

Ceramics TECHNICAL

AU\$17.50 US\$16 £10 NZ\$22.50 CAN\$29 DM33



Paperclay • Water reduction in Woodfire Kilns
Young Designers • Paperslip • Using Colour
Wet-fired Ceramics • Tiles • Workshop Reviews
Education in Australia • Kilns and their Design

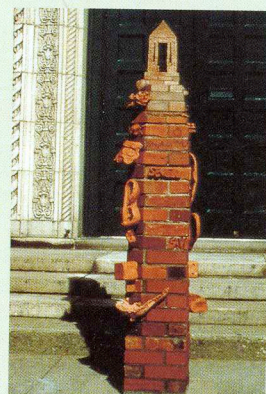
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COVER

Mira Sadot

Fields (detail).

Glazed block. Stoneware,
1250°C, carbon-trap glaze.
30 x 30 x 5 cm.



Journey of a South African Soul

*The ceramic work of Lynnley Watson, forms and techniques,
is discussed by Wendy Lauritano-Gers*

Left: *Cynthia –
Flower Seller.*
Walmar spar. 2000.
26 cm/h.

Right: *Ubuntu.*
1996. 50 cm/h.

LYNNLEY WATSON IS A QUINTESSENTIALLY POST-COLONIAL POTTER. Her work of the past 20 years is a meditation on the cultural heritage of many white women in South Africa during this period of momentous and tumultuous changes. Her oeuvre attests to both her British historical roots and to contemporary realities. Watson's work speaks of a journey of the soul, a grappling with issues of identity, cultural heritage and personal mythologies. This article will investigate some significant sculptures that, to the author, appear to define certain key aspects of the artist's work. Watson also produces raku or smoke fired vessels and utilitarian wares. Those works are not within the scope of this article.

Watson's work from the 1980s paid homage to the Pre-Raphaelites. She produced busts of women of classical beauty, with long necks and exquisite facial proportions. While at first glance, some of these sculptures may seem to



reflect a (Western male) vision of perfect beauty, others speak eloquently of loss and restraint. The subject's head and face are finely modelled, but the clothing binds and restrains the upper body. The work seems to speak of the frustration of women, frequently seen as objects of beauty, unfit for meaningful or professional employment. In complete contrast, the brute masculine qualities of a male head are emphasised in a more recent sculpture, *Brownjohn Hamburger* (1994).

A recurrent theme in Watson's work is a celebration of her South African natural environment, and the rich heritage of indigenous fauna and flora. Watson is a keen draughtsman and her studio is full of seed pods, leaves, flowers and grasses and reference works on trees and birds. Her observation of the local natural environment is reflected in studies of plants, rocks and trees found in arid areas of her native Eastern Cape and the small Karoo. Watson's sculpture, *Homage to Mutual Arcade* (1997) is an avenue of *Dracacna Draconae* trees which reveals Watson's indignation at the destruction of a beautiful Victorian building in an urban renewal program.

Social concerns also permeate her figurative sculpture. Her sculpture *Ubuntu* (a Xhosa word meaning that you do not live for yourself, you live for others) (1996) reveals a particular pathos, of the collective strength of black women who were behind the miracle of South Africa's peaceful transition to democratic government. *Cynthia, Flower Seller, Walmer Spar*, (2000) is the first

Homage to Mutual Arcade. 1997. 16 x 28 x 46 cm.

Lynnley Watson is aware of volume in her work and prefers the coiling technique, even when slab-building would be the more obvious choice. She 'feels' the volume of the form from the inside and stretches it outwards. In her experience, coiling reduces structural cracks and facilitates greater sensitivity to form and detail.



Above: **Brownjohn**
Hamburger.

1994. 34 cm/h.

Below: **Chickenlady.** 1999.



sculpture in a series in which Watson celebrates the lives of impoverished women who, against all odds, have contributed to society.

Watson's recent figurative works explore a more personal mythology. They depict 'chickens' with the heads and busts of women. Often the chickens have women's buttocks. *Chickenlady* (1999), an earthy, voluptuous chicken/woman with a big beaky nose and bursting cleavage is a subversive feminist rebuttal against other mythical and half-human animals such as unicorns and the goat/man, Pan. Both the latter mythical beasts are lithe, athletic, muscular and abound with phallic and patriarchal associations. The chicken/woman with Medusa-like hair acknowledges Western European mythology, and both confirms and denies these Arcadian associations. These sculptures are both witty and incisive statements about women who are comfortable with themselves, and a retort to the local chauvinist patois that refers to women as 'chicks'.

The voluptuous *Chickenlady* is supremely confident with her head tilted up, her arms in a gesture that seems to indicate that she has just blown a kiss to the viewer, or is about to perform an operatic aria. The satirical irreverence and *joie de vivre* is compelling. This work is one of Watson's most accomplished, both iconographically and ideologically and locates her firmly within the contemporary South African artistic landscape; she investigates African and feminist issues in a manner that is fresh, free of clichés and challenging.

Wendy Lauritano-Gers is an art historian from South Africa.

TECHNICAL DETAILS:

Watson prefers soft clay and seldom uses slip between coils. Rather than place coils one on top of the other, she squashes the coil with a downward movement of her thumb on to the front edge of the previous coil, simultaneously adding and working in the new clay. (If one were to take a cross section of the coils, you would find that they had been added at a 45° angle.) This causes an overlap, which strengthens the work. Complicated forms, consisting of a base and figure/s, are made in one piece. For example, in *Ubuntu* a scaffold of dowels supported the legs, necks and arms. Once the whole form had firmed sufficiently, the dowels were removed. This ensured that there was an even flow of air through the piece during the firing process. Stainless steel bicycle spokes were used internally to reinforce the legs, taking the shrinkage of the clay into account. In *Chickenlady*, Watson decorated the surfaces with terra sigillata to achieve the correct subtlety of colour. After bisque firing a light wash of copper oxide was applied to emphasise the details. It was then fired to 1100°C in an electric kiln.