

Essay on the work of Clementina van der Walt

by Michael Godby, Professor of History of Art, University of Cape Town (Dec. 2002)

Clementina van der Walt developed the style of ceramic tableware for which she is best known during the late 1980s. Referring generally to zoomorphic forms of African mythology, and drawing on the geometric principles of Zulu and Ndebele beadwork, African textiles, pottery and basketry, amongst other sources, this signature style of ceramics seemed to celebrate the cultural achievements of Southern Africa and anticipate the political liberation of the end of the decade. The popularity of this style of tea services and tableware allowed the artist to resign her lecturing post at the Wits Technikon, move to the Cape, and set up her own studio, initially at the Arts Foundation at Dal Josafat and later in her own home in Paarl. Early in this history, van der Walt reduced the process to decorating industrially produced blanks with overglaze enamel. This adaptation permitted, first, increased production from her own hand and, soon, the establishment of a studio where her designs were copied and developed by others. Within a few years, van der Walt was employing around ten assistants and her work was being exported all over the world. During this time of intense commercial activity, van der Walt deliberately maintained contact with the world of art by producing exhibition pieces within the tradition of ceramic vessels and, occasionally, taking part in art installation shows.

As the business grew, van der Walt moved her studio from her home into premises that could accommodate not only the production and dispatch parts of the business but also a retail outlet. Very soon she introduced other craft into this shop, particularly African urban art, and, in partnership with Albie Bailey, the studio opened an art gallery with a regular programme of art exhibitions. Obviously, all these developments tended to take her away from the actual making of ceramics, which she came to regret. But as well as providing her with a certain independence, van der Walt's experience in retail led her to a new understanding of the significance of material things. When she addressed her customers in a large quotation on the wall from William Morris, the founder of the Arts and Crafts movement, Have nothing in your homes that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful she was articulating an aesthetic principle whose rigour and economy was profoundly to affect her own work.

Although van der Walt still felt - indeed, she still feels - that her signature work, even while largely produced by assistants under her supervision, expresses something of the joy and the energy that she recognizes in African life and culture, she came increasingly to feel the need to return to making individual pieces by working directly in clay. To give form to this need, in 1993 van der Walt visited Hylton Nel in Bethulie and worked with him in his studio for two weeks. Nel is the acknowledged master of individual, even idiosyncratic tableware and ornament, and prolonged exposure to both his work and his working philosophy confirmed for van der Walt the new direction in ceramics that she was searching for. The work she made following her stay in Bethulie constituted a deliberate contrast to her factory-produced work in every aspect of ceramic style. As against the uniformity of industrial blanks, van der Walt introduced a pronounced irregularity - in the shape, the thickness and the texture of her pieces - that insistently proclaim their hand-made status. Similarly, in deliberate contrast to the flat brightness of overglaze enamel paintwork, she introduced qualities of subtlety, depth and variation in her use of glazes. And in her glaze designs, she combined the geometry of her

signature ware with organic rhythms of line, shape and tone. Significantly, at this time, van der Walt confined this thoroughgoing exploration of the medium to the format of utilitarian tableware.

A distinct source of inspiration for van der Walt's work in recent years has been a new consideration of the function of tableware. On one level, this inspiration reveals itself in her invention of new ceramic forms for new purposes, at least purposes that are new to her. Thus, at one time she produced a series of bowls and lids that she designed as receptacles for miso soup. At the same time she made ceramic spoons, chopstick holders and rice bowls. Obviously, these designs were derived in large part from oriental models, but the point is that in these works the artist was applying her skills to meet specific needs in her own life. For this range of ceramic ware was made specifically to suit the requirements of macrobiotic cooking that she practiced at this time. For the artist, this connection between utensils and food integrated her ceramic practice into her life in an important new way. Thus, although for different reasons van der Walt was not willing to maintain the strict macrobiotic regime, and she no longer uses characteristic macrobiotic pieces, she does retain from this tradition a sense of the significance of food and of eating as an essential part of one's lifestyle. It is very much her purpose in designing tableware today to create appropriate physical forms for the ritualistic, even sacralistic understanding of food in one's life. To express this new understanding of the potential of ceramics, van der Walt has designed a new notice to herself and her visitors on the wall of her studio:

For those who seek the sacred in ordinary, everyday life.

Interestingly, although it is not at all obvious in the style of her recent ceramic work, this new credo connects her work with many African traditions of embellishing domestic utensils, because they also express the commemorative dimension of domestic rituals as occasions of affirming one's place in one's community and family, both living and dead.

Clearly, this journey into the symbolic potential of ceramics and ceramic making has taken van der Walt a long way from the high-tech interests of her youth. In retrospect, her decision to leave Johannesburg for the Cape, her time at Dal Josafat, her visit to Bethulie, and her sense of a growing connection with the Karoo community of Nieu Bethesda, can all be seen as moments in a journey away from the condition of city-life, that defines itself principally by its ability to transform its environment, towards an appreciation that life may be more healthy when the environment is allowed to shape consciousness. In moving between the poles of this journey, van der Walt has had not only time to assist her but also the extraordinarily elaborate structure of her chosen medium. For ceramics not only presents its practitioners with a myriad of choices - such as vessel types, clay types, kiln types and temperatures, shapes, textures, glazes, colours, and designs - but also a seemingly infinite historical exploration of these variables, all with their rich associations and histories. To an outsider this plethora of choices might seem bewildering, but to a committed practitioner they constitute the very discipline of the medium.

The inspiration for van der Walt's work in the present exhibition derives from a number of sources - technical, aesthetic, functional and historical. Thus her desire to make candle holders has led her to explore the translucency and reflective qualities of porcelain. Again, her enjoyment of rich textures and subtle, resonant colours has encouraged her to work with majolica tin glazes on much of her tableware. And diverse needs such as the requirement for uniformity across the set of tableware, on the one hand, and a delight in experimentation, on the other, has led her to re-interpret the seventeenth-century Japanese oribe tradition that combines over and underglaze techniques in a

synthesis of organic and geometrical forms. In individual pieces, such as large dishes and bowls, van der Walt also addresses the two challenges of the medium she has chosen to work with, and the history that the particular form suggests. There is an obvious eclecticism in this practice - van der Walt's output is as prodigious as her energy - but, rather than construing this term in its negative sense of simple borrowing, as is usually the case, van der Walt's work is more usefully understood as an ongoing inquiry into the nature of her materials and the search for appropriate forms for particular individual functions. This appearance may seem busy, even intense, but the intellectual search, together with the material production, actually constitutes a profoundly contemplative activity. In van der Walt's ceramics, there is embodied an extraordinary combination of respect for materials, an admiration for history, and an appreciation, actually a celebration, of function.

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