

Excerpt from Contemporary Ceramics in South Africa

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CLEMENTINA VAN DER WALT

Clementina van der Walt is a potter who has successfully walked the tightrope over the abyss of the art versus production conflict. On the one hand, she has had to deal with commercialism and its potential artistic compromises, and on the other, with the poverty of the artist who chooses to struggle with esoteric and frequently unmarketable concepts.

She has managed this by developing two different kinds of work, namely commercial 'production line' vessels and 'contemporary' vessels. With the first she makes a living; with the second, she explores ideas. Neither commercial concerns nor artistic values are compromised, and in fact the same sensibility that guides her exploratory work with the vessel as metaphor informs the designs with which she 'clobbers' white commercial tableware. The two enterprises exist side by side; one sustains the other.

Both her commercial tableware and her expressive vessels bear her distinctive on-glazes, marks and images. Van der Walt says that she wanted to create 'charming, colourful, exciting dinnerware'. The desire to create these objects arose from her sense that pots as art tend to become remote from everyday life. 'Art' pots are inclined to be placed in elite categories of gallery work; tableware, on the other hand, provides 'all-round visual pleasure'. Because pattern and decoration are van der Walt's primary means of giving enjoyment she does not make the forms of her plates, bowls and teapots herself: these she buys ready-made, glazed and fired, from large production factories. Designs derived from West African textiles and images from Pre-Columbian art are clobbered onto the surfaces of the commercial ware to effect a startling metamorphosis from plain white to exuberant pattern.