



Marianne Fassler's archive space is a fitting tribute to the South African fashion icon

**M**ARIANNE FASSLER WAS, FRANKLY, LOOKING WAN. The famous electric russet dreadlocks were tinged with deep blue around the face. The dye will wash out, of course. She was slightly slumped in the leopard print-upholstered chair. No makeup. Comfortable clothes. A million pink balloons to wade through before hitting the stairs.

The night before, Leopard Frock had rocked into the small hours of the morning. Impossibly long-limbed models did their thing in hand-beaded, hand-crafted, hand-embroidered, hand-cut Fassler clothes, all beneath the light of a March moon.

You don't need an excuse to throw a party, but this one was a celebration of 40 years of the iconic Marianne Fassler brand — and the opening of her archive in a newly built addition to the Leopard Frock shop, dressing spaces, and workroom, where some of the most industrious and skilled assistants turn out clothes so distinctive they could not be confused with anyone else's.

Walk through everything, navigate the balloons from the night before, and look up. There's the archive, one side open to everything below, its walls painted a deep moody blue — perfect for showing off the clothes that hang like memories along two walls. They will be changed regularly, because a lot of clothes comprise 40 years of history. Until now, they've been crowding out a bedroom, leaving an indefinable perfume.

Do you, I ask Fassler, have a favourite outfit, or is that an impossible question? She is drinking black coffee. A long Gregor Jenkin table divides us. "Yes," she says, "I do." It turns out it's the first dress she ever made. "It's a little baby pink, smocked minidress, inspired by Mary Quant, and I was just out of high school when I made it." And, yes, it'll hang in the archive sometime.

It is the third wall that intrigues me the most, almost more than the clothes. It is made up of albums crammed with articles and interviews over the past 40 years and I genuinely don't think another one like it exists. And yet, it is fitting that they are remembered because, in some way, they have become part of the weft and the

warp of the country itself. "I'm not the only one to make notes," she says firmly. "I learnt that from my mother, Hannatjie van der Wat, who keeps an immaculate archive of her career as an artist. Moments are so fleeting — you need to pin them down."

"This archive," Fassler says, "is a tribute, not only to the scores of people who have gone into the archives, but to the people who have worked on the clothes, designers who are now working elsewhere — their hands are here."

"I haven't digitised my entire archive yet, so much of the early part is still on paper. Students come from all over the world and use my albums and the clothes as a study resource. It's mind-blowing to fashion students because they can touch and feel what they're studying, as well as reading it."

There's another reason why this archive is important. It commemorates magic, those irresistible Fassler pieces which linger in the mind. There's the guineafowl skirt, for instance, worn until you could wear it no more. It remains the most stolen item from fashion shoots over many years.

There are the coveted Mandela skirts and jackets bought by many celebrities during the Madiba years. They were both reverent and

irreverent, made, Fassler says, "when this country was so optimistic. To be relevant, fashion needs to reflect a moment in time." She pauses. "Now, it would be patronising."

What's hung on the rails will always be eclectic, but what stands out, always, are the touches of Africa that inform almost everything Fassler makes. Where did that come from?

Fassler has been influenced by powerful women: Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, of African Ceremonies fame, and Barbara Tyrrell, who published iconic books full of beautiful drawings depicting the intricate detail of tribal costume, drawn in the field. "I was fascinated. It somehow echoed my own experience. I've always been far more interested in what people were wearing on the streets of Joburg, especially in Diagonal Street and Kwa Mai Mai in the '60s, '70s, and '80s." It's fair to say that this shaped her vision for the rest of her career.

Today, very few African prints make their appearance in her clothes. "I don't have to use African prints to be African. It's an intangible thing," Fassler says. But the influence of the remarkable duo of Beckwith and Fisher, whose magnificent books focus on ceremonies and costume in Africa over the past 40 years, cannot be underestimated.

An archive could mean the slow ending of a rich road. I don't want to mention retirement. "But," Fassler says, "I really believe it's time for me to have a succession plan, sort of." That's where the dynamic Lezanne Viviers may well step in. "She understands the tradition. But make no mistake, there is a firm foundation and she would do me proud," Fassler says.

And if one day you should find yourself upstairs, sitting on one side of the long Gregor Jenkin table, do yourself a favour. Go to the loo. 