

WRITING WITH LIGHT - THE WORK OF KATHERINE GLENDAY

Katherine Glenday (1960 -) lives in Kalk Bay. This is one of many small villages that hang between mountain and sea on the west side of False Bay in Cape Town, South Africa. Just beyond Kalk Bay the land mass stretches southward to Cape Point. Thereafter it is just the heaving ocean.

This part of Cape Town is swept clean by the winds. Airy vistas are visible from the old house in which Glenday lives. The wetter and woodier parts of Cape Town lie on the other side of the mountain. Here in Kalk Bay one is conscious of light, air and the vastness of the ocean that beyond the shores of False Bay rolls towards the wastes of Antarctica.

This place is entirely favourable to Glenday's work. It is as if Glenday has captured the elements of her environment and spun them, like a magician, into small artworks that are more containers of another world than mere pots.

It seems contradictory in ceramics, an art form that normally evokes the Thorian elements of earth and fire, to deal with such insubstantials as air and water. Glenday captures these ethereal elements in porcelain, a material that is hard and immutable. This is only one of the many paradoxes of her oeuvre. Her vessels also express complex ideas in the medium more usually associated with the notion of "craft", rather than that of "art" with all its conceptual ramifications.

Herbert Read said that since pottery was neither imitative nor illustrative, it was form in its purest essence. Read was writing in 1931, before Wayne Higby coined the phrase the "contemporary vessel" and before postmodernism permitted a more complex interpretation of the vessel format. Yet in 1979 - 1982, when Glenday was studying for her undergraduate degree in ceramics at Pietermaritzburg University in Natal, a formalist approach to ceramics was still dominant. Under the twin imperatives of a modernist (formalist) aesthetic and the dying influence of Anglo-Orientalism, Glenday felt her opportunities for self-expression constrained. She had originally wanted to study painting, but under the influence of a kind mentor, the potter, Marietjie van der Merwe (1935 – 1992), who was a visiting lecturer, Glenday turned exclusively to ceramics. Against the advice of her other teachers she chose to work expressively, and somewhat perversely, through the technically demanding medium of porcelain. Thus began a love affair with the material. Its whiteness, fineness; its subtlety and delicacy fitted in well with Glenday's approach to life, so much so that in years to come it became easy to confuse the potter with that of her work. But both perceptions would be wrong. Since as delicate as Glenday might look, a steely resolve and a searching mind belie her persona - and as with her vessels - the fineness of the pot forms disguise a complex iconography. Yet, Glenday did not entirely shrug off

the formalist influence. A tension exists between the formal elements in her work, which are understated and restrained, and the ideas embodied in her vessels. Drawn by the translucent surfaces of the pots, the patient viewer will be startled to find a depth of meaning therein.

Glenday's early post-graduate porcelain vessels tended to use the pots as small pedestals for sculptures or, and this occurred quite frequently, the porcelain would become a white sheet on which paintings and drawings would trace the artist's explorations. At this time a motif appeared. An attenuated androgynous figure, often caught in the act of flying or swimming was set on lids or clung to the sides of the pots. Much as in Mabel Lucy Atwell's illustrations for children, images that Glenday was exposed to as a child, this small form displays an innocence that is pre-sexual. This creature appears frequently in Glenday's oeuvre. It is not too fanciful to see it as her alter ego. As her work progressed, Glenday engaged more explicitly with its sexual nature (or the denial of it!). Wrestling with the notion of gender identification Glenday came to believe that gender functions along a continuum, the outer boundaries of which are represented by extreme forms of masculine and feminine attributes. Glenday terms this the "Ken and Barbie syndrome". She explores the idea of a gender continuum in a mature work, entitled *Tuning* (2001). This is a series of thirteen subtly distorted vessels, which formed part of a solo exhibition held at the Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town in November 2001, the title of which itself was *Tuning Narcissus*.

As Glenday wrote

The 'Tuning' vessels refer to a range of notes played on a journey toward harmonious balance with another or from resolution within. The masculine on the one side and the feminine on the other can be seen to become more 'airborne' as they enter the middle ranges on the continuum. These matters are sacred and delicate, and as the concept of love in all its forms is limited by the one word we have in the English language, so do matters of masculinity and femininity suffer the same truncations of understanding (Glenday unpublished 2001).

Unlike her earlier work in which the figure adorned the pot and in which most of the significance of the work resided, in *Tuning* the forms of the pots themselves encompass the meaning. In Glenday's later works this generally holds true. As she has become mistress of her material, porcelain has become like spun gossamer in her hands. The pots appear as light as the beat of a butterfly's wing and as ethereal as a wisp of a cumulus nimbus cloud over False Bay. The forms are indented, edges are broken, the pots are penetrated and coloured textured elements are inserted – all this with an authority of one who has mastered her material. The androgynous figure is now contained within the very walls of the vessel. It is drawn with the light so it lies simultaneously on the surface and diffuses through the clay. Its pale form is luminously captured in the walls. Glenday is not averse to piercing the surface in areas – over the 'hara' or 'pelvic'

region and at times to insert darker elements of matter into the transparent hardness of the body. The vessels are given titles, which are clues to the artist's intention, but not essential to decoding the messages, which are apprehended at a more emotional level. Thus *Written on the body*, *The quality of matter* and my personal favourite, *Has body needs tenant* all speak of a yearning for meaning in a chaotic world. In the latter work the title is written into the walls of the pot. The words can only be read when held up to the light.

Given the iconographical weight of her work, Glenday was faced with a problem as how to exhibit the vessels. "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. For her 2001 solo exhibition at the Irma Stern Museum, Glenday chose to exhibit her work in installations. She sought the help of the renowned artist, Karel Nel (1955-). Together with Nel and Michael Heuermann who constructed the high tables, shelves and light boxes, Glenday placed groups of similar vessels on textured surfaces. These surfaces consisted of an assortment of found materials: shells, lumps of dark charcoal, luminously coloured seed pods, growing bean sprouts. The materials were placed between sheets of glass on which groups of similar pots were arranged. *Tuning* was displayed at eye level against the wall, where it became a sentence to be read from left to right – or a line that pivoted on its central axis, pot number 7, the point of equilibrium.

In one example, vessels, painted and incised with images of swimming gold fish, another favourite Glenday motif, were displayed over a fish tank containing the living red-gold fish swimming amongst shards of Glenday's pots. The *coup d'grace* was the light table, which throwing muted light from beneath, filtered through the whiteness of the vessels above.

In 2002 Glenday took part in a group exhibition at the Kim Sack's Gallery in Johannesburg. In the series of works created for this show Glenday evoked the "magical other" which she described as a yearning for an imagined (an)other who would bring to self, qualities of harmony and balance in which a state of completion is achieved. In Jungian terms the personality becomes actualised. The androgynous figure is depicted as reaching and stretching upwards - towards the light and downwards into body and matter. Sometimes wings are added or in failure they droop uselessly from the shoulders. In a work entitled, *The journey* (2002) the figure swims across a series of shallow bowls reaching towards a point which has no beginning and no end. And - once again, as in *Have body needs tenant*, the viewer discovers by careful looking, Glenday writing in light:

As my vehicle drove into the sunlight
The soft plop of your insect body
starburst onto my windscreen

and I saw the universe
dancing its rainbow
in the hologram of your bright grains
if you, then why not me?

Wilma Cruise - June 2003

Natal University is the only university in South Africa to offer a degree course in ceramics as part of the Fine Arts degree.

Marietjie van der Merwe was influential as a teacher of ceramics throughout South Africa. Amongst others, she was involved in setting up kilns and imparting technological knowledge to the Art and Craft Centre at Rorke's Drift in the rural area of Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal). This was at a time when black people had few opportunities for art or craft education.

As well as being a painter, Karel Nel is Associate Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, and an expert in African art.

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