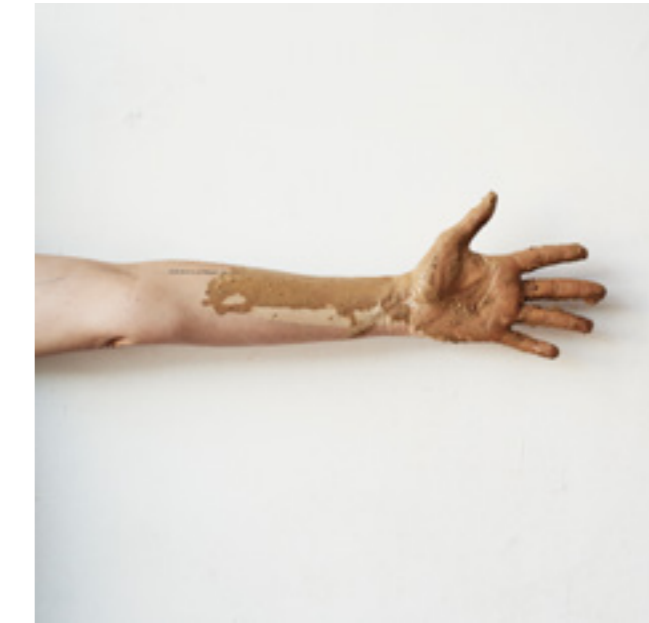


DIRTY BOOTS

BELINDA BLIGNAUT



BELINDA BLIGNAUT'S WORK IS EVOLVING. This artist marches to her own rhythm, not intent on merely producing what's expected of her and also not producing when there is no need to. The most recent work by Belinda Blignaut appears on Instagram. Although associated with a Punk aesthetic, with its resistance to the mainstream, and usually set within an urban environment, she seemingly has rejected such in favour of ceramics in the town of Somerset West in the Cape.

WITH OLD-SCHOOL PUNK PLAYING in the background we settle to talk about her new venture, which sees a fully functioning clay studio and the most recent development, the creation under her guidance of the new NPO called ARTISAFIRE.

Belinda: Would you like me to turn the music softer? It might be distracting. I still listen to this stuff from long ago.

Luan: Sure

Belinda: Sound has always been part of my work. I do not mean I am a 'Sound Artist' but that from the beginning it has been part of what I do or make. I work directly from life and there's audio attached to that. Anyway, everything vibrates. Sometimes we just need to listen.

Belinda cites her work in 1994 where she distributed posters of herself, her half-naked body bound by red tape with her name and a number blazened across it. In this work a recorded message said, "Hi, you've reached Belinda, leave a message".

Belinda: I am doing some sound recording in clay at the moment. Different parts of the making process have different sounds and it's a part of the experience I want to translate into the finished work. When recording in the earth during my digging of wild clay, if the recorder is closer to the surface, there are surface sounds such as birds, water trickling, insects. Deeper under the earth it changes. In the studio, the making of the work has sounds, preparing clay, joining, work sounds. My concept is "working from the inside" and I am literally working while standing inside the piece. It was this experience that made me want to document what I hear to translate how it feels. And it feels amazing. The most important part of the work though, is form. Although I've always made objects, this is different, it's fully engaging, an intimacy with my material which constantly teaches me.

Luan: How did you get to working in clay, ceramics of all things?

Belinda: A friend invited me to a pottery studio. It was pottery for the mass market. Not at all what I like, but the second I touched the raw clay I was in

love. I felt this is the medium I had been searching for. This is the one that can enable me to say everything I want to say. Not the glossy wares but the clay in its natural form, it just felt right. I had never done ceramics in my life but suddenly I wanted to. And did. The more I worked the more I wanted to explore this medium. The link was not conceptual or aesthetic for me, it was emotional. It came from within. I think it also draws on earlier childhood experiences that most of us share. Playing in the mud, making mud cakes and being immersed in the Earth. I liken it to a child exploring any number of ideas and shapes and feelings through working with mud. It goes back to this somehow. It is a material that can tap into the psychology of a person. The earliest makings of an individual and the larger historical context, its infractions on the psychological make-up of the person, it will all find a way of being made concrete, solidified through intense heat, in mud and in stone.

(When one sends a WhatsApp message to Belinda at a time she is not available you are greeted with the message: I am in mud).

Luan: This is not the first time you worked in 'plastics' though. You have done work in Bubblegum. Is it similar?

Belinda: Yes, I worked in Bubblegum for a number of years. I chose Bubblegum because it is a material that everybody is familiar with. Unlike bronze or marble it is in direct contact with every person. Everybody has chewed a Chappie at some stage. I also value that it has a relationship to the body, to everyone's bodies, because it has to be chewed in order for it to be malleable or enjoyed. This familiarity and association with the body both attracts and makes one uncomfortable. I like this duality. It speaks to an uncomfortable familiarity with our bodies and ourselves. We are most familiar with our own bodies, yet at the same time our bodies are the most alien thing we experience.

The act of blowing bubbles led to the masks I made. I would chew a large amount of Bubblegum then blow a bubble big enough to cover my face. It would pop and be spread all over my face thus creating a type of mask. These were the final artworks. I like the randomness of this method and





ARTISAFIRE CLAY COLLECTIVE. Collaborative pieces made by a mix of cultures in a community project run from the studio. Sculpted by adults with Alzheimers and dementia.



“Sound has always been part of my work. I do not mean I am a ‘Sound Artist’ but that from the beginning it has been part of what I do or make. I work directly from life and there’s audio attached to that. Anyway, everything vibrates. Sometimes we just need to listen.”

making something with breath keeps me fascinated with using this as a medium. To create something out of nothing. I also like its irregularities, it is easily manipulated but also unpredictable. The shape you might have achieved by moulding it does not remain, it falls back into itself again. These imperfections are exciting and always unexpected.

In this sense the clay is similar. One has to forego complete control over the outcome of any piece one makes. No two are alike and the imperfections actually contribute to the work and in my mind lend it a depth that one cannot easily achieve by using more traditional materials such as oilpaint.

Clay is also a commonly found material. There is clay literally everywhere on Earth and this accessibility appeals to me. Once I had done sufficient work in clay I felt it too good a thing to keep to

myself and wanted to share this, so I opened my studio in Somerset West.

Luan: Tell me about the studio, who does it cater for and also about the NPO you are in the process of starting.

Belinda: I wrote an Art Manifesto some years back and over time, have rewritten several versions. My main concern is that art must be useful. It has to contribute positively to society or humanity. It must be of service to people and the community. I believe clay has therapeutic capabilities. What I felt and experienced that first time I touched the clay and also subsequently, I wanted others to also experience. It has actually taken me this long to bring together my intense desire for social change and my relentless passion for art-making. Basically I have classes, but they aren’t really classes, it is more a space for people to come and sort their shit by working in mud. It is that simple.

And it had to be open to everybody. We welcome everybody. If you have the time and are willing to try it, this is the place. We also welcome specifically those with special needs like adults with Alzheimer’s and dementia, those who have forgotten, those who are forgotten, all ages with Autism and also children coming from trauma or abuse, sexual and other. We cater to those who are hearing-impaired, those who have no sight, the physically disabled, and those who need to find a way to communicate.

The idea is that we find ways to make the experience fit around each individual’s special needs. Participants are not expected to conform to any curricular format or structure. We fit around their needs and structures. They have absolute freedom as to what they make. It is very important that we do not apply pressure to produce or constraints regarding what gets produced. It is Clay as Therapy and expression. Healing. Using the earth

which has evolved over millions of years, touching, shaping, a way of knowing that everything changes. A way of coping.

We have individuals who come and we also have school groups who participate. We needed to extend this to those truly outside society. To the most needy, like the homeless and those in severe poverty. Once again through the help of a local NPO, Halli Trust, I got into contact with the informal settlement of Smartie Town at Macassar, a settlement close to Somerset West. It is from Macassar that we sourced people to come and be trained to assist in the studio. Currently we have four part time assistants whom I personally introduced to clay, trained them to be able to work in a ceramics studio and whom I will, as soon as we receive funding, employ fulltime. This will be a dream come true. It sounds like very few, only four people but the circle of lives those four support and the lives they touch is wide. It does not end with only them. One has to start somewhere.





ARTISAFIRE CLAY COLLECTIVE. Works made by various special needs groups finding a voice through clay at the studio. Sculpted by adults with Alzheimers and dementia.



"IT ALSO STEMS FROM THE IDEA of making something from the inside and working towards the outside. I am not producing pretty ceramic ware. That is not what I am trying to do here at all. I want to build a work that starts from within"

This is how our NPO started. BASA commissioned the studio to produce work done by the studio through the work we do within this underprivileged community. The work is commissioned and paid for. From this came news that the National Lottery is interested in funding more projects from us. The money raised goes straight back into creating more opportunities and to further the work within the community. There are no profits to be made from this. We are currently almost a registered NPO.

It is called ARTISAFIRE and we hope to change many more lives. It all comes back to clay, its commonality and its abilities to heal and to be a therapy unparalleled by most other. Art needs to work like this, from the inside out. Only then, to me, will it be able to be useful.

The team was formed out of a desire to learn from, teach and collaborate with people of various cultures, while at the same time being art as action. It's about art taking social change into its own hands. This is as "activist" as I know how to be right now.

Luan: Coming back to your own practice, how does this balance work?

Belinda: I work on my own from 7 to 10 a.m. every day. That is the time of day I am able to set aside for my own practice. Then from 10 onwards it is spent on Clay Therapy.

Luan: You don't produce traditional ware within your own practice. At the moment you are building this massive pot. Could you tell us more?

Belinda: It also stems from the idea of making something from the inside and working towards the outside. I am not producing pretty ceramic ware. That is not what I am trying to do here at all. I want to build a work that starts from within. It is not unlike work I have done before, be it the posters from '94 or the more recent Masks made from Bubblegum that was made pliable by my chewing. I place my body in my work, physically, if possible. My work has always been a quiet visceral investigation into how we adapt, overcome and grow. So no, I don't make vases.

Punk can be very malleable, it morphs constantly, finding a home in as diverse a place as socio-political activism on the one hand and punk culture that appears to be apolitical like psychobilly, horror punk and punk pathétique, on the other. It differs from place to place and time to time.



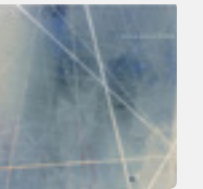
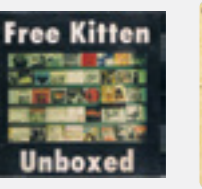
One aspect remains constant, its need to counter the mainstream. It affronts consumerism and attempts to lend a voice to the working class, the down-trodden. In this regard Belinda Blignaut's work rings true. Hers is not a purely aesthetic exercise or beautiful object only belonging in a gallery or prized collection, it strives to be active on a social level, to interact with people, to serve people and to do good. The organisation she guides hopes to lend a voice to the voiceless. In that sense it is pure Punk.

The work with clay, with the Earth, also speaks to a current Zeitgeist of Art that has a relationship to our planet, with social responsibilities.

INFO: www.facebook.com/BelindaBlignautArtist

INFO: www.facebook.com/Artisafire

INSTAGRAM: [belinda_blignaut](https://www.instagram.com/belinda_blignaut)

STUDIO HITS				
<p>SONIC YOUTH GOO</p> <p>1990 DGC</p> 	<p>LOU REED JOHN CALE SONGS FOR DRELLA</p> <p>1990 SIRE</p> 	<p>CINDYTALK UP HERE IN THE CLOUDS</p> <p>2010 EDITIONS MEGO</p> 	<p>FREE KITTEN UNBOXED</p> <p>1994 WILLJA</p> 	<p>KOOS</p> <p>1989 - issued 2008 Warren Siebrits, One F</p> 