Hewitt Museum and Columbia University’ Mortimer B. Zuckerman Mind Brain Behavior Institute. They will also be sold at Making Space, the brand’s new concept store in Brooklyn, New York. Additionally, there are also plans to offer up felted coats that cost upwards of $2,000.

“I thought this machine was scalable to a large degree if my theory worked out,” Ahl said. “It could have been a waste of money. But my hunch was right.”

Along with 69 retail locations and 1,000 wholesale accounts, the company boasts revenue of about $500 million annually. This includes sales of around $3 million from the Renew collection. Evidently, sustainable practices can be remunerative enterprise. To wit: Eileen Fisher is green in more ways than one.