



[Belinda Blignaut, *Thrown*, 2018](#)

Fragments on Belinda Blignaut's 'Thrown'

[Belinda Blignaut](#)

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[blank projects](#), Cape Town

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After following Belinda Blignaut and her work online for some time, I was overwhelmed by the abundance of evocations and references that sprung up after seeing her work in person. My diffuse inventory of notes, allusions and fragments of writing made it difficult to pick apart specificities, or locate and describe unifying themes. In some ways, I imagine, this suits the nature of Blignaut's practice, conceptually vast and fragmented as it is. Her second solo show at blank, 'Thrown', is (materially; aesthetically) a departure from her previous exhibited work, charting the internal processes of her recent practice, with each piece of sculpted clay or collection of foraged objects acting as sign post, pointing to the varying conceptual underpinnings of her work.



Belinda Blignaut, *Wild clay, ground minerals, shards of exploded works*, 2018. Wild clay, ground minerals, shards of exploded; 47 x 20 x 19 cm

The first room of blank's three chambers is document - a table set up near the front window showing bits and pieces from a workshop held in conjunction with the show, small stones and charred plants, ash, and a bag of the same wild clay used in many of Blignaut's vessels, allowing visitors to engage these things' materiality; to sculpt their own little objects; to partake in and experience the genesis of these processes. The workshop itself could also be interpreted as a stand-in or attempt to translate and acknowledge an important part of Blignaut's practice now - as facilitator for a kind of experimental clay therapy^[iii], which situates clay (earth, mud, sediment, stone) as a potential ground for the release of trauma through its physicality and its malleability.

On the wall near this table is 8345223 (1995) - one of Blignaut's most recognisable works - a poster with her name and her gallery at the time's phone number branded along its left side, which was originally exhibited in conjunction with a telephone receiving voicemails left by the public. Alongside the text is a photograph of the artist's torso, jeans unbuttoned and chest bound with red tape - reminiscent of Robert Mapplethorpe's queer fetish photography or Lynda Benglis' notorious artforum ad. This poster - a staple of my undergrad and a formative image in the

development of my own (and I suspect many others') punk feminist sensibilities - acts as a reminder of Blignaut's role in contemporary South African art history, as well as a counterpoint to her most recent work. I appreciate the curatorial juxtaposition, how jarring and strange it is: how it accentuates the shift in Blignaut's practice from confrontational to collaborative, from 'hard' (in the way that any woman artist's work that is not shy about the machinations of the body or evasive of the interconnected economies of gender, sex and labour, would be described as 'hard') to soft (in the way that clay is soft), and 'embodied' in a different, perhaps subtler, more mature or more symbolic way.

In the same room is a collection, arranged in a neat square, of small objects - bones, leaves and other debris - collected on Blignaut's clay foraging excursions, held in or arranged alongside tiny bowls, as well as two separate examples of her monumental clay experiments, *Working from the Inside*, in which she attempts to shape and build clay around her own body.

*Because change can also mean building an exoskeleton:
A coral larvae attaching itself to a wall of rock; or a mollusc whose shell
grows with its body*

These vessels, moulded like a muddy second skin or armour, are an exercise in creative failure: one of them, *Breaking and Breakthrough*, has exploded in its firing, pieces of shattered clay arranged around a ruptured half-object, whilst the other is a remnant of Blignaut's opening night performance of this same action, in which incisions can be seen in the clay vessel, this flaying of its skin a necessary destruction in allowing Blignaut to vacate it. In this case, the destruction – whether intentional or not – of the work allows the fragments to be recuperated into new works, strengthening them: the remnants of wasted objects forming new, stronger bodies and skeletons.

Or a hermit crab, who forages shells from those dead molluscs, bric-a-brac encasements, adaptable bodies.



Belinda Blignaut, *Thrown*, 2018: Installation view, blank projects

Blank's second room is filled with smaller vessels, seemingly objects in stasis, "finished projects", marking a different stage of process: the fired object, the unexploded object, the qualitative success. Many of these smaller vessels, however, are subversive in their function, like odd copies and reiterations of themselves, not really vases or jugs – shaky mimics of their utilitarian ancestors, incapable of really holding or carrying.

*Openings (like pinholes) and others where there is no hole at all: a vessel already full (of itself) of waste of itself or bits of vestigial process; appendices and internal organs –
Openings (like mouths) or trepanned bone because a vessel does not*

necessarily have to be water tight and some vessels make gaps for the debris of transformation: to vomit fire and purge smoke whilst insides char to ash or stone or space or whatever -

Fire from the Inside I and II read as little prototypes for Blignaut's larger, embodied performative works, where the body and the builder in question is fire - the agent of transformation - itself. The blackened holes near the bases of these vessels are like tracheas, inhaling oxygen into the cavities of their rib cages, clay lungs expelling smoke through their chimneys. Their interiors give evidence of the volatile means of their making and substantiation - a reversal of a "usual" process, in which the outer skin remains soft, the mud, stone, and sediment on their surfaces still vulnerable and potentially subject to resculpture.

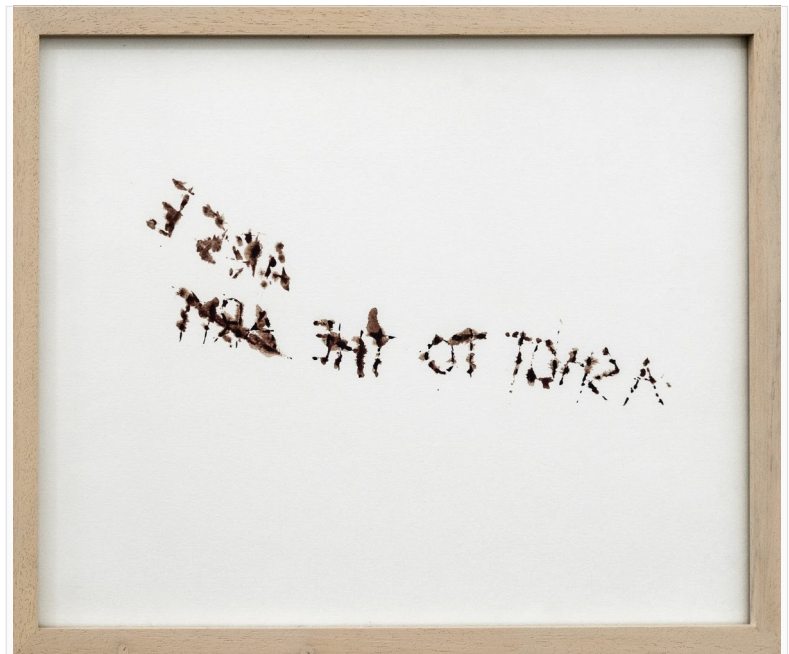
The most important part is allowing scabs to form like gateways to the body

In their strangeness, spikiness and softness, as well as the clear line of relation between their material and its physicality, Blignaut's vessels are bodily. The process of firing - a hardening, strengthening process - and the incorporation of fragments of failed pieces seems a type of healing, in which the objects themselves seem to have undergone - and survived - a type of physical trauma.

- or armour, strengthened with sediment and moist things and dry things: place markers for well points; a spring has run dry; do not build canals; water finds space where it finds it.

The last room contains only one vessel, with the word "protest" etched into its surface. This vessel, which is sculpted from Blignaut's usual materials, but also contains her own blood, is displayed alongside the 2012-13 series Scarry Scarry Night, the only other two-dimensional works on the show, in which Blignaut has printed phrases on to paper, also using her blood. These images - a very different kind of physical imprint to Working from the Inside - are a call back to 8345223 in their direct address of the body, of its abjection and the politics of its existence.

In conjunction with the accompanying vessel these prints - and the phrases they convey, for



Belinda Blignaut, *Scarry Scarry Night (A Shot To The Arse)*, 2012. Blood on Fabriano paper; 30 x 40 cm

example “a girl is a gun” and “it’s only skin” – challenge, or protest, to use Blignaut’s own words, the assumed importance of bodily integrity, of the body as a thing only permeable or accessible under externally governed circumstances. In opposition to a canon in which the bodies of femme people in particular are portrayed as only ever capable of receiving violence^[iii] and never meting it out, least not upon themselves, Blignaut refuses this passivity in her rejection of this ‘giver/receiver’ (of violence) paradigm. This infraction of one’s own bodily boundaries (often a response to trauma) acknowledges bodies as porous as well as agent, with Blignaut’s holistic confrontation of trauma (physical, emotional), exploring questions of what it means to have a body in the world; what it means to do things to your body; to do things with your body.

In many ways, I can see the forms of scabs, scars and sutures reflected in the clay itself, figuring themselves in different ways across different objects. Clay, in its materiality, can become a cipher for skin, the vessel a body (rib cages, lungs), their creation processes themselves mimicking those of the body (cutting hair, healing wounds, hardening, softening, shedding skin and growing new skin).

The focus here on process, in which bodies are vital agents, as an activity worthy of attention, and the clear relationship between process and abjection, shifts Blignaut’s work away from the realm of ‘product’ or commodity, prioritising the labour of creating.

low, not like low brow, but close to the ground.

The positionality of Blignaut’s work dances with the historically distasteful realm of craft and the decorative – unsurprisingly still associated with so-called women’s work and domestic and reproductive labour – affixing to these practices a different type of usefulness: one not predicated on the art object’s transcendental or sublime qualities, but on its potential for physical and emotional catharsis.

^[iii] Blignaut is the founder of the [NPO Artisafire](#) in which she works, alongside psychologists, with people with special needs, exploring and documenting clay’s therapeutic and expressive potential.

^[iiii] I am referring here to the prevalence of images of dead women within the art canon – for example, Millais’ Ophelia (1853), although there are many others – which imply that there is a type of ultimate beauty portrayed in the passivity of death, and where women’s bodies are always signs and metaphors. This has been written about by numerous feminist and cultural theorists (eg Julia Kristeva, Susan Sontag, Judith Butler, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Maggie Nelson and others), often with a particular focus on how dead women are portrayed contemporarily in news and entertainment media. The social and symbolic positioning of these images is dependent on various corresponding systemic intersections. For instance, JonBenet Ramsey, a white, middle class, conventionally “pretty” girl, was bestowed with

saint-like qualities in the US media, becoming a paragon of innocence; a symbol of an unjust world, a type of eulogising often only reserved for white, cisgender women and girls. [This](#) interview with Kimberlé Crenshaw about the #sayhername movement is important in its specificity regarding the visibility of black women murdered by police in the United States, and shows how the media coverage is, here, always different to that of white women. The hashtag has also been adopted by local sex worker advocacy organisation SWEAT, in which it is used to commemorate, specifically, women who do sex work – a line of work in which the large majority of people are marginalised in some way, and in which there is a disproportionately high murder rate due to the profession’s criminalisation and consistent stigmatisation. The ways in which these images of death come to be circulated, and the politics of (in)visibility therein, emphasise their position as sign, their prevalence implying that these women are always already dead, that a primary condition of being in the world as a femme person or a perceivable woman is passivity (ie death); the potentiality of becoming one of these images.