



The second coming of khaki

Can Patrick Robinson, a critics' darling, revive Gap?

BY ERIC WILSON
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

On a recent Monday afternoon, as the ballyhooed new designs of Gap's fall collection by Patrick Robinson began appearing at its store on Fifth Avenue and 54th Street, a line of customers stretched well around the corner — at Abercrombie & Fitch, that is, two blocks away.

Fashion magazines have heralded the recent arrival of Robinson at Gap in reverential tones (he is actually called a "megabrand messiah" in the September issue of *Elle*), and the windows announce in big block letters that a "New Shape" is in store. But there has not yet been a seismic return of shoppers to a retail chain that stopped being cool around the time Abercrombie opened its doors with a reinvented brand.

Inside the Gap store, a few dozen customers were trying on US\$58 waffle-knit cardigans and blazers made of fleece. But for a better picture, one could stand outside on the street corner for 15 minutes and count shopping bags: six from Gap, 27 from Abercrombie. The following day: eight from Gap, 38 from Abercrombie.

Reinventing Gap, the US' largest specialty apparel chain, has been fashion's equivalent of Merlin's stone for much of the last decade, as sales and profits have dipped, along with its image among young consumers. Robinson, 41, is the third designer to attempt to pull the sword since Gap began to publicly acknowledge its creative personnel in 2003, and the most closely watched because of his popularity with industry insiders and his finesse with casual American sportswear. His fall designs have generated promising reviews, but also concern about whether a single designer — one with a mixed track record — can revive a brand with 1,155 stores in the US in the midst of an economic crisis.

On the one hand, the company has continued to report weak sales, including an 11 percent drop last month in stores open at least a year, and last week, Brand Keys, a research consultancy, announced that Gap ranked last in customer loyalty. On the other, some retail analysts long critical of Gap's merchandising efforts and management choices have joined the chorus that is singing Robinson's praises.

"I just about died when I went in the store," said Jennifer Black, the president of Jennifer Black & Associates, a research company focused on the apparel industry. "I don't know how traffic's been, but from an aesthetic perspective, I think it

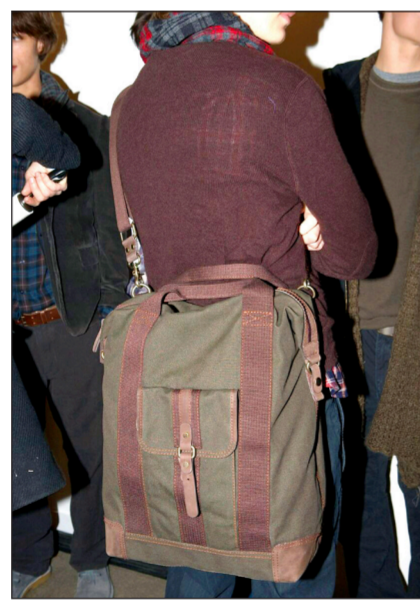
looks great. For me to be taken aback is kind of a big thing."

The clothes are indeed compelling. The trench coat and shirt-dress styles and the muted colors — a variety of grays, browns and purple plaid — are at once basic and fashionable, a duality that could be either girly and pretty or androgynous in an Oliver Twist goes to a Nirvana concert sort of way. But will customers, especially those who look to Gap for jeans and T-shirts, get it?

In an interview in the Gap showroom in Chelsea last week, Robinson said he could best describe his vision for Gap as one of "optimism," keying into an emotion conveyed by the company's past advertising campaigns that spotlighted bright colors and made wearing khaki seem like a swifty choice. Having grown up in California, he recalled shopping at Gap stores and thinking how cool the white gallerylike spaces were. While he wanted to recapture that feeling, he said, the styles, fits and colors — even the weight of the T-shirt fabrics — all had to be changed. "We can't go back and put women in big old heavy sweatshirts," he said. "That was Gap in the 80s."

Throughout his career, Robinson has demonstrated a single-mindedness about image control, including his own.

But at Gap, Robinson said, he is comfortable working within a large corporate environment. That said, he has continued to assert the need for creative control: last week the company dismissed its European design staff, adding the duties for creating lines for international markets to Robinson's purview. The



move raised eyebrows among those who have wondered whether ego had caused his problems at Perry Ellis and Paco Rabanne. But Robinson said the hoopla had not made any difference to the success of his collections.

Gary Muto, the president of Gap's adult and body divisions, said Robinson's arrival at the company had revitalized its design staff, describing the difference as "night and day." Part of the reason is that the designs are selling, he said, citing a deep V-neck shirt and pull-on skirt introduced this summer as an illustration of how classic clothes could be fashionably updated.

"Where we're going to win is with those items that are truly versatile, that a person can dress up or dress down and still be able to express their own personal style," he said.

Robinson has demonstrated that he is a versatile designer, and one who has learned when to let the product speak louder than the personality.

"Speaking honestly, when I was younger, I really wanted the fame thing," he said. "It was part of the game of being a fashion designer. But that doesn't turn me on anymore. What turns me on — my soul — is making cool clothes and being part of a company where I can actually see the difference I'm making. I'm not just spinning my wheels and getting the clothes into five stores in America."

One thing that stands out about Robinson's collection for Gap is how similar it looks to his work for Perry Ellis, with loose popover plaid dresses, sleeveless wool jackets and cropped cargo pants in mushroomy grays, layered up with artsy knits — clothes that fashion editors had clamored about back then but customers never had a chance to buy. Now anyone can at Gap, even those who have never heard of Robinson.

"It's definitely a major improvement," said Rie Cochran, a 21-year-old secretary from Marshall, Michigan, as she left the Fifth Avenue store. "It's chic, but still subdued."

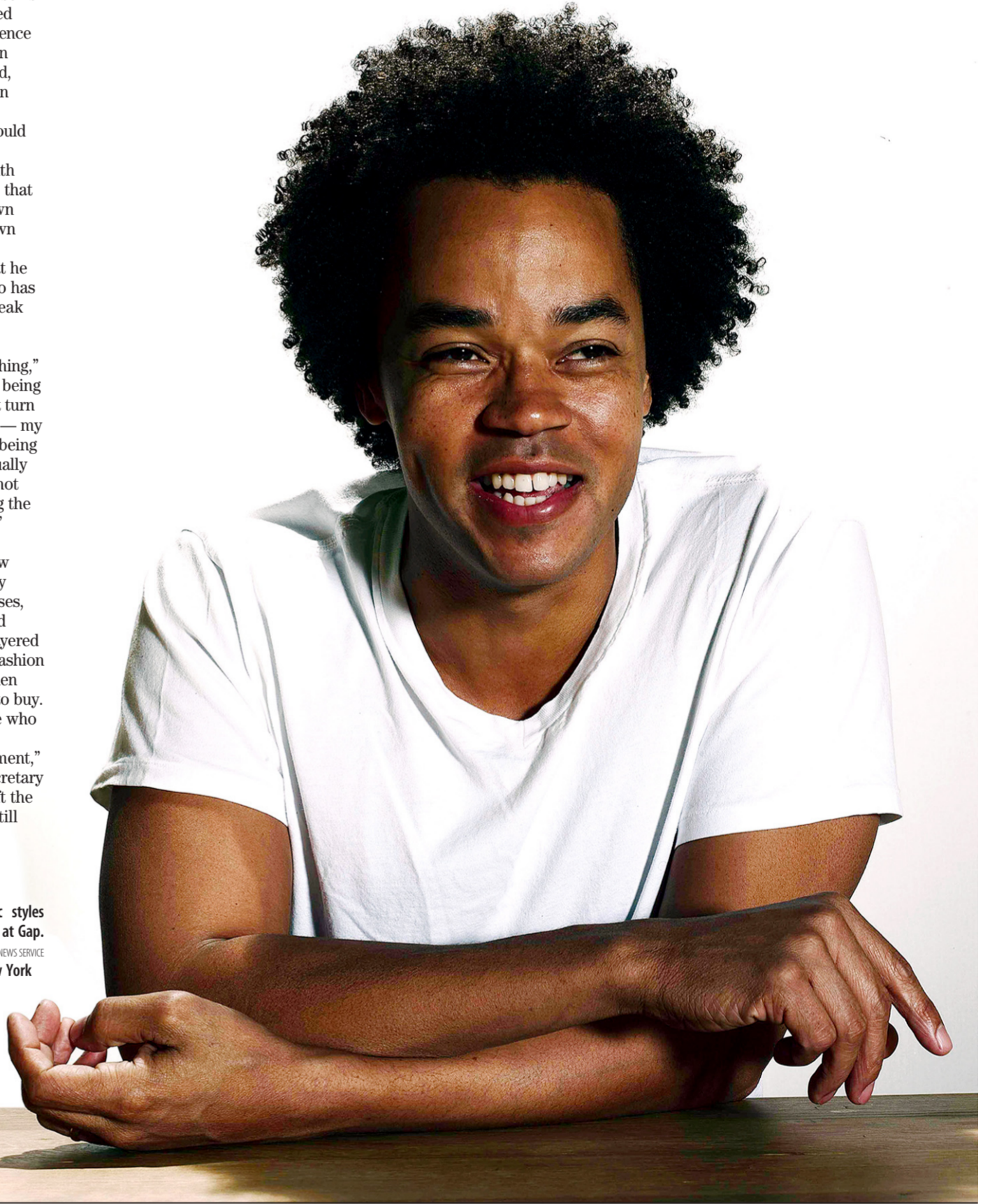
Nevertheless, she walked out empty-handed.

Top and left: Muted colors and classic styles exemplify Patrick Robinson's fall collection at Gap.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Right: Patrick Robinson in his office in New York earlier this month. Robinson is the third designer since 2003 to attempt to revive Gap, the US' largest specialty apparel chain.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Despite a looming recession, pet fashion is all the rage

While department stores are suffering from shrinking sales of clothing, shoes and accessories, the pet fashion industry is thriving

BY PAOLA MESSANA
AFP, NEW YORK

It's a dog's life during hard economic times. But Chihuahuas in a tutu? Pugs in designer tank-tops? Dachshunds draped in Swarovski bling?

That was the scene at the third annual Pet Fashion Week in Manhattan this past weekend, where despite a looming US recession, the world's dog-loving fashionistas gathered to share ideas, market their products, strut a canine catwalk and raise money for charity.

At a time when department stores are suffering from shrinking sales of clothing, shoes and accessories such as handbags, those in the pet fashion industry are thriving, thanks to dog-loving elites and the buying impulses of millions of other pet owners.

"I've always loved dressing up dolls and Barbies, and I wanted to take it into something else that I loved, and I love pets," pet-fashion designer Kameron Westcott from Dallas, Texas said as her five-year-old Yorkshire terrier, Louis, peeked out of a canine carry bag designed by

luxury fashion giant Louis Vuitton.

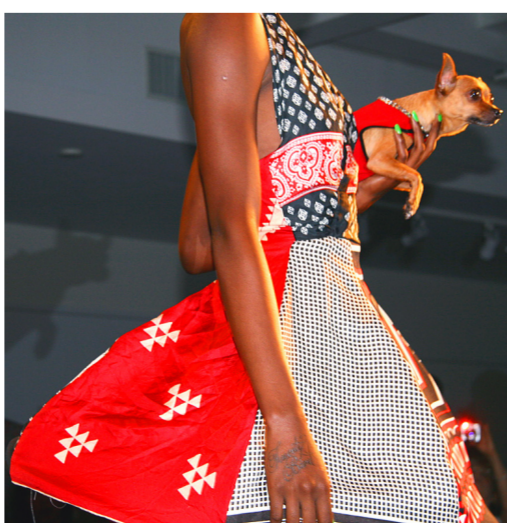
"Dogs need to be cute when they go to parties as well," quipped Westcott, who runs an Internet web site hawking a range of Brazilian-made clothes and accessories for dogs.

"They want to feel elite and posh, just like we are."

These dogs are having their day. All five floors of an exhibition center in southern Manhattan were crammed with dozens of stands marketing a range of pet beauty products and clothes.

Palatial doghouses on offer stood covered in lush drapes and filled with cushions bearing Swarovski jewels (price: US\$9,000 to US\$15,000) and other jewelry, while other vendors were peddling the "must-haves" of the moment: all things environmentally friendly and recyclable.

Such green items ranged from cardigans knitted out of Andean alpaca wool to a line of bamboo-only products by "Pet Duti," a brand which offers items aimed at easing the unfashionable modern-day necessity of cleaning up after one's dog outside.



A Chihuahua is presented by a model at the third annual Pet Fashion Week in New York on Saturday. Spending on pets in the US rose to US\$40 billion last year, compared with US\$28.5 billion in 2001.

PHOTO: AFP

Pet Fashion Week proved to be a runaway success, although one woman was disappointed. "You can't stop me, I want my money back," shrieked a lady on the verge of a meltdown after having been barred from one of the events Saturday morning for having the wrong ticket.

"No, you paid for the evening charity show. This one is for buyers, designers and the media," a hostess responded, unruffled.

The show's stars came out amid an elaborate and ominous backdrop of oil drums and abandoned jerricans meant to evoke the "scary situation" reflected by today's energy crisis, according to organizers.

Bulldogs paraded out wearing tight wool knits, and elegant Afghans sauntered by clad in Hermes, all led by human fashion models as sumptuously outfitted as their four-legged friends.

Chihuahuas skittered about in tutus, and a trio of tank-top-wearing pugs were pushed down the makeshift catwalk in a shopping cart.

Swedish designer Tania Fyking, seeking a

new outlet for her flair for fashion, made the trip to New York at the suggestion of a friend.

"I flew from Stockholm and I do not regret, I hope to find an agent for my brand," said Fyking, who specializes in producing exotic leather goods favored by several Hollywood celebrities for their pets.

According to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 63 percent of US homes — some 71 million households — have pets. They include 88 million cats, 75 million dogs, 142 million goldfish and 13 million reptiles.

Spending on pets rose in 2007 to US\$40 billion, compared with US\$28.5 billion in 2001, including US\$17 billion spent on food, US\$11 billion on veterinary care, US\$10 billion dollars on medicines and US\$3.9 billion on pet toys, clothing and "dog-sitters."

On its Web site, the association says doctors claim that "pets help to lower blood pressure, to reduce stress, to prevent heart disease, to lower healthcare costs, to fight depression and loneliness."