

## Felicity

## POTTER at eighty



then David is the 'Heston Blumenthal' of ceramic glazes. Constant experimentation and meticulous precision are his watchwords. David told me subsequently that only once in his life had he ever bought a commercial glaze - a transparent one. He buys the ingredients from South African suppliers and mixes all his own recipes.

Shortly afterwards I was invited by David to visit Bukkenburg Studio in the quaint, historic hamlet of Swellendam in the Western Cape. The partnership of David and Felicity recalls the connected yet unfurling rings of a Mandala. In Oriental art, particularly Tibetan, a Mandala is a schematized representation of the cosmos, characterised by a concentric configuration of geometric shapes, each of which may contain an image or representation of a deity. In Jungian psychology it is a symbol representing the effort to reunify the self. My visit gave me the opportunity to encounter that still, small centre of this Mandala - the singularity of James.

James, Felicity's son, suffered a severe accident when just a small child. In 1972, as a result of James's need for high care, Felicity, whose speciality was in the decorative arts, met David, whose interest was in the care of people with special needs. Around the singularity of James, the creative stardust of Felicity and David began to rotate, coalesce and evolve.

Felicity has always been inspired by nature. She tells of hurrying home after school when still a little girl, to water her plants. Rotating within the energetic, creative gravity of her mother, Ruth Wolff, a well-reputed designer, architect and interior decorator, Felicity graduated from the Johannesburg Technical College with qualifications in Art and Commercial Art. Like so many artists, she has been a multi-tasker, working at one stage with Ernst Ullman as a designer, commercial artist and screen printer, for Penny le Roy as a designer and textile printer and even for two years as a Judges Clerk! After James's accident, however, she worked from home. Felicity then met with David, who hailed originally from Swaziland, and had been involved, when in England, in the care of people with special needs. During 1972, whilst they were house parents at Cresset House - a school and training centre for

## Zen and Now



children in need of special care, situated in Halfway House, near Johannesburg - they were asked to begin a small pottery studio at the school.

Felicity renewed her acquaintance with the mercurial Tim Morris. He was skilled in what has become known as the Anglo-Oriental School of studio pottery, as well as being an accomplished watercolourist, and he proved to be a magnet to both her and David. They were both excited by his work and environment, and Tim, together with his wife Marlene, was keen to become involved in getting the pottery at Cresset House underway.

"If you're going to start a workshop at Cresset, you'll have to do more than rely on donor support and prepare yourselves for a long period of sustained commitment. It's an expensive business starting and running a pottery studio," advised Tim Morris when David and Felicity expressed a desire to open a pottery studio there. A special relationship developed between them, which saw the establishment of a vibrant studio at the school.

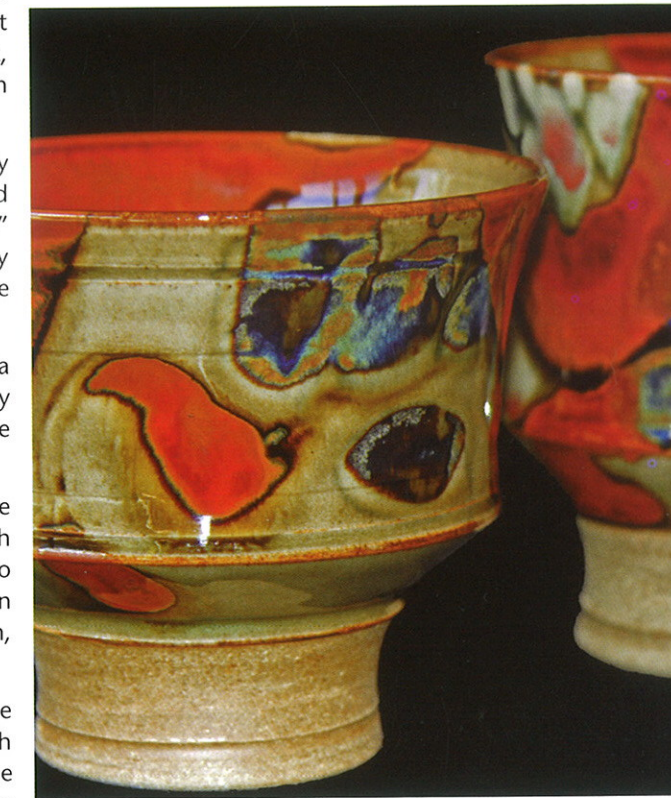
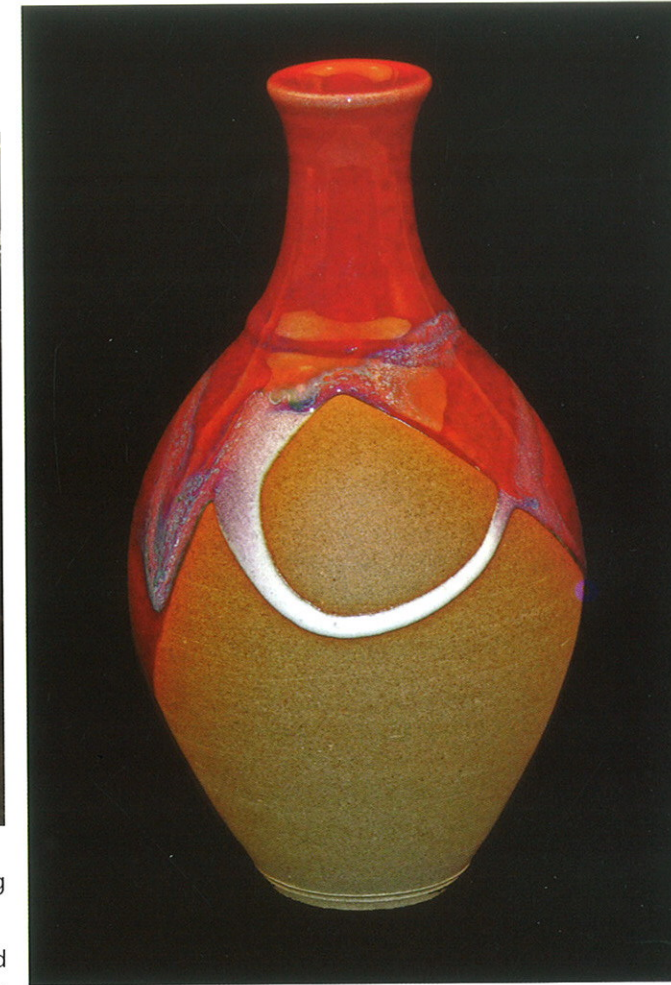
In 1973, they joined the newly formed Association of Potters Southern Africa (APSA), now Ceramics Southern Africa (CSA), and in 1975 David and Felicity exhibited work on APSA's first National Exhibition, which was held in Cape Town.

Through this growing friendship, they were introduced to the work and impulse of several pioneers of South African Studio Pottery and became acquainted with some of them. On their website [www.pottery.co.za](http://www.pottery.co.za) they pay their respects to those who inspired them at the time and continue to do so now. In addition to Tim Morris, there were potters such as Hyme Rabinowitz, Sammy Lieberman, Esias Bosch and Thelma Marcusson among others.

They have published and still maintain memorial pages on Facebook for three of the pioneers of high-temperature reduction-fired studio pottery in South Africa, namely: Tim Morris, Hyme Rabinowitz and Esias Bosch. They welcome contributions from those who have memories of these ceramicists, including pictures, stories and anecdotes.

The move away from the school and into their own home studio in Johannesburg took place in 1976, and a year later they built their first reduction kiln, a 100 cubic foot monster fed by a municipal gas main.

The following twenty years saw a period of growth and immense output with exhibitions in South Africa and abroad, corporate and private commissions and



All the work in the accompanying images are made by David and decorated by Felicity using their own exclusive blends of clay and glazes.  
Reduction-fired to cone 12 ( $\pm 1$  320°C) in oil-fired (paraffin) kilns.

Article by Joy Savage  
Photographs by David Schlapobersky

"When you buy from an independent artist, you are buying more than just a painting. You are buying hundreds of hours of experimentation and thousands of failures. You are buying days, weeks, months, years of frustration and moments of pure joy. You are buying nights of worry about paying the rent, having enough money to eat, having enough money to feed the children, the birds, the dog. You aren't just buying a thing, you are buying a piece of heart, part of a soul, a private moment in someone's life.

"Most importantly, you are buying that artist more time to do something they are truly passionate about; something that makes all the above worth the fear and the doubt; something that puts the life into the living."  
.....Rebekah Joy Platt; Artist

I first made the acquaintance of David Schlapobersky and Felicity Potter when I attended a 'Walkabout' exhibition of their high-temperature, reduction-fired stoneware and porcelain, held at the Oude Libertas Gallery in Stellenbosch during 2014. There is much about the skills involved in ceramics that recalls cooking and as David shared his glaze recipes with his audience, I was reminded that if I am a 'Jamie Oliver' type of potter, (glugs of this and handfuls of that!)



## FEATURE Profile

## Felicity POTTER

pots made for special landscape projects. Articles in magazines and other publications made their names familiar both locally and overseas, and they presented numerous workshops under the auspices of APSA.

They were founding members of the Johannesburg Studio Route, where studios in various disciplines, in and around the suburbs of Johannesburg were open to the public on the last Sunday of every month.

Then, as now, David's technical throwing skills and Felicity's decorative ability proved to be a successful symbiosis. As much love and care is bestowed upon a commissioned metre-high wine jar or jardinière, fountain or washbasin, as upon a casserole, platter or lowly coffee mug. Arguably one of the most ancient of the arts, pottery is both functional and symbolic. Pots are everyday companions in our domestic life, take part in our sacred rituals and also appeal to our higher aesthetic senses.

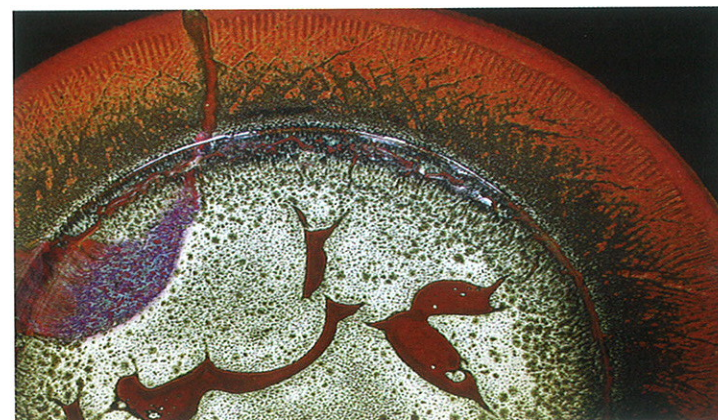
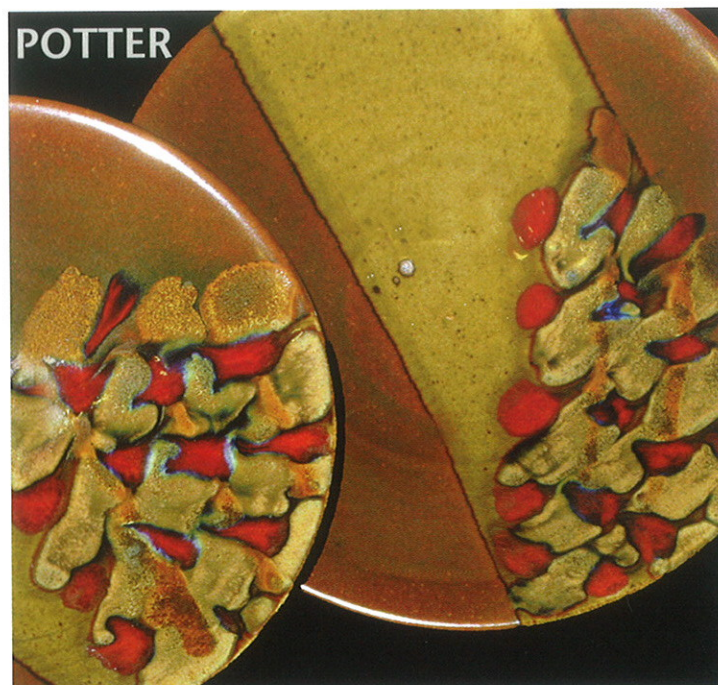
David recounted an amusing anecdote - in 1993, as a trip to the UK was being planned, a suggestion was made to bring and submit for auction at Bonham's in London: ".....your best big pot". Upon viewing the piece, the ceramics specialist at Bonham's, Cyril Frankel, would not accept that it had been made by David and Felicity in Johannesburg, insisting that it must have been made somewhere in the Far East - his experience and expertise informing him that it was of Eastern origin. Needless to say, the pot was not put up for auction!

They moved to Swellendam on the 1st October, 1996, having bought the house two years earlier. They had been dreaming for many years of moving their studio to the country and as David succinctly put it to me during our interview: "We stopped for a meal and petrol on our way from Cape Town to the Garden Route and almost immediately decided that this could be the place". They fell in love with the Victorian Heritage House, Bukkenburg on a large piece of ground in the historic heart of Swellendam. The house which had been owned by a local farming family for generations, gave its name to the pottery studio, gallery and guest cottage. In the inimitable manner of civic bodies the local municipality turned the electricity and water supply off on the day they arrived at their new abode, with the disclaimer: "Pay up and we'll switch back on"!

Coming as they did from socially and politically active families, David and Felicity have been very active in the communities around them, in Alexandra Township when they were in Johannesburg, and then in Swellendam after their relocation.

Although David admits to becoming somewhat more reflective recently, they remain inspired and productive, ever mindful of what they have in being able to work from home, take care of James and create beautiful ceramics which connect them to an ancient timeless tradition, as well as the wider world. However, they still exhibit their work away from the Swellendam studio and undertake a variety of commissions. They run workshops, including children's sessions and will structure them for people of all abilities. The Bukkenburg studio and gallery are open most days and visitors are welcome to drop in, browse and view the work in progress.

During the year they host at least three 'Open Studio Weekends' at Bukkenburg, including the now well-known and supported "Potters' Lunch". They are held to coincide with public holiday long weekends centred on Freedom Day in April, Heritage Day in



September, and the Day of Reconciliation in December. These open studio weekends cultivate an awareness of their work and nurture an audience. Felicity's catering has built up a reputation over the years and they now have people travelling from afar to enjoy a lunch on the veranda at Bukkenburg.

Late morning on the day I arrived was a momentous occasion. One of the two large paraffin kilns had just cooled enough to be opened and as all potters will appreciate, it was like attending a birth. Each new 'baby' was carefully lifted out and placed gently on the bench. Exclamations of joy and relief accompanied the tiny, high-pitched pings of carefully placed pieces. I know of no potter who can become blasé towards this emotional moment! The happy culmination of months of hopeful, ceramic gestation - David's Attic forms with Felicity's lively decorations had produced another wonderful batch of newborns. Deep iron glazes, copper reds and turquoises, cobalt blues, celadons, gentle rutiles and the soft, ashy mattes of high-fired porcelain and stoneware filled our gaze. These combinations of colours and effects are not usually encountered in reduction-fired studio ceramics.

"Right," said Felicity, entering with an earthy announcement: "It's time for lunch."

Swellendam is surrounded by large farms with quietly grazing sheep, sweeping stretches of wheat and chartreuse yellow canola fields. Ash from these, as well as that from wattle, give subtlety to the soft matte glazes to be found on the shoulders of urns or within the concave sweeps of platters. Behind the Bukkenburg studio the Langeberg Mountains soar. The conservative, traditionally Afrikaans community

is benevolently invaded in the summer season by English, Dutch and German holidaymakers, affectionately referred to as 'swallows'! They visit and revisit the studio.

In the spirit of the Arts and Crafts Movement of the early Twentieth Century, David and Felicity are lifestyle potters. They work, live and make relationships within the orbit of their home. Whilst I was browsing in the studio, reading the pithy quotes and quips on the walls and absorbing the symmetry of the displayed ceramic forms and the subtle gleam of the glazes, an English family entered, bent upon the same purpose. With the jovial conviviality of like-minded strangers, we spontaneously embarked upon conversation. They had visited Bukkenburg before and yes... they bought more pots. It is via these rotating satellites of repeat business and word-of-



*Joy Savage is a ceramic artist who has lived for most of her life in Central and Southern Africa. She has a B.A. Degree (majoring in English and History of Art) from UNISA. While residing in the Durban area she was involved in teaching ceramics for many years and had articles regarding her award winning work appear in many local publications. Since moving to Stellenbosch early in 2007, she joined CSA Western Cape and has written several reviews for the Newsletter of the Region and for National Ceramics Quarterly Magazine.*

mouth contacts, that Bukkenburg Studio exerts its ever-widening gravitational pull.

My two days' stay enabled me to steep myself in the peace and benevolence that characterise this scenic spot. At one point, whilst in conversation with David near the entrance to the studio, James stretched out his hand and touched my sleeve, laughing merrily. "He likes you," David told me. Like small children and animals, James is very sensitive to the emotional radiance of those around him. Generally, as adults, we are very verbal beings and occasionally we need to be reminded of quieter, less-obvious forms of communication. I felt warmed and touched by James's acceptance of me. I had come into his orbit; the still, small centre of this Swellendam solar system.

Later that day, driving back to Stellenbosch through the swelling hills of the South Western Cape, flanked on the right by the purple peaks of the Riviersonderend Mountains, I thought contentedly of the two bubble-wrapped platters securely ensconced on the back seat of my car. Would they be used? Yes. Would they be objects of quiet joy and contemplation when not being used? Absolutely.

It is only fitting that a quote from David and Felicity's collection should be the string with which I draw this article to a close:

"Pottery is at once the simplest and most difficult of arts. It is the simplest because it is the most elemental; it is the most difficult because it is the most abstract. Historically it is among the first of the arts.

...Art is an escape from chaos...it is the indetermination of matter seeking the rhythm of life." *The Meaning of Art: Herbert Read c.1931*

Felicity and David may be contacted through their website [www.pottery.co.za](http://www.pottery.co.za)



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