

# SA'S FASHION

WITH ITS EVER-CHANGING TRENDS, THE FASHION INDUSTRY CAN EXERT INTENSE HEADWAY. HOWEVER, IT ALSO REPRESENTS THE PERFECT INTERSECTION OF

“CREATIVE PEOPLE ARE EASILY BORED, TAKE RISKS, MAKE LOTS OF MISTAKES, WORK INDEPENDENTLY AND CHANGE THEIR MINDS A LOT – BUT THEY DREAM BIG!”



By Claire Mason

# MAVENS

PRESSURE ON DESIGNERS WANTING TO MAKE CREATIVITY AND BUSINESS SKILLS

SA has a robust fashion scene. With international brands clamouring for a presence in the country's malls, and Africa taking front and centre stage for global luxury fashion houses, the local industry's mobilised in recent years and regular fashion weeks now promote Mzansi's designers, attracting big sponsors. From Johannesburg to Cape Town to Soweto, fashion week tickets are often the hottest items in town and the events always attract a throng of glitterati. Well-known retail brands have also got behind the country's designers: Woolworths, for example, had a long relationship with

Stoned Cherrie, stocking a capsule collection of its clothes in selected outlets. This collaboration gave Woolworths a lot of positive PR, while also providing Stoned Cherrie with exposure to a bigger market.

Fashion plays a large and important role in SA's economy: 2013 figures show that it accounted for 14% of the 60 000-80 000 manufacturing jobs in the country. Eight percent of SA's GDP is from the local fashion industry.

Besides setting trends, designers are also uniquely placed to effect positive change to the environments in which they operate.

## MARIANNE FASSLER AND LEOPARD FROCK – PROUDLY (AND STYLISHLY) SOUTH AFRICAN

Having been in the local industry for 40 years, Fassler's designs have become synonymous with South African fashion. However, her Leopard Frock label was only set up in 1992, which "makes it a relative baby in the context of my career", she laughs.

She believes the challenges faced by fashion entrepreneurs in this country are no different from those facing their counterparts elsewhere in the world. "We all have to deal with the same problems, no matter where we live and work. These include supply chain, creditors, sell-through and high rentals. Retailing is complicated and demands a pretty ruthless approach. I'm happy with my trajectory as a business, but I'm particularly proud to have maintained a stable, highly skilled workforce and to have mentored many young designers over the years. I'd venture to say that almost everybody working in the local industry once got practical work experience at Leopard Frock," she says.

Despite her success, Fassler believes she still hasn't reached the peak of her career. She adds that while she has no regrets about choosing a life in fashion, she wishes she'd known when she first started how much of a game-changer social media would be in terms of marketing, influencing customers' perceptions of style and networking.

She concedes that designers can be erratic and are driven by their vision, rather than deadlines or bottom lines. "What I know about creative people is that they're easily bored, they're risk-takers, they make lots of mistakes, they work independently and they change their minds a lot – but they dream big!" she says.

Indeed. And SA's fashion mavens like Yumnaa Firfirey, Vanessa Gounden and Fassler – who've changed the way people see style, sustainable business and our continent – dream bigger than most.

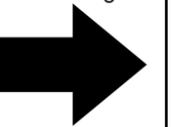
VANESSA GOUNDEN – HER OWN STYLE, HER OWN WAY

Gounden, SA's first female mining magnate, launched her fashion label in London in 2011. She'd had a love of fashion since childhood, though her adult life took her on many paths, including politics, activism and other fields. It took her five years from conceptualising her brand to opening her store, but she never doubted that it would happen. "You could say my fashion label has been in the works all my life," she says.

Today her label's sold across the world, but she counts the opening of the Vanessa Gounden flagship store on Conduit St in London as one of her three fashion career highlights. The other two were also remarkable. "The first was the launch of my label on my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday at Whitehall, also in London. The second was opening my own atelier in Cape Town, thus empowering and stimulating the local garment industry. We have many talented people in SA," she says.

Along with the challenges that come with the fashion sector, Gounden's also had to deal with a frustratingly conservative mindset – that "everybody does it this way" – which eventually led her to follow her own path, on her own terms. It's an attitude which has rocked the boat, but has stamped her as an individualist in a notoriously conformist industry. This, she says, has been her biggest learning curve. "I wish I'd trusted my instincts from the outset, instead of ever listening to the many self-styled consultants and critics who've crossed my path."

She's clearly got staying power and her designs are eagerly sought after by upmarket, successful women who want to make a statement with their clothes.





Tom Ford who said that the hardest you'll ever work is in the fashion industry," she says.

Due to other commitments, she could only devote three days a week (Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays) to Bodhisattva. However, through sweat, tears and "nerves of steel", she worked every moment she could to meet her launch deadline.

"By mid-January of 2014, my final launch collection had only just been conceptualised. Patterns, samples and fabrics still needed to be made and then production needed to begin. Meanwhile, I had another four-day-a-week job to attend to," she recalls.

Unexpected obstacles added to the pressure. "Three weeks before launching, my silks still hadn't arrived because of the postal workers' strike. When the strike finally ended, the silks couldn't be found in the mayhem of boxes

which had accumulated at the post office."

Another problem was her uncertainty over what price point to offer potential customers. "My production costs were very expensive because I was dealing with silk, leather and mohair. Not only were these materials costly, but they required special expertise to construct into beautiful garments," she says.

She needn't have worried. Bodhisattva was launched to great acclaim and a designer from Switzerland quickly became Firfirey's first customer. Today Swiss women are still among the strongest advocates of the label, although it's also very popular among women in SA, Italy, France, Germany and Holland.

In business now for 30 months and going from strength to strength, Bodhisattva is delivering on its tagline, "Re-imagining Fashion". Firfirey has drawn valuable lessons from the mistakes she's made along the way, realising that to create a new paradigm in both fashion and business, she can't play it safe, but must continually innovate and experiment.

While she believes fervently in her brand, she says she's grateful that she didn't realise just how much work and stress would be involved in establishing it. "Had I known, I probably wouldn't be in this interview today," she laughs. 🌈

## BODHISATVA – FASHION WITH A CONSCIENCE

Involved throughout her working life in community development programmes in the Cape, Yumnaa Firfirey's always believed that the most effective way to make a difference is through business with a social conscience. However, she was aware that this can be an extreme spectrum, with business as for-profit at all costs at one end and caring NGOs which struggle financially at the other.

After enrolling for her MPhil at the UCT Graduate School of Business, and having been drawn to fashion since the age of 11, she decided the time was right to put her beliefs to the test and start her own fashion brand, Bodhisattva, with the aim of making a positive impact on the environment and society. This was also driven by her observation, through her business consulting activities, that the textile industry in the Cape had been decimated by continually trying to compete on prices with imports from the Far East, significantly reducing the number of jobs in that province.

It took nine months from conception of the brand to its launch at the Design Indaba in Cape Town in February 2014. "That's quite symbolic, because I did feel as if a new life came into existence," says Firfirey.

She admits facing huge challenges in realising her vision. "It was