

Opening the Treasure Chest

South African ceramics embrace dynamic design, collaboration and groundbreaking digital technology, writes **Wendy Gers**

The inclusion of this essay on ceramics in this issue of *Art South Africa* is both an acknowledgement of the dynamism of the contemporary ceramic scene and a tribute to the Ruby anniversary celebrations of Ceramics South Africa (CSA). Over the past forty years CSA has nurtured local potters and ceramic artists, and their efforts are evident in the vast diversity of South Africa's contemporary ceramic heritage.

CSA celebrations are accompanied by the launch of the exhibition, *All Fired Up: Conversation Between Kiln and Collection*, at the Durban Art Gallery in March (see p. 77 in this issue) and will include a special version of the National Exhibition at the Pretoria Art Museum in October. The latter will coincide with the release of the 100th issue of the Association's journal, *National Ceramics Quarterly*. Another major ceramics exhibition, *Fired*, opened in February at the Granary of the Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town. This scholarly retrospective of South African ceramic history included works from all of Iziko's satellite museums, a massive logistical achievement by the curator of Iziko's Social History Collections, Esther Esmiol. In addition to the retrospective, *Fired* included a temporary installation of 101 contemporary table settings, by guest artists, on a long banqueting table in the Lady Barnard Room. Esmiol acknowledges that the installation was inspired by Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974–9).¹ However, unlike Chicago's monumental feminist icon, the 101 table settings were not accompanied by lavish embroidered place-mats, silver goblets or a luxuriant floor-covering. The settings were placed directly on the sober, polished wooden table. The installation was an homage to the creative energies of the guest artists – nothing less, nothing more.

Esmiol's choice of place settings is especially appropriate in South Africa's economic context, which forces most ceramic artists to concentrate their production on these literally and metaphorically alimentary wares. Working

as a ceramic sculptor or installation artist is a risky venture. Most artists who make ceramic sculptures or installations (with the notable exception of Wilma Cruise) also make vessels. It is thus important to be especially sensitive when considering local domestic ware. Plates, platters and tiles often are a substitute for a canvas in the case of frustrated painters; while vessels incorporate sophisticated, sculptural dimensions. Indeed, the oeuvres of South Africa's most interesting ceramic artists articulate the imagined divide between utilitarian and sculptural and/or conceptual form as a continuum.

Wilma Cruise laments that "Pots' in South Africa still evoke the concept of craft and viewers are conditioned to read each vessel as a discrete unit generally devoid – or mute – as to its significance."² This articulation of critical "significance" as a part of a broader cultural discourse is essential for the future of South African contemporary ceramics, especially for utilitarian objects.

Utilitarian Domestic Ware

The relationship between contemporary mass-produced Asian imported crockery and hand-made or partially mechanised local domestic pottery is mirrored in a comparison of McDonalds and Slow Food. Yes, good, real food takes longer to make. It may, at times, be slightly more pricey, but it is an authentic product of our *terroir* and *savoir faire*. Furthermore, it creates jobs and maintains dozens of small businesses.

The doyenne of contemporary South African crockery is Clementina van der Walt whose iconic "African" dinnerware charted new design territories. A new arrival on the scene, the Mervyn Gers Collective, which includes Gers, Diana Ferreira and Karen Kotze (Woven Ceramics), received rave reviews at the recent Design Indaba.

In the run up to Cape Town hosting Africa's first World Design Capital in 2014, many ceramic artists are developing ranges that may be considered



Mervyn Gers, *Untitled*, 2011, glazed ceramic, 60cm. Image courtesy the artist



ABOVE LEFT Katherine Glenday, vessels from the *Silent Earth Collection*, 2011. Photo: David Ross and courtesy Amaridian, New York **ABOVE RIGHT** Astrid Dahl, *Hellebore Seed Capsule*, 2012. Photo: David Ross and courtesy Amaridian, New York

“glocal” in their aspirations. While many of these ranges are rather predictable, depicting indigenous landscapes, flora and fauna, and obvious icons, or resembling gauche copies of trendy European creations, others are more conceptually sophisticated. Ceramic Matters, a collective comprising Gerhard Swart and Anthony Harris, produces wry and urbane domestic articles. Their upholstered pots invert basic expectations of everyday objects, and play with the fragility inherent in the ceramic medium. Similarly, Ceramic Matters’ recent crumpled table setting and crockery for the Iziko exhibition parodied slick, sanitised contemporary dining utensils through their sublimely ridiculous, warped forms!

White Light and Music

Various contemporary ceramic artists have, in recent years, developed bodies of work centred on an investigation of the luminous qualities of white stoneware or the fragile translucence of porcelain. Astrid Dahl’s sensuous organic forms are inspired by the botanical photography of Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932). She argues that white clay offers an unblemished canvas for light and dark to “shape” the piece. While she starts with a drawing, she notes that the plastic quality of the clay enables the piece to evolve in the creation process. Exhibited internationally, her work conveys the delicate promise of sprouting seeds or exotic flowers, petrified and transformed into a magical matt, calcaneus medium.

The porcelain master Katherine Glenday has extended her creative energies to include musical performance, collaborative sound, dance and curatorial projects. Her extremely diverse body of porcelain works reflects on the ethereal nature of transfigured light and, according to the artist, her delicate vessels contain her “prayer for life”. Numerous ongoing, transformative series of “thematic” conversations characterise Glenday’s oeuvre. In her collaboration with the Malian textile artist, calligrapher and alchemist, Aboubakar Fofana, Glenday creates vessels with imported English porcelain stained with African oxides, including mud from the Niger River, given to her by Fofana. Glenday’s blue and white wares are inspired by family stories of her forbears



in the Dutch East India Company who trafficked Oriental porcelain, and her more recent English family’s love of “china”. The latter’s effusive surface pattern and decorative pastiche are associated with a superficial language that conceals underlying communication. While articulating her interest in trade routes and migrations of meanings, these works are also infused with her African experience. Another recent body of work investigates the relationship between surface decoration and the distilled gesture. Yet other vessels are conceptual explorations of medium: arrested sound and clumsy vessels versus poised forms. Her installations, which invoke an intimate alchemic osmosis between her vessels and rocks, shells, pebbles, water and other vegetal matter, collectively produce a refined, calligraphic symphony.

Afro-Contemporary

Creolised African references are at the heart of Ian Garrett’s oeuvre. His contemporary *uphiso* (standard Zulu beer pot) forms are rooted in his apprenticeship with the late Nesta Nala (1940–2005), but incorporate intricate surface decoration. His hand-built vessels continue and transfigure archaic ceramic techniques. Glossy burnished areas contrast with elaborate swathes of matt-textured motifs applied with a white mussel shell prior to being pit-fired. In an unpublished statement, Garrett notes that “many layers of expression are incorporated into my work: reference is made to archaeological vessel styles from pre-historic Europe and India to reflect my ancestral background, elements and ideas are influenced by the contemporary African traditions that I have studied and collected, personal expression is incorporated into the language of motifs used on each piece, and the works are presented in the context of contemporary international studio ceramic art.” Recent pots with raised decorative motifs recall *pitthoi* from Greece and Cyprus. Garrett’s Dionysian receptacles are the embodiment of master craftsmanship and conduits for cosmological conversation with ancient gods. Majolandile Dyalvane often reinterprets utilitarian artifacts like the beer pots, wooden milk pails and platters of his native Xhosa culture. Recent work includes colourful references to surreal and cubist paintings. *Ukuqatshulwa*



TOP LEFT Ceramic Matters, *Warped Dinner Service*. Image courtesy the artists **ABOVE LEFT** Michael Eden, *Maelstrom V*, 2011, high-quality nylon with blue mineral soft coating. Image courtesy the artist and Adrian Sassoon, London **ABOVE RIGHT** Majolandile Dyalvane, vessels from the *Silent Earth* exhibition, 2011. Photo: David Ross and courtesy Amaridian, New York

Xhosa scarification is a formal device that appears in many of his works and references the surface as skin, marked by the passage of time, age and culture. Other interesting permutations of an Afro-contemporary visual idiom occur in the oeuvre of Clive Sithole and Mervyn Gers. Gers’s vessels, like those of Astrid Dahl, recall seeds, but also reference Fon vessels from Burkina Faso, which are covered with prickly *amasumpa* (wart-like protrusions). Gers revels in the viscous qualities of glazes and in the rugged, earthy forms of his native northern Karoo.

Personal Mythologies

Hylton Nel, Charmaine Haines, Wilma Cruise and Lynnley Watson are among the most interesting contemporary artists, whose engagement with clay invokes the fantastic, ironic, stoic and sensible. Watson’s figurative sculptures of anonymous domestic workers are tributes to South Africa’s invisible *abafazi* – women who have left their families to raise the children and clean the homes of others. In *The Nanny* Watson, drew from her “experiences as a child, but more from empathy for the domestic worker who makes so many sacrifices in her personal life.”³ Watson’s figures often suggest moments of retreat and resigned solitude. While embodying contemplative meditation, her female figures, especially the *reveuse*, are musings on the boredom of housework⁴ and transmit the impotence of their isolation and frustration.

Metaphors of frustration and dislocation are also evident in the work of Wilma Cruise whose sculptural oeuvre is characterised by limbless figures. In recent works, Cruise appropriates Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* as a metaphoric matrix for exploring the animal/human interface. Her *Baby Field* (2010–12) installation consists of hundreds of armless babies that can be cradled in the hand.⁵ Though recalling fetish fertility figures, the babies’ vitrified surfaces and anatomical deformities imply a thwarted fecundity and future impotence.⁶ Cruise’s mob of mutant babies provides a model for considering human/animal communication “that avoids the sentimental trap of anthropomorphism while still allowing for an empathetic and ethical repose to the question of the animal’s experience.”⁷ For



Cruise, the mutant baby/animals are also associated with the contemporary environmental crisis.

Open Source Digital Futures

Cruise’s apocalyptic reflections on the future lead me to consider another aspect of the future for ceramists in South Africa. 3D digital printers allow for the creation of complex ceramic forms that are not possible in artisanal or industrial production methods. The Briton, Michael Eden’s iconoclastic digital pieces explode many preconceived notions about pottery, and are radically altering the international ceramics scene. While the digital divide is a reality, engaged designers are democratising 3D printing technology.⁸ The Belgian duo of Claire Warnier and Dries Verbruggen, from the spatial design agency Unfold, in collaboration with Interaction Designer, Tim Knapen, devised *L’Artisan Electronique* (2009). They assembled an open source 3D printer kit for printing plastic and modified it to print porcelain.⁹ The expatriate South African Jonathan Keep, a former ceramics graduate of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg and now based in England, is an adept digital ceramist and uses a printer developed by Unfold. The printer imitates the traditional coiling technique used by ceramists, in which the form is built by stacking clay coils, but offers radical formal possibilities. Unfold’s virtual pottery wheel is another digital tool that may participate in the transformation of contemporary ceramics. By moving your hands in front of a laser beam, the (invisible) digital material is “moulded” in thin air. Various accessories can be used to create a template for manipulating the digital form: sheets of paper, bent metal and turned timber. The resultant virtual objects can be printed in clay.

Critical Futures

While these revolutionary tools may radically alter South African ceramics, the sector needs more than formal innovation and technique to sustain itself. Critical discourse is painfully lacking among potters, who frequently see their wares merely as decorated surfaces and forms. Also, there are few



ABOVE Ian Garrett, *Leaf Thread*, 2011, pit-fired terracotta, 27 x 30cm. Photo: Les Hammond and courtesy of the artist **FACING PAGE** Wilma Cruise, *Cradle*, 2011–12. 1000 ceramic forms, each c. 30cm, installation size variable. Photo: Wilma Cruise

professional spaces for display and research. While many art museums collect and research South African pottery, some significant institutions such as Iziko SANG, still turn a blind eye to potters. While galleries such as the Kim Sacks Gallery (Johannesburg), Artisan Contemporary Gallery (Durban), Ebony (Franschoek), Clementina Ceramics Gallery (Woodstock), Kalk Bay Modern, Heartworks (Cape Town) and the Dorp Street Gallery (Stellenbosch) are champions of the cause, many ceramic artists bemoan the lack of access to art spaces of a more radically contemporary nature. The white cube is a nonexistent formulation in the lexicon of most potters who are conditioned by the craft gallery format, where objects are displayed in compromised, aesthetically chaotic conditions. The lack of appropriate exhibition spaces thwarts the artistic potential and expressive liberty offered by creative scenography and the installation format, as proposed by Katherine Glenday in her 2001 solo exhibition at the Irma Stern Museum.¹⁰

This essay is a partial and superficial survey of some significant actors¹¹ and issues that feature in the contemporary ceramics landscape. It is hoped that scholarly and prestigious journals will continue to embrace this domain. Critical craft, contemporary pottery and ceramic design are vital, rich and diverse aesthetic expressions that are art, South Africa.

I wish to thank the artists involved for their assistance as well as Claire Warnier and Dr Elizabeth Perrill for their judicious comments.

1. Chicago's installation represents 1 038 important women; thirty-nine are represented by place settings and another 999 names are inscribed on a Heritage Floor.
2. Wilma Cruise, "Katherine Glenday: Painting with Light" in *Ceramics Art and Perception* 57

(2004), 85.

3. Correspondence with the author, 25 April 2011.

4. Ibid.

5. *Baby Field* was exhibited at the North-West University in October 2011. It is a work in progress and will ultimately include one thousand babies and additional sculptures.

6. Wilma Cruise, "Some Notes on Alice". Unpublished text, 3.

7. Ibid, 5.

8. The democratisation of Rapid Prototyping techniques has been facilitated by groups including Fab@Home and RepRap. RepRap stands for Replicating Rapid Prototyper and was initiated by Adrian Bowyer of the University of Bath. He devised a 3D printer that can be assembled via online building plans and open source software for a fraction of the price of a commercial 3D printer.

9. Industrial 3D printers have been commercialised by Shapeways, Ponoko and others. Other pioneer artists and institutions undertaking original research using ceramic printers, and developing new printers, include the Centre for Fine Print Research at the University of the West of England, The Solheim Additive Manufacturing Laboratory at the University of Washington, John Balistreri and David Herrold.

10. Assisted by the artist Karel Nel, Glenday had bespoke tables, shelves and light boxes constructed. She grouped similar vessels on textured surfaces of found materials, including shells, lumps of charcoal, seedpods and sprouting beans. These evocative materials were placed between sheets of glass onto which groups of pots were arranged. In another example, vessels, painted and incised with images of gold fish, were displayed over a fish tank containing gold fish swimming amid potsherds (Cruise, 3).

11. I note the exclusion of various artists including Ian Calder, Ruan Hoffmann, Ralph Johnson, Carla da Cruz, Nicolene Swanepoel, Clive Sithole, Zizipho Poswa, Nico Masemula, Martine Jackson-Klotz, Carolyn Heydenrych, Juliet Armstrong, Christina Bryer, John Shirley and Charmaine Haines whose oeuvres merit critical attention.

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