



Henry James sums it up in his letter to H.G. Wells. "It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process."

That is the way I feel when I'm in the pottery workroom with Felicity Potter and David Schlapobersky. The art we're viewing is a collection of their sculptural stoneware and porcelain platters, planting pots, vases and urns.

These are disciplined art forms which nevertheless transcend the purely functional. There's a primal sensuality to these magnificent four foot high urns. The subtly glazed surfaces incorporate modern derivatives of ancient brushwork techniques. Cobalt blue on delicate grey, almost white backgrounds. Touches of iron oxide. I can't resist the need to touch. To slide my open hand over the smooth glaze. Trace the outlines of Felicity's delicate designs with my fingers.

This year their work will be exhibited on at least eight shows. Right now

they're working on the Pretoria showing of their work in the Ernst de Jong gallery. It's pretty frenzied to get everything together. Yet on this Monday morning Felicity's tranquillity and David's down-to-earth pragmatism refuse to be hassled by me making undue demands on their time as well. The atmosphere is one of peace in their Parkview home, seemingly untroubled by circumstances that I for one would find intolerably painful to live with.

Felicity's eldest son James, then aged four, was stuck by a car in Jan Smuts Avenue 22 years ago. He lives with Felicity and David and his two brothers, loved and treasured despite his quite overwhelming disabilities. In fact, James is the wellspring of their lives. Through him, they developed the pottery. To be at home with him. To live as a family. Sharing, communicating in the way James can. Felicity has written more graphically, more tenderly about James than I can attempt to do . . .

"What is James? He is an experience deeply spiritual and at the same time

physically burdensome. His every move is there to be loved, admired and appreciated. He is a companion, but only to those who have taken the time and have had the desire to understand him and thus to get to know him. Simply straightforward and yet devious. So much hidden, yet so much expressed in so many unusual, refreshing, exciting ways. Love

FELICITY

to all who want to receive it. Shy yet uninhibited. Half man, half boy. All smiles and joy expressed. Displeasure expressed, boredom and bad temper, all things expressed. Communication at its height. Cosyness and warmth enjoyed. Affection given and received. Suffering experienced. Everything done with him and for him experienced to the full, flows inward and becomes part of him. Satisfaction is simple achieve-

The story of two special that bind them together

ment. Gratitude for small things understood. A life so full that there is no room left. House full! Overflowing in fact with goodness of life and love itself.

"Pour in to this willing open mould. Pour, pour until it overflows and we can all partake of the goodness that he in all his simplicity expresses with such ease. What does he know of world affairs, war in Africa, black or white? He is closer to God, the source of all things, than we realise. He knows as God knows the universe which He has created in all its glory. Pain, suffering and dislike are for him experience but not a part of his being. He is a ray of pure light which penetrates all things, and as the particles of dust dance in the sun's rays, so do we dance in his light, for he brings joy and peace and pure goodness and love revealed and experienced. One huge smile, eyes, mouth, cheeks and all, inside, outside. A naughtiness which is part of his sense of humour. A clownish, impish laughter. He does things to make you happy, to make you laugh.

"That's James. He's also very funny. Why do we love him so? Why do we enjoy him so much? God knows. Perhaps a little so-called madness brings us all closer to the source . . ." When I read this I can't stem the tears,

but for Felicity and David there's no sentimentality, no room for tears. Life is an exciting challenge. A challenge to achieve. To create.

"Let it be understood that it's OK to have your handicapped child at home. Nobody is born with special qualities of maturity. You can develop it. Unfortunately society has taught us to look at handicapped children in a

AND DAVID

certain way," says Felicity.

What James has catalysed in Felicity and David's life is their career as potters. Ten years ago they moved with James to Cresset House as houseparents to eight or nine adolescents. The intention was to start a pottery and eventually sell the work of the handicapped children. What they set out to do was realised in the most positive and productive way. I learn this while David is explaining how

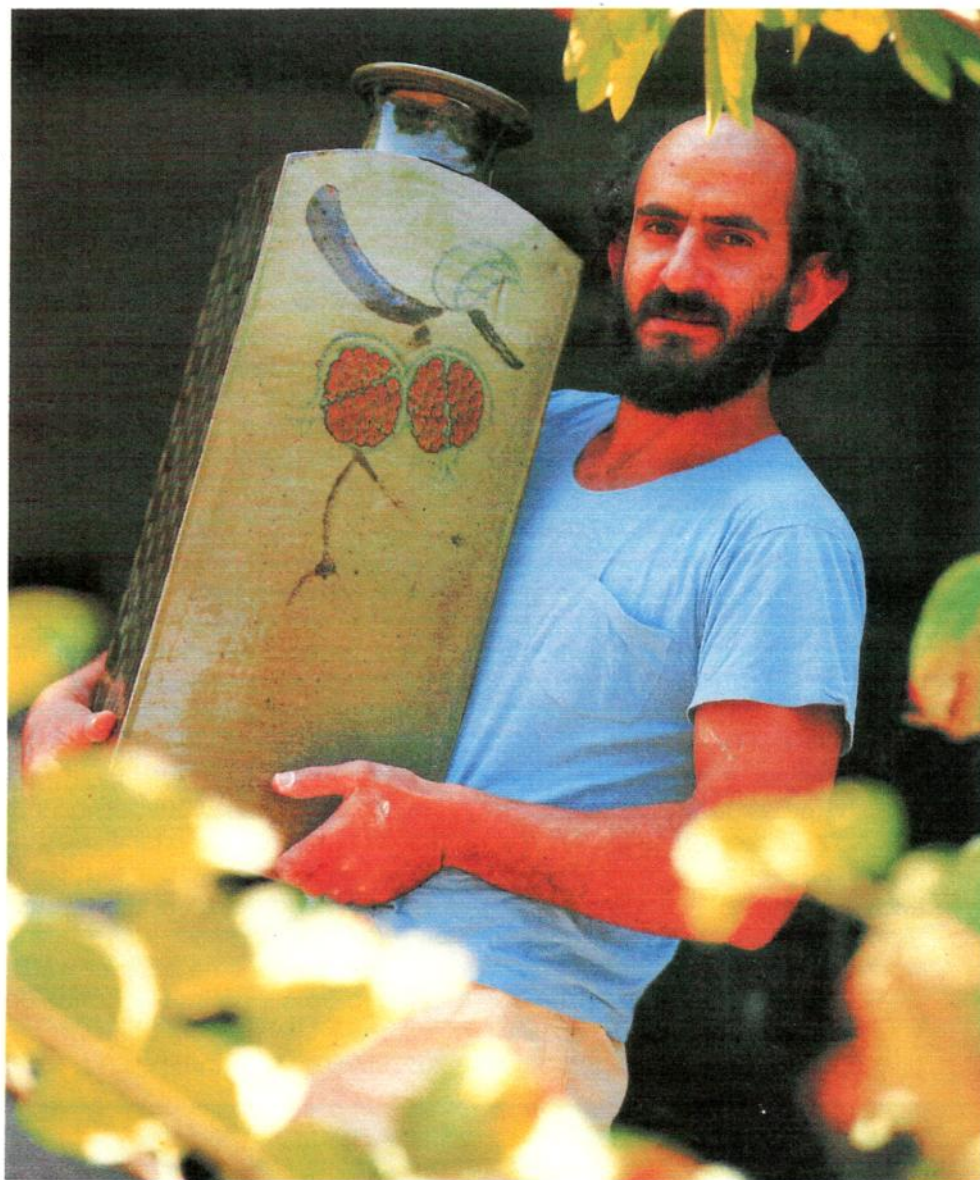
people and the things by Hellouise Truswell

they started their career.

He looks like a pre-Raphaelite painting with high exposed forehead and a mop of unruly, curly, black hair. He relaxes into a comfortable chair, lights another Van Dijk little cigar — his private addiction. He puffs away at about 20 a day.

We're sitting in the coolth on the patio, sipping excellent brewed coffee, munching away on Felicity's just-baked crunchies. The diningroom, living area and kitchen are open plan with the flow of space including the patio. Explains Felicity: "I want to be able to talk and communicate while I'm cooking which I love doing." The house has been arranged in such a way as to maximise James' ability to participate in all that's taking place. After three years at Cresset House, David and Felicity branched out on their own. The experience at Cresset "cemented what we were doing together. It was very hard and challenging. We learnt SO MUCH," they agree.

What is pottery about, I ask. Is it always the quest to throw the perfect vessel? No, no, no, says David. "It's a process of change and development. Every kiln has a perfect pot." How does one know it's perfect? "It sings to you. Every kiln load gives you



different songs. That's what fires us on. We're living on the edge . . . Especially with the big pots. We're so turned on by what we're doing."

Only Lucas — part gardener, part potter, general helper and friend — helps in the workrooms. Virtually everything is done by Felicity and David. Mixing the clay, deciding the designs, throwing the clay, decorating and glazing — all of these activities are shared experiences. Because pottery is a living thing for them both they do not go in for preconceived ideas. "It's a process of evolution," says David. "The pots evolve. The shapes evolve through talking and dreaming."

"And discussions," interjects Felicity. "If I'm building a big pot, if it's growing, I rush in to David. We discuss where we're going with it. Obviously a lot of the pots have the same look about them, if it's the right look. When we get bored with it, we change. But if you try too hard to change, it goes wrong." Creativity takes a toll. As Felicity points out: "If the pace becomes too intense and we make too many pots

we suffer burn out."

Felicity and David have an agreed pattern of working although they can easily reverse roles. While she is decorating the pottery, David will take over the housework, the fetching and carrying, caring for James. Teamwork is the ethos. Because he is quicker and more adept at it, David throws the clay on the two wheels. Felicity is responsible for choosing the colours, the design and decorating and glazes.

After creating between 150 and 200 individual pieces for a show it is almost a relief to seek out the humdrum of housework as an antidote to all the intensity. Felicity says she finds comfort in the sweeping and washing activities around the house. For David it's the same. "I go to town on the cleaning of the workshop. Everything has to be in order before I start another creative circle. It sorts your head out."

They're avid readers of books on ancient and modern pottery as a fountainhead of inspiration. When there is spare time Felicity is drawing, paint-▶▶

ing and sketching. "You can't go in cold on a Monday morning and decorate. You have to school yourself. Pottery is discipline above all else." She sits in the corner of the patio holding and stroking a blissfully happy Yorkshire terrier, Emma, on her lap. Emma, Phoebe and Agnes, all three purebred Yorkshires, have produced litters in the past. "It's been great in times of financial need," jokes Felicity. This year has been the busiest they have experienced, with the pressure of creating the vast arrays of small and large pieces for eight exhibitions. "We've extended ourselves. It's been wonderful," they agree.

Their lives together, however, go beyond just making pots. Their unwavering enthusiasm embraces many activities. David, an avid windsurfer, is now channelling his redoubtable energies into sailing. Felicity seeks expression and relaxation in playing the classical guitar. Another hobby is gardening. "It takes me away from myself."

Somewhere she finds the time to work out at the gym three times a week. "How you feel and think about yourself is very important. Basically I give Rob Egnos at Parkwood Sport

and Health credit for keeping me alive and trim."

As she points out, James is difficult to move. But this is no deterrent to her walk programme. She supports and walks with him — 10 drive lengths every day. "If I'm not busy we do 20 lengths. I can still bath him and lift him." Looking at her it's hard to believe. She is so slim, small and almost fragile looking. Her appearance is Nordic with blond hair, glowing complexion and true cornflower blue eyes. I'm interested to find out that aspects of the feminist movement appeal to her in a certain way. "There's a lot there that's always been inside myself. But I believe very strongly that one has to keep a balance. There's no point in going overboard."

More than any other interest, though, the focus is on their craft. Pottery, they both emphasise, is not a job. "It's a way of life. There is 100% emotional absorption." Preparing for a show involves working until 10 at night and over weekends for six or eight weeks at a stretch.

"When we take time off over weekends to go sailing it's the bonus on top," says David. Work can start before seven in the morning and, as he

says, "I can go on throwing until 10 at night. Time is not the issue in the making of pots."

It is, I am told, "tricky to get pots out of consistently high quality. We're highly critical of what we do. We probably overjudge ourselves."

Felicity and David have kept a low profile in the pottery world. It's only over the last two or three years that "we've pushed ahead. We've made strides in terms of output, spreading our pots around." Response to their work is excellent. They have sent consignments as far afield as Kimberley, Cape Town, Klerksdorp. "And Pretoria is a wonderful place for us."

After weeks of intense preparation for a show. David has to marshall his energies to start again. "I can't go straight into the big pots. I have to throw a few dozen mugs first. Then gradually I work up to the big things." What they try and achieve in their functional domestic work is a balance. The cup lip not too thick. Casserole lids which don't chip easily. In the process of working at this ancient craft a way of life which gives much pleasure and peace has evolved. "A way of living our lives. We're not out to achieve the ultimate

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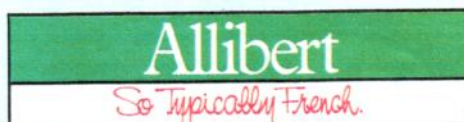
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pot or make a lot of money. It's a measure of self satisfaction." As David says rather irreverently: "It's lekker. We feel good about what we're achieving."

Way back in 1973 David was told by potter Tim Morris to settle down to the discipline of taking a 100 lumps of clay a day and throwing 100 mugs. At that stage of his apprenticeship not to undertake the big artistic ventures. It was tough going but he has not regretted the discipline he learnt. Today there is still strong emphasis on the domestic line even though he has proved himself a true artist on the more adventurous undertakings. Throwing identical mugs and plates and cups is "like practising scales. That's the discipline as opposed to free throwing."

These are the bread and butter lines. As Felicity stresses. "You have to make a living. I paint endless pictures which I keep in a cupboard. I don't sell those. Your art has to unfold, develop."

Both state that they do not have a cerebral approach to their art. "We're not intellectuals. There's no beginning and no end to what we're doing here. We're still striving to do better pots, whatever that means. It's a tremen-

dous challenge."

They're experimenting with the excitement of new glazes. Says Felicity: "It's a new type of decorating. You can use certain metal oxides in glazes which under certain conditions and certain temperatures perform in different ways. We know about this, the heat and the atmosphere in the kiln. We have certain preconceived ideas of what might happen but we're not always sure of what will in fact happen. We're not concentrating so much on the brushwork but leaving it to the glazes themselves."

Experimentation with starving the flame of oxygen has produced some exciting new effects both shiny and matt, bumpy and smooth. A lot of it is like abstract art. David agrees that it is very exciting work. "But we can't turn out hundreds of pots with these colours. It will comprise only part of our total output."

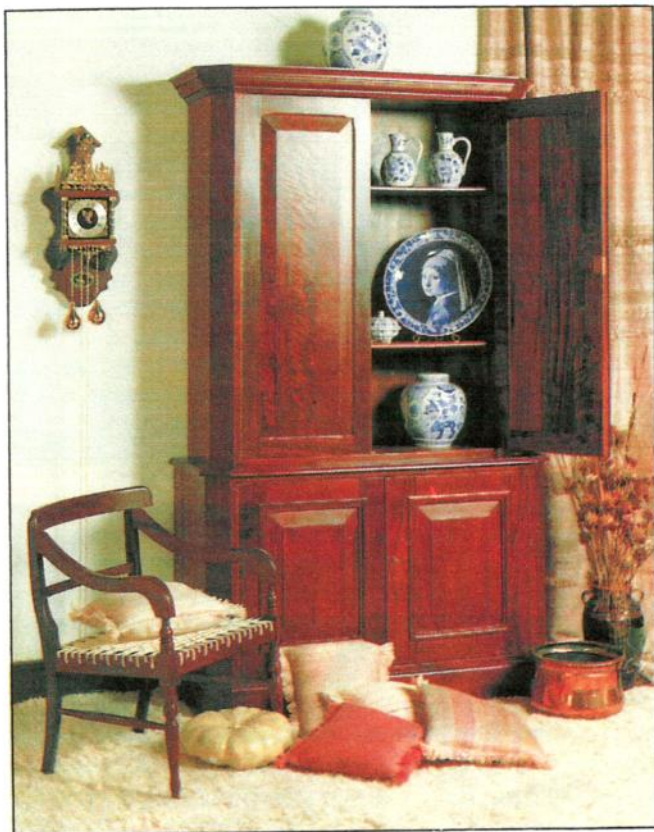
Apart from taking care of their own family, Felicity and David are involved with fostering an eight year old girl for the last eighteen months. "We wanted to take on something together from scratch. You make the time. We have her over weekends and for some school holidays. We're envelop-

ing her in our system. It is so rewarding. She's a real joy in our lives." Not surprisingly the one problem is that there is not enough time for all their interests and undertakings.

How do they feel about the way their lives have developed since their interests dovetail so well? Says Felicity: "We're happy with it. There are no limits to our lives. That's what being creative is all about. We're striving all the time. When we open the kiln there is a certain amount of fear and trepidation about what we have put into it. One experiences such relief at what comes out of it."

While we're talking, James pages through a picture book. What will happen to him in the future, I wonder. But Felicity and David have worked out a personal philosophy. Felicity explains:

"Having looked at institutions and knowing the way people think about having children like James living at home we know that for us it is important to give James all the loving care and attention in a home situation. We will not spoil the present for him by worrying about the future. We're giving him the best now. Ours is an alternative lifestyle. We're happy with it."



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