

# Fashioning Inclusivity

July is Disability Pride Month, a worldwide celebration of people with disabilities and their contribution to society. Three designers talk to *Tatler* about how they are creating a more accessible world through fashion

By Madeleine Mak

**W**hen you think of functional clothing, the first thing to come to mind might be performance-optimised sportswear. For people with physical, mental or intellectual disabilities, however, “functionality” can have a far higher bar: clothing designed for a specific need that allows them to move through life more easily.

Enter the world of adaptive fashion. Unlike garments created to speak to the latest consumer trends or to reflect a creative director’s vision, adaptive fashion puts the unique medical needs of its wearer at the centre of the design process. Even if two people share the same diagnosis, their experiences are not identical, so garments in this category tend to be hyper-personalised.

A 2023 United Nations Development Programme report suggests that there are more than a billion people with disabilities in the world, and about 700 million



of them live in Asia and the Pacific. The region accounts for 23 per cent of the global adaptive fashion market, according to a 2025 study by Cognitive Market Research—a number that will only increase.

*Tatler* speaks to three Asian designers of adaptive fashion who are proof that the future of inclusive fashion design is bright.

## DESTINY PINTO, BY DESTINY PINTO

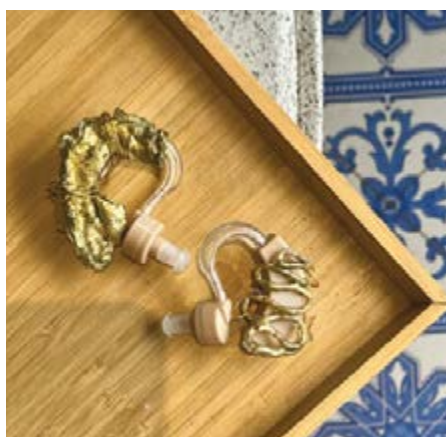
Destiny Pinto was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis at the age of only 19. The condition causes the immune system to attack cells around the joints, causing flare-ups that leave her body, and especially her hands, swollen, painful and stiff. She started wearing compression gloves—they apply mild pressure

to an inflamed area for pain relief and increased circulation. But while they soothed her physical symptoms, their clinical look and feel had an unexpected negative impact on her mental health. “Alongside the anxiety that I already had about my condition, the look of the [gloves] really amplified that. They stood out against everything that I wore,” Pinto tells *Tatler*.

Unable to find anything on the market that suited her personal style, Pinto took things into her own hands. With her dexterity limited by her condition, the London-based creative found it easier to type prompts on ChatGPT and learn how to use virtual design software such as Blender and Marvelous Designer rather than sketching and sewing prototypes. Between flare-ups, however, she played around with

sticking material onto existing compression gloves using duct tape. Her finished creations are full of personality: a red leather glove with an eyelet belt detail; a suave black ruched option; and a white iteration decorated with floral lace.

Pinto’s conceptual designs and story went viral on social media, leading her to launch By Destiny Pinto, an accessories label that



her wants was so important because it first influenced my human-first approach. I tried to refer to the internet but I realised that I can’t just assume things,” Pinto says.

The 23-year-old also looks to her South Asian heritage for inspiration. While setting up her brand, she reconnected with her roots in Goa, where she fell in love with the rich textiles and jewellery found in the south Indian region; these particularly influenced the hearing aid cover she created with textile designer Anastasia Glass. In this way, adaptive fashion has enabled Pinto to embrace who she is on multiple levels. “Like a lot of other immigrant children, I feel I grew up with a lot of shame [at] being South Asian. This has been a really healing experience for me,” Pinto admits.

While grateful for her successes and with ambitions of seeing patients be able to purchase her designs in clinics and hospitals, Pinto is open about the difficulties of juggling a chronic illness and a burgeoning business. “Sometimes I forget that I’m a human being, because the brand is so much bigger than me and I believe that it can help so many people,” she says. “I have to remember that my journey is different from those more able-bodied than me, but there is also so much beauty in doing things differently.”



**From left:**  
By Destiny  
Pinto designs;  
compression  
gloves; designer  
Destiny Pinto;  
hearing aid covers  
designed with  
Anastasia Glass;  
walking stick  
accessory

reimagines medical devices with a fashion-forward eye, in 2023.

“Before going viral, I felt like I was the only person wearing compression gloves. I discovered that many others wear them and not just for conditions like mine,” she says.

Today, By Destiny Pinto caters to those requiring ostomy bags and hearing aids, chest binders and walking sticks. Pinto uses a human-centric approach to design, consulting individuals with different chronic illnesses to understand their wants and needs. Of all the designs she has created, the ostomy bag cover, first created for her best friend Nikola, who had to use the medical device after surgery, has influenced her design practice most. “Designing for Nikola was one of the most important things for my brand. Showing her prototypes and making adjustments based on





## KADRI KEUNG, RHYS WORKSHOP

It was Kadri Keung's late grandmother who motivated her entry into the adaptive fashion space. The older woman needed a stoma bag and had to use a bib while eating as ageing and disease affected her coordination—a circumstance that left her grappling with shame and eventually eschewing social activities. Keung, who studied fashion design at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, found the lack of aesthetically pleasing and functional options for these items unacceptable. Alongside her mother, who has spent three decades in the garment manufacturing industry, Keung launched Rhys Workshop, a Hong Kong-based social enterprise, in 2018.

Rhys Workshop's adaptive garments come in vivid prints and feature traditional Chinese touches.

example, sport Mandarin collars and Chinese button knots that differ from most waterproof bibs for adults, which tend to be plain and purely functional. It's a move intended to lift her customers' spirits. "Sometimes, they refuse to join in on the important moments of their family members. We want them to feel young, happy and confident about themselves," Keung tells *Tatler*.

As well as bibs, Rhys Workshop produces bespoke padded vests, two-piece sets, jumpers, pyjamas, stoma bags and more, using adaptive design features such as snap buttons, soft-touch velcro and magnetic zips.

Like Pinto, Keung also takes a human-centric approach to her work, with a key component of Rhys Workshop being its customisation services. Typically, the design process begins with often lengthy face-to-face

meetings with a client—and, when necessary, their caregivers—to better understand their needs. For example, she says, "I have clients [who use wheelchairs] who need to dress and use the toilet by themselves. One drives, so I need





From left: Rhys Workshop designs; designer Kadri Keung; close-up of sewing machines at the Rhys Workshop studio



# “Financially, it’s difficult but if these garments can make people happy, it’s worth it”

to know her entire process: how she pushes herself into the car, disassembles the wheelchair and puts it into the car.” With several rounds of mock-ups and fittings, it can take up to six months to complete a bespoke order.

Rhys Workshop’s bid to create societal impact isn’t confined to its garments. Its master tailors work out of an industrial building in Lai Chi Kok, but other staff members include women from underprivileged communities and individuals with disabilities; they were paired up with the social

enterprise through local non-profit organisations. Rhys Workshop not only teaches these individuals how to sew but also gives them job opportunities with flexible work hours. Since its founding, Rhys Workshop has provided more than 130 training and job opportunities to upskilled employees, who have earned close to HK\$3 million.

While Keung is happy that her products make a difference, she says, “I’m most proud of how far we have come. Almost half of the ladies who come to work every

day have been with us since the day we opened. It’s been a very difficult seven years, but we have continued to grow and support each other.”

Rhys Workshop’s meaningful ethos has led to a slew of commercial partnerships that include Swire Group, Watsons, Chow Tai Fook, J Crew and, most recently, Muji. Upcycling excess inventory from the Japanese retailer, the ReMuji capsule featured patchworked tote bags and other small accessories sold across stores in Hong Kong.

In March, Rhys Workshop received a grant from the DBS Foundation to bolster its purpose-led efforts. Keung plans to use the funds to start a new programme that provides employment for fresh graduates with physical disabilities as well as renting a new studio that is more accessible for individuals living in other parts of the city. “I really love what I’m doing,” she says. “Financially, it’s difficult but if these garments can make people happy, it’s worth it.”

## CLAUDIA POH, WERABLE

Werable is a Singapore-based adaptive design studio launched in 2019. Its founder Claudia Poh, a fashion graduate of both Central Saint Martins in London and New York's The New School's Parsons School of Design, was inspired to create meaningful impact through dress after meeting someone diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—a nervous system condition that results in a loss of muscle control.

“She kept throwing out her clothes and trying to find solutions,” Poh tells *Tatler*. “It gave me an identity crisis because I was going to school to make things that people don’t really need. What was I doing this for?”

Poh realised, however, that luxury fashion and accessible clothing are not mutually exclusive. The brand places an onus on easy-to-wear occasionwear—her garments are designed to be put on and fastened using only one hand; the Easy-Grip Bucket Wrap Shirt, for example, is fastened with magnetic buckles. Other creations are designed to camouflage assistive devices: the Transformable Bolero, first created with a stroke survivor in mind, reimagines the traditional sling in the form of a cropped cardigan with a discreet padded inner sleeve, while the Hakama trousers have in-seam pockets that hide catheters. “We knew we wanted to focus on occasionwear that sees recognisable clothing styles with accessible features,” says Poh. “As much as I want to create impact ... as an [adaptive] fashion brand, you’re not just competing with [other] adaptive fashion brands, you’re also competing with the rest of the market.”

That foresight is exemplified by the brand’s Wishbone bag, its first commercially available design, which the Design Singapore Council invited Werable to showcase at Milan Design Week.

70 Two years in the making, the



“Universality has always been a core tenet of the brand and I knew it had to be something I would want to wear”



design was born of a request from two-time Singaporean Paralympic swimmer Toh Wei Soong. Toh was diagnosed with transverse myelitis, an inflammatory disorder that affects the spinal cord, at a young age and was looking for a sling bag that would not affect his centre of gravity while using crutches or a wheelchair. Now in its seventh iteration, the eco-leather and tear-resistant nylon design features a stabiliser strap and detachable harness that helps anchor the bag to the body, as well as a magnetic buckle—part of Werable’s “easy on, easy off” design signature. “Milan Design Week was a fantastic experience,” Poh says. “I got to iterate what the bag is all about and understand the gaps in how others perceive accessible design.”

But for Poh, the Wishbone, which was displayed in *The Curious World: Brain, Body and Biosphere* exhibition that ran earlier this year at Singapore’s ArtScience Museum and will be

available to buy from September, isn’t just for those with specific physical requirements—she uses it herself daily. “Universality has always been a core tenet of the brand and I knew it had to be something I would want to wear. I don’t believe in one-size-fits-all solutions, but at this moment, the Wishbone bag is my way to create the biggest

possible impact,” she says.

Poh also teased a line of easy-to-wear knitwear and athleisure in the pipeline. “I don’t want Werable to just be a disability brand that creates disability products. There is nothing wrong with this, but I just see it as so much more. I just want to make useful things that help us all move through life.”



**From top:** The Werable team working in studio; the Wishbone bag.  
**Opposite page:** Designer Claudia Poh