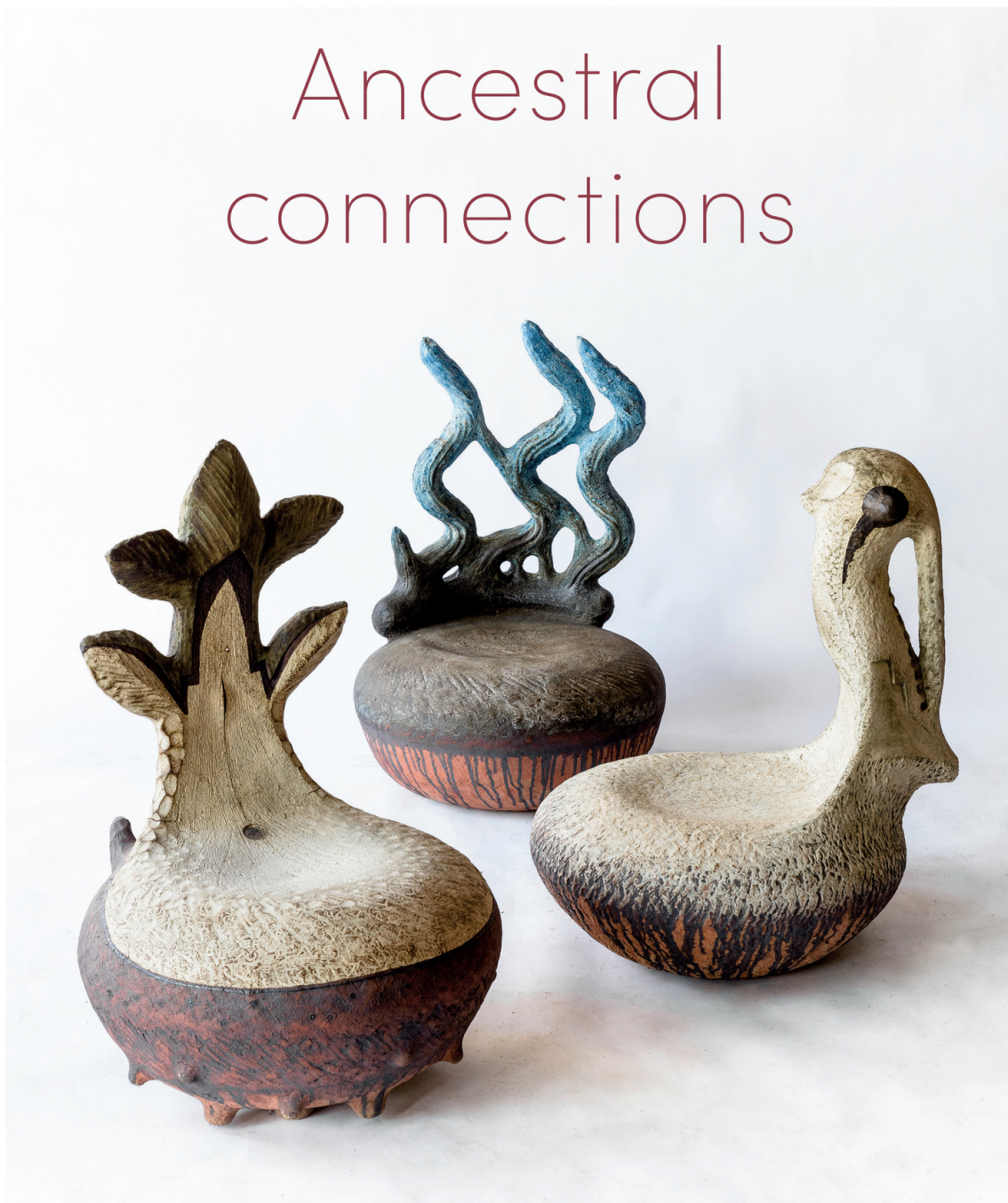




ABOVE: *iThongo* installation, 2020 RIGHT: *uTyani*, *iMpepho* & *uMalusi*, from the *iThongo* series, 2020

Ancestral connections



The South African ceramic artist Andile Dyalvane draws deeply from his Xhosa roots, finds *Isabella Smith*

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IT IS AN EXTRAORDINARY STORY. In 1978, a young boy is born in Ngobozana, a small village in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, to the Jola Clan lineage of the amaXhosa nation. Majolandile Dyalvane – nicknamed ‘Andile’ – often amused himself by playing with clay-rich mud on the banks of a river. Forty years later, Dyalvane is an internationally renowned ceramic artist with exhibitions in cities including New York, London and Basel, a slew of awards to his name and invitations to artist residencies across the globe

How did it happen? For Dyalvane, a childhood spent farming, looking after the family’s livestock (‘So the goats didn’t gallivant and wander into someone’s garden or the fields’) and exploring the land were fundamental in shaping his life’s work. ‘Country life is what made me the person I am, with the rituals and traditions and ceremonies that we practise at home,’ he reflects.

Today, his art often incorporates Xhosa symbols, shapes and narratives. These range from his *Scarified vessels*, carved with patterns that recall the traditional practice of skin scarification, to *iThongo*, a series of stools inspired by the shapes of the glyphs created by Dyalvane to correspond to certain Xhosa words and are a channel through which ancestors communicate with us.

EARLY DREAMS

Until 1994, Ngobozana was part of Ciskei, a segregated ‘homeland’. Growing up under Apartheid, Dyalvane didn’t see pottery born from his own culture. ‘Those who were in power took our traditional artefacts,’ he tells me. ‘And art was not taught at our school.’ All the same, the young Dyalvane was an inveterate doodler, filling his school notebooks with drawings.

In 1995, he followed his father, a migrant labourer, to a township in Cape Town. Without knowing what would be required of him – let alone a ready portfolio – and speaking little English (‘At that time I was a village boy and we speak isiXhosa’), Dyalvane applied to Sivuyile Technical College. His book of sketches changed the course of his life: tutors saw what he could achieve without training and gave him a place on an art course.

From there, he says, ‘My mind was blown.’ The students were taken to galleries, museums, craft markets and design shops, exposing him to a world he had barely known existed. The feeling was one of recognition: ‘I have always *known* this thing, when I was being punished for doodling or dreaming or whatever,’ he says. ‘I came up with the idea that if I can draw it, I can make it. From there I have never looked back.’

He spent three years at college, majoring in ceramics, and graduated near the top of his year. This mattered, as it led a headhunter from a pottery studio to offer Dyalvane his first job. He credits his five years there as useful for artistic development – ‘being guided in the use of colour, detail, design’. He was invited to a residency in Denmark and while there, met people from Nelson Mandela University in Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth). This eventually led to his applying for – and then receiving – a full scholarship to the university.

He spent the following two years studying ceramic design on a comprehensive course that covered ‘the science, the history, the design, the entrepreneurship – everything’. After earning his diploma, he returned to Cape Town and teamed up with friend and fellow artist Zizipho Poswa to open their own studio, Imiso Ceramics, in 2005. The pair soon gained



ABOVE, FROM TOP: *Gori*, 2024;
Ngqarutyana, 2024

RIGHT: *Ixhanti* installation, 2024,
all from *OoNomathotholo: Ancestral
Whispers* exhibition for Friedman
Benda, New York



*I can recall whatever whispers that
may have been heard when I was
young from the feel of that clay*





a reputation for producing innovative pieces that drew the attention of galleries and collectors both locally and internationally.

At their studio, Poswa and Dyalvane host residencies for other artists and, of course, create their own work. At the centre of their space is a circle adorned with patterns shaped from clay and mud. A daily ritual takes place here. 'Before we start the day, we will burn some sage incense and play an instrument just to come back and be intentional about what we are about to create,' he says. 'The studio is a feast for both the eyes and the soul.'

ESSENCE OF HOME

When we spoke, Dyalvane was taking stock after a long period of work on an exhibition for Friedman Benda in New York, which ran from 5 September – 2 November 2024. *OoNomathotholo: Ancestral Whispers* comprised large vessels of coiled earthenware placed in a circle around a central totem, an arrangement designed to recall a village *kraal* (enclosure) or a ceremony. Other vessels featured intentional tears and cracks: a way of expressing the grief he felt after losing six loved ones during the Coronavirus pandemic and in the period shortly after. Several were shown last year in the exhibition *Mirror Mirror: Reflections on Design* in the gilt and marble surrounds of Chatsworth House in Derbyshire.

It is fair to say that international white cube galleries and stately homes are a long way from his roots. One way Dyalvane stays connected is by using clay collected from those riverbanks where he used to play as a child. Several times a year, he will drive the 12 hours to Ngobozana to see family and friends and to harvest wild clay. He mixes this with commercial clay bodies and uses it to make surface textures that 'bring an essence of home to the work that I create,' he says. 'I can recall whatever whispers that may have been heard when I was young from the smell of the water, the feel of that clay. It takes me back to why I was drawn to making or playing.'

The first stage of the process is the creation of a mood board, which Dyalvane and his wife Nkuthazo Alexis use to gather images and objects they find compelling. After the couple discuss ideas, themes and feelings that arise from the assemblage, they come up with names or phrases that feel fitting. Dyalvane will begin to sketch, adding these to the board. 'We then ask ourselves: why are we being led to this name, this word, these textures and scales and forms?'

Next, he hand-models small maquettes from clay before beginning the full-scale piece. Dyalvane works with coils so long that he keeps them slung around his body as he applies and smooths them in place. 'I start dancing while beating them. I work with the rhythm, so there is always a particular sound when I am making,' he reveals.

His pieces sit in a drying room for about a week before being first bisque-then glaze-fired in an electric kiln. The kiln's size determines the upper limit

ABOVE, FROM LEFT: *Cornish Wall*, 2020, from the *Leach Pottery* series; *Scarified Black Jewel*, in collaboration with Nina Runsdorf, 2016, from the *Camagu* series; *Umwonyo II*, 2023, from the *Umwonyo* series
LEFT: drawing process, 2020




Images: courtesy of the artist; Southern Guild; Friedman Benda; Leach Pottery; photos by: Hayden Phipps; Phoebe Dheurle; Adel Ferreira; Adriaan Louw; Justin Patrick

of his work's scale: 120cm high. He coats interiors with commercial glazes and prefers underglazes and oxides for the exteriors, which he sometimes then sands to create a range of textures.

CEREMONIAL TRIBUTES

A 2019 residency at the Leach Pottery in St Ives, with its incredibly similar landscape to that of Dyalvane's home, brought him a sense of familiarity and that home can be strongly felt in different places in the world. The idea of adding shards to his Leach Pottery works came about on hearing and seeing that studio rejected pieces were deposited into the Stennack River that flows beside the property. It led him to create jagged yet fluid forms in matte, earthy browns with flashes of red. One such work, *Umwonyo*, is now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; another, *Cornish Wall*, earned a Special Mention in the 2022 *Loewe Foundation Craft Prize*.

With such achievements to his name, which work does he feel proudest of? Without hesitation, he answers: *iThongo*, the series of sculptural seats he designed to be arranged in a circle around a fire, recalling Xhosa ceremonies. Each coiled earthenware piece is low and curvilinear, and bears carved or stamped pictograms or glyphs from the 200 or so symbols Dyalvane has created to correspond to isiXhosa words. The artist calls these *Uyalezo*, a 'language of dreams gifted [to me] in vision space'. It is not hard to understand why he cares so deeply for the series. Alongside their beauty and meaning, they are a technical marvel in both heft and scale.

Unusually, *iThongo* was driven to his hometown to be shown to his local community before being exhibited in Cape Town with Southern Guild and in New York with Friedman Benda. 'It is the work that I feel has an energy – and will always have an energy – that so far surpasses anything else,' he says. 'I still today get goosebumps when I think about it.' 

For more details visit @andiledyalvane; imisoceramics.co.za; southernguild.com; friedmanbenda.com

ABOVE, FROM LEFT: ceramicist Andile Dyalvane; *iThongo* installations – Ngobozana, Eastern Cape, 2020