

# IT'S IN HER DNA — *SERIOUSLY?*

MARIANNE FASSLER HAS MANAGED TO TURN  
NON-CONFORMITY INTO A CORNERSTONE OF LOCAL FASHION

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Marianne Fassler doesn't like clothes. During the course of our conversation, she even refers to fashion design as an "airhead profession". She doesn't pay too much attention to TV and magazines, and the relentless search for novelty that characterises the fashion industry. "I honestly and truly don't know where to find fashion TV," she says. "I don't buy *Vogue*. It doesn't interest me."

And yet Leopard Frock, her brand, has been a landmark on the fashion landscape since before 1994, and is as fresh and relevant today as it ever was. In a TED talk she gave recently, she poked fun at all of the things the media have called her: doyenne, icon, stalwart, grand dame... But she is all of these things. She's such an established figure on the South African fashion scene that it would be pointless to talk about the last near-40 years of local design without mentioning her.

Her point is that fashion design is about more than just clothes. "The most interesting and most enduring, and certainly the most revolutionary, fashion designers come from another source," she says. Fassler's constantly evolving engagement with questions of identity and self-expression are at the centre of what makes her work as a designer so significant and influential, but also so popular.

"Clothing is a communication tool, more than anything," she says. "It's an expression of individuality. I reflect who I am and my time and my place. At its best and most original, that is what fashion does." She explains that for her, it's important to have a broad range of interests, but "that one thing" (fashion) is what she's passionate about because it allows her to communicate. It's like a prism through which all of her diverse interests are channelled.

And her interests are indeed diverse. They spill over into her home, from which the Leopard Frock studio operates, as much as they do into her



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fashion design. The fireplace is not just a fireplace – it's a Geoffrey Armstrong installation. The hearth is a Simon Stone mosaic. But she's anti-elitist, happy to throw together street craft and kitsch with high culture and contemporary local art. In the entrance hall, a row of makarapas hangs from the wall, given the same treatment as the more "serious" pieces.





Not only has the reality of the street art she has collected over decades informed her work; it has also shaped her ethos. "I love it when art serves a practical purpose," she says. "African art was applied in the right way for everyday objects." She cites the carving of traditional neck rests, granary doors and cowrie shells, the knotting of fish nets – the way value is given to everyday objects through art. "I love that about African art," she says. "It's got that everyday integrity and thought. Whereas today, it's so disposable; we just buy a plastic one."

And that's why Fassler believes, ultimately, in the value of fashion design. "That's why I'm saying clothes should be a little bit more considered, rather than totally disposable," she says. "I believe that everything you put on your body should have meaning."

From her love of upcycling in her designs to the fact that she prefers to wear a few of her own designs over and over for a long period, no matter the occasion, her approach to design is about fighting a mindlessly consumerist approach to fashion. "I do a little talk for women's groups called 'I've got nothing to wear'," she says.

"People think they have nothing to wear because they've got too much in their cupboards. And they don't really love any of those, but they buy them because they feel the need to get something new."

Leopard Frock's attraction is different. "My clients buy my clothes because they like the way I think," she says, echoing Steve Jobs's comment that people don't buy what he makes, but why he makes it. "It represents something," she says.

And that something is a real interest in the world around her. "I just think we don't work hard enough on developing into the kind of people that are interesting," she says. "I mean, if you're not interested, you'll never become interesting."



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Luckily, she doesn't have to go far to find what she's looking for (although she's an avid traveller): she's inspired by Africa. "Just the environment is enabling," she says. "Everything about it is layered. Do you want perfection? Go live in Sydney. But this is complex, layered and very resilient."

And she doesn't believe for a moment that local resonance is limiting. Quite the contrary. What we call international brands all have strong local resonance. "You can say, that's a real Italian look, or a real American look, but it's still global," she points out.

And perhaps that's the secret to her longevity in the fashion world: the resilience of her design DNA, her ability constantly to reinvent the brand without losing its essential character. She still prioritises making clothes for interesting women to wear, yet manages not to take it too seriously. "Lighten up when you write this," she says as she shows us out, letting us in on the secret of her staying power.

