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Carla Kranendonk (right)
purchasing fabrics

PATTERN



*Filled with joie de vivre, the internal world of Dutch-born artist **Carla Kranendonk** is brought to life through the women of colour on canvas which serve to highlight independence, dignity, empowerment and pure African beauty, writes Ayesha Shehmir*



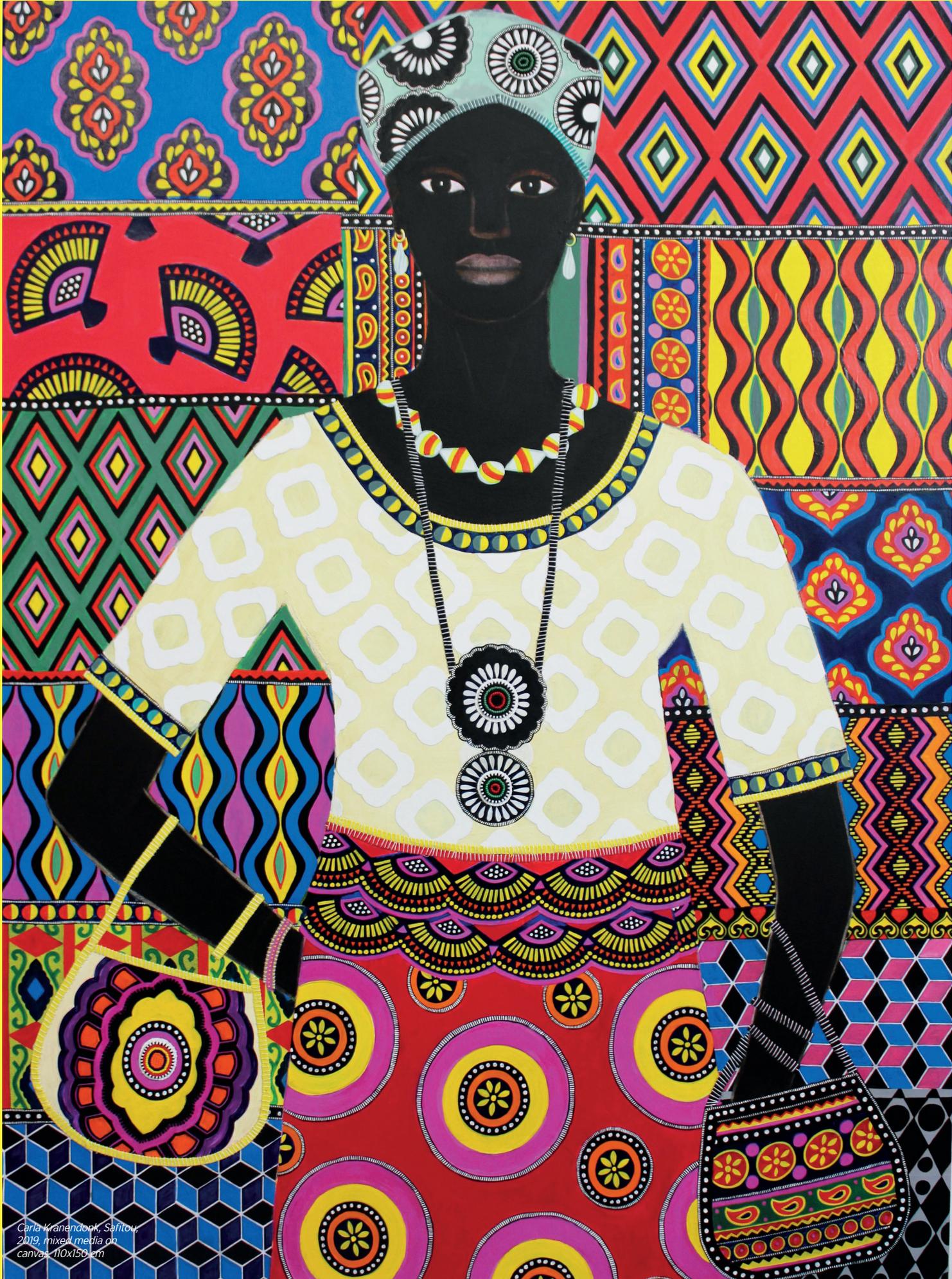
Carla Kranendonk
Seynabou, 2016.
mixed media on
canvas, 170x180 cm



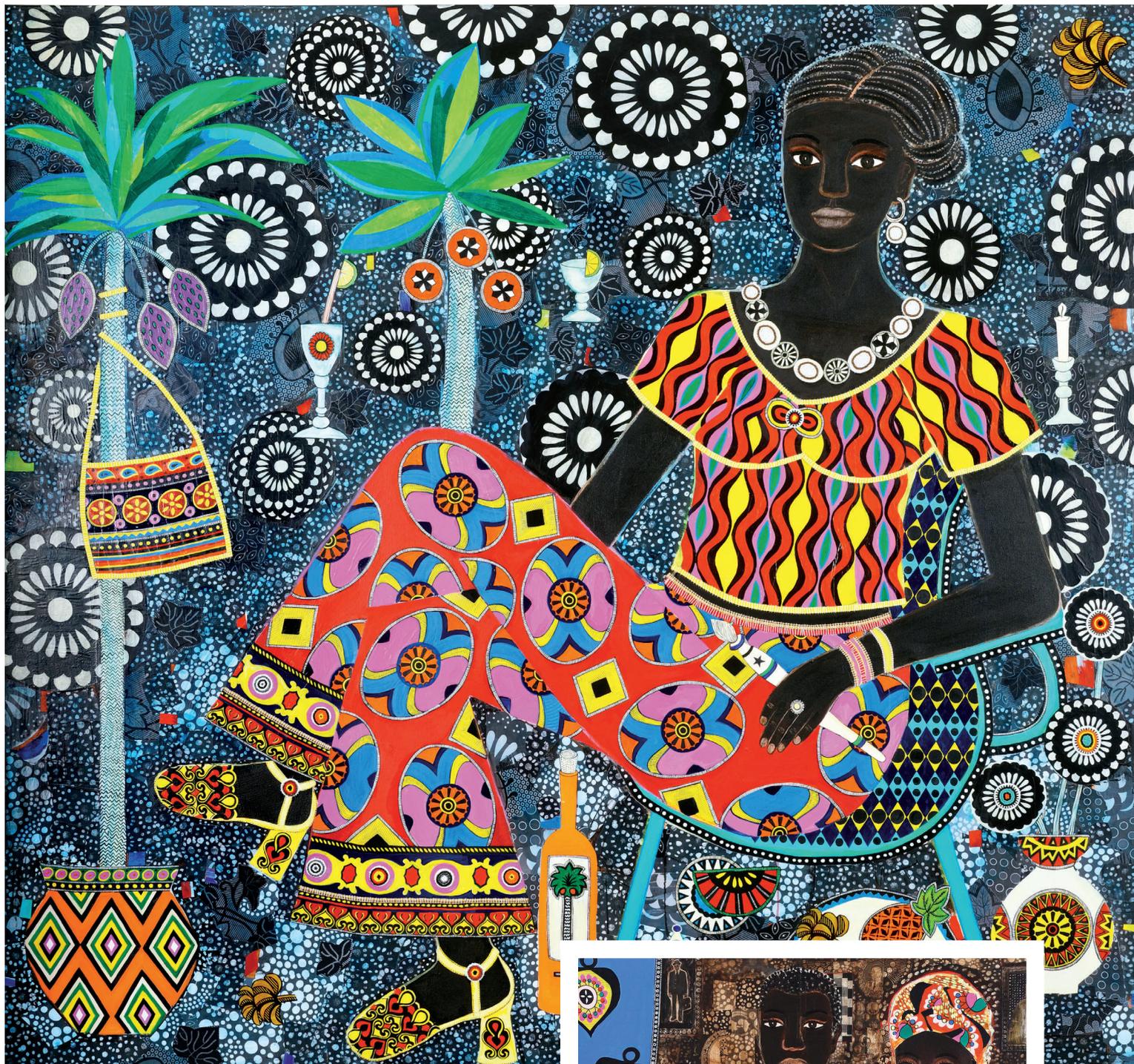
Born in a small village north of the Netherlands called Steggerda, Carla Kranendonk was always drawn to the world of art often finding herself painting, drawing, experimenting with clay and paper; simply creating. “My parents have always supported me to draw and paint,” says Kranendonk. Her father was a bank director and her mother a seamstress. “My mother was always making dresses so I grew up with lots of fabrics around the house,” she shares. “I didn’t like school too much. I was always looking outside the window and not listening to the teachers.” The exception was art lessons, which she always enjoyed and never missed.

Following her high school years, Kranendonk attended two different art schools including Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam from 1984 until 1987. She describes these years as some of the best in her entire life.

In 1991 Kranendonk visited Senegal, a trip which would later change her life. “I remember stepping out of the plane and feeling the warm weather on my skin,” she recalls. “I also remember a strange smell, the atmosphere in the airport, the fascinating beautiful black custom officers, soldiers and policemen.” It was her first time in West Africa and she immediately fell in love with the country: the colours, the light, the people. “The light in Senegal is the most beautiful light in the world,” she expresses. “The beautiful ladies took my attention, the way they dress, act, walk and look. I also fell in love with their way of living, the houses and the colours in the interiors, the food – all of it was fascinating for me and still is.”



Carla Kranendonk, *Sañitou*,
2019, mixed media on
canvas, 110x150 cm



“I FELL IN LOVE WITH THEIR WAY OF LIVING, THE HOUSES AND THE COLOURS IN THE INTERIORS, THE FOOD – ALL OF IT WAS FASCINATING FOR ME AND STILL IS”

Kranendonk's travels to Senegal are a strong inspiration for the colours and patterns seen in her large-scale collages and particularly, her works highlight the strength and resilience of the women of Senegal. “Senegalese women inspire me because so many of the ones I have met are strong, confident and beautiful women,” she explains. “They know how to dress and impress. They are working together and helping each other out, they are helping their large families. They are strong women. During difficult periods of my life, they inspired me to think positively and work hard, to keep strong and to believe in myself.”

Comprising paper painted with vivid patterns that are intertwined with embroidery, beadwork and female figures from African culture, the works are a collection of her precious memories and experiences which she holds onto dearly. “In Senegal you can find rooms with very colourful walls and sometimes women invite you into their bedroom to show



From top:
Carla Kranendonk,
Yande, 2019,
Mixed media
on canvas,
170x180 cm;
Couple in Balance,
2012, mixed
media on canvas,
190x150 cm





Fabrics the artist uses for her work



Carla Kranendonk

you photographs of their family members or of their wedding,” she says. “I remember one bedroom, all the walls were completely painted pink and the lady was wearing a light yellow slip dress covered by a colourful wrap skirt. When I make paintings and choose my colours, I am always thinking of memories like these.”

The pieces are also a declaration of love for 20th century artistic traditions. Growing up, Kranendonk was hugely inspired by art masters of this period by the likes of Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Fernand Léger, Georges Braque and Édouard Vuillard. “I liked their ‘free’ way of using colours, forms and figures,” says Kranendonk. “Most of all I like the very strong focus and high energy of Picasso and I love the beautiful colours and forms of Matisse.”

Kranendonk began her artistic journey as an abstract painter and German painters such as Anselm Kiefer and Markus Lüpertz greatly influenced her. In the last year of her studies in 1987, she met another great influence. “I fell in love with a boy from Suriname and he introduced me to black culture and music,” she admits. “He brought me to all kinds of places with reggae and African music. From the beginning, I was very overwhelmed by this and it had a huge impact on me. Although I had never been to Africa at this time, I was always thinking of it.” Eventually Kranendonk shifted her focus from abstract art into figurative art but it took years until she developed her own authentic style. Her first mixed-media painting, a portrait of a black woman, was of her mother in law who passed away in 2000.

Strong, a recent exhibition which was held at London-based Rebecca Hossack Art Gallery, offered a glimpse into the joyous world of Kranendonk, spanning hand-embroidered paper collage, textiles and beading work. The artist combines acrylic paint on canvas with photocopies of African fabrics and beads that she sews onto the canvas herself. The women in the paintings are surrounded by flowers, shoes, books and other items depicting the strength, joy and grace Senegalese women embody. “I want to pay tribute to the beauty, pride, strength and humour of African people.” On show was *Fifi* (2018), *Khoudia* (2019), *Nola* (2019) amongst others. “For me the bright colours and patterns represent my longing and my fascination for Africa and the Caribbean,” says the artist. “My focus is also to use them as abstract parts in a figurative painting. I like to play around with them and find new compositions and strange combinations of colours.”

There are no rules when it comes to Kranendonk’s art; she simply creates what she feels. “I find that the colours speak for themselves in an abstract way, they talk and create an exotic atmosphere in the artworks,” she says. “I’m always trying to let a painting shine and say something important about women and their private world: her bags are carrying her secrets; her shoes are part of her style, identity and her freedom to travel, to move.”

Currently the artist is creating works for Art Paris and Art Central Hong Kong. “Every painting tells its own story,” she says, adding what she hopes to portray the most to the world, “I want to show the world beautiful, strong, black women and their importance. They have to be seen.” ■