

"I can't help but work in installation & multiples"

in conversation with Hennie Meyer

Written by Wilma Cruise

When he was a young Rotary exchange student in Australia, the South African artist Hennie Meyer, took a course in ceramics simply because it was the only option available to him as the other courses were fully subscribed. The move proved to be serendipitous, as he fell in love with clay which provided him the requisite language to articulate his reflections on life. As Meyer somewhat deprecatingly says, "Since I cannot write nor sing, ceramics proved to be the means with which I could express myself". He spent a year on the wheel, training as a studio potter and, thus the notion of roundness and reproduction was set at an early stage.

Thirty-something years later, Meyer continues to work within the genre of the studio potter, producing small items for domestic use – but with the addition of another dimension to the studio production narrative. The domestic vessels he creates are used as elements in a variety of installations, both within the walls of the gallery, and outside of it. Meyer successfully sets out to achieve an expansiveness that challenges the comfortable domesticity of his vessels, by grouping his pots in different configurations. He also utilizes them as discrete elements in expanded works, including land-art interventions. This opening up of a new kind of ceramic discourse that transcends the mud walls of studio pottery meets Meyer's aim, which is to rise above the conceptual limitations of 20th Century studio pottery, while also paying lip service to its aesthetic and ethical principles.

Meyer's use of the multiple subsumes his interest in the inter-relationship of functional objects on each other. In 2008 he exhibited at the Klein Karoo Art Festival and used a jug as the single element in a floor installation, with individual vessels functioning as pixels in a printed image. "Every jug in this installation fulfills its purpose as a good functional object. It can hold liquid, pour; can be held easily in spite of having no handle. In the presentation of the installation this traditional function is destroyed. It allows the viewer to see the jug as a totally new object stripped of its usual function" (Meyer 2008, translation by the author).

Undoubtedly Meyer's *magnus opus* was his installation titled, *Ukusela eKapa*, a project he conceived with architect Janine de Waal, and presented for the celebration of Cape Town as the 2014 World Design Capital. The concept underpinning *Ukusela eKapa* (which literally translates as 'drink up (or schulrp) Cape Town') was to connect the diverse peoples who make up the population of Cape Town: rich and poor; black and brown; the haves and the have-nots; the old and the young; the infirm and the able. The process was to get each one of ten thousand people to personalise an unfired drinking cup (*ikomityi*) by pressing their fingers to make an impression in the wet clay.

The task of connecting with such a large number of people was enormous and involved complicated logistics. With only a small team to support him, Meyer manufactured each cup by using a basic hand-operated extruder, and then joined and fettled the bases before packing each

