

Masquerade

Clementina van der Walt

Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, South Africa,
December 2004 - January 2005

Exhibition Review by Wilma Cruise <http://www.uwic.ac.uk/ICRC/issue007/articles/011.htm>

Clementina van der Walt lives in St James in Cape Town. Her old Edwardian house hangs on the cliff overlooking the expanse of False Bay. Her light airy studio is within sight and sound of the sea. Van der Walt has been a significant force in ceramics in South Africa for three decades. She has been a teacher and a production potter - her line of hand-painted table ware graces many a home with its riot of colour and African motifs. She is also a gallery owner and dealer in studio ceramics; and most importantly she is a ceramic artist.

In 2003 van der Walt turned the full force of her creative attention on her own studio work. She sold her lucrative production business and largely sourced out the running of her gallery, Clementina Ceramics and The A. R. T. Gallery to her partner Albie Bailey in order to concentrate on her own work. In 2005 she was selected to exhibit at Ceramic Art London, at the Royal College of Art. As a prelude to her London debut, van der Walt showed her work at the prestigious Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town in December 2004 and January 2005. The exhibition 'Masquerade' showcased both her studio ceramics and her other more experimental sculptural pieces.

The juxtaposition of the two types of ceramics raised important issues attendant on the intersection of studio ceramics and sculpture. The juxtaposition of ceramics and sculpture suggests that old thorny conflict between art and craft. In an age of fluidity when the centre has folded (or so we're told) this categorising of the products of creative endeavour is anathema. And in many ways this sentiment is correct. Hierarchies and categories are odious. Old modernist notions such as truth to materials and adherence to utilitarian function (in ceramics) are restrictive. But, as van der Walt laments, the critical assessment of ceramics has suffered as a result. The discourse that applies to other artistic practices fails in the face of the specialist requirements of studio ceramics. As a result there is a breakdown of critical language, which having fallen off the table of analytical attention, gets swept under the carpet. At the Irma Stern Museum, van der Walt exhibited her studio ceramics separately from her other sculptural work. Platters, free form cups and bowls were displayed in a room with a sensitivity to the formal parameters of the space which, given the domestic dimensions of the Irma Stern Museum, (It was the home of the famous South African painter Irma Stern from 1927 to 1966) was entirely sympathetic to the intimate nature of the work. The pieces were not placed on the kind of painted boxes that inhabit galleries, but on lightly wrought metal and glass stands commissioned by, and made for, van der Walt. The bases showed a hand made quality without detracting from the ceramics above, which was floated on the glass, sometimes at eye level sometimes below, encouraging the viewer to look into their interiors as if one were sitting at a table about to use the objects.



Figure 1

Deep bowl, 33cm diam x 10.5 cm ht



Figure 2

Plate 18cm diam



Figure 3

Oval pod dish, 45 x 24 cm



Figure 4

Pinched cups, 8 x 7cm

Van der Walt's platters, bowls and cups serve as objects both for use and for contemplation. Ceramic objects are intimate ones that enter our space. They are touched by hand and lip as well as eye and mind. They underscore the ritualistic understanding of ordinary daily activities. As such they are understood (and critically assessed) in terms of their own definition. A central theme in this discourse is tactility. A repulsive surface, rough and harsh, repels. So too does heaviness, an aspect that contradictorily can be assessed with the eye. Van der Walt's ceramics do not fail in this respect. They seduce with the invitation to touch their buttery surfaces inflected here and there with a splash of red, the colour of ox blood. Textures are played off each other, the smooth gloss interior of a plate where the food is to rest is set against the matt surface of the rim - sufficiently rough to speak of baked earth but not coarse enough to repel the hand. Van der Walt demonstrates her mastery of the medium. Her forms are free formed but unforced. They are lyrical and light. They make reference to the African cultural and physical landscape in the play of colour - a dark brown of wet earth against the ochre of burnt veldt; the khaki of grass against the white of cloud, and always the grace note of that wonderful ox blood red. Occasionally an African motif appears transmogrified into her personal decorative language.

The second group of experimental works is shown in another room. Here, ceramic masks hang on the wall. Marching down the centre of the room, on a red-lacquered Chinese table are 'vases' which have been created by placing two masks back to back, thereby forming free standing Janus-like heads. The masks hang on the four walls at regular intervals. They act as drum beats of colour against the surface of the museum walls that are painted a

harmonious earth colour. The Chinese table echoes van der Walt's leitmotif red. **(Fig.5)** Like the studio ceramics across the foyer these works provide the viewer with a sensual experience in their play of colour and texture. The masks reference African ones- and indeed some them have been cast from Punu masks. Yet others are cast from faces of people van der Walt knows and then subtly altered. As Professor Sandra Klopper noted in the Invitation to 'Masquerade':

(the) masks reveal (an)other world of feeling and experience ... by the eerie impassivity of their features ... they are also strangely and unnervingly silent - at once present but absent ... these faces are curiously unsettling, for although at one level they seem to record particular individuals, there is often a haunting distance between the image and the person.



Figure 5

View of exhibition



Figure 6

Face mask 1



Figure 7

Face mask 2



Figure 8

Face mask 3

The exhibition of the masks presents as an installation - and why not? But on a careful second reading there is something missing and perhaps it is here on the interface of studio ceramics with installation art that fault lines begin to show - if only in the merest hint. Van der Walt has translated the mask into the language of studio ceramics in which colour and

the quality of the surface are paramount. However, the masks do not sufficiently interrogate their source in African culture nor do they achieve enough ironic distance in order for the artist to place these works into the larger arena of art discourse. It is perhaps in the Janus-like mask/vases that the greatest divergence between modes of seeing occurs. **(Fig.9)** These are not vases in the sense that they are used to hold flowers. The objects reference vases in their accessible interior space but they do not require flowers to complete them. But, if they are not vases should they then function as sculpture? Asking this question requires a shift of focus, a blink of the eye and one has moved into another area of critical dissection where questions of tactility, utility and colour become less important than form, inflexion of space and content.



Figure 9

One side of 'White Head Vase'

As a general principle the difference between vessels and sculpture is that vessels define and displace interior space while sculpture inflects exterior space. In this respect vessels have more in common with architecture than they do with sculpture. Thus while the Janus vases satisfy the criteria of tactility and colour they hover undecidedly over the question of the role of their interior space. They refer to container but do not address the issue critically or satirically as would for example a 'contemporary vessel'. But van der Walt is that rare creature, a thinking ceramist - she is prepared to debate these issues particularly the place of ceramics in the arena of contemporary art. She observes that the only ceramic works to make the cut at the prestigious South African Art Competition, the Brett Kebble Art Awards in 2004, were those that used repetitions of the same form. In her opinion this use of the multiple served the only purpose of enlarging the ceramic submissions so that they could compete visually and spatially with other works. At the BKAA the multiple served the metaphorical purpose of a shout, 'Here I am - take notice!' As she notes, the multiple is used in ceramics as a system of production as for example and most obviously in the manufacture of plates and cups; in 'fine' art, it has a different aetiology, one of a critical statement on the manufacturing process itself. Yet it was clear that the ceramists at the BKAA had not explored this irony. This is only one of the areas between ceramic and art discourses, which

could fruitfully be explored, but only if the divergence of artistic practice and ways of seeing is acknowledged in the first place.

Living on the southern tip of the African continent means that the African way is often evoked and idealised. A favourite riposte in the debate over art and utilitarian craft forms is to fall back on the argument that art in Africa was never divorced from practical and ritual practices in traditional societies. 'It is all art', so the argument goes. However, this point tends to idealise 'traditional' African society and entirely discounts the fact that much African art nowadays is made for collector and tourist markets. It also assumes that the only discourse surrounding ceramics is that of utility. This argument is intended to foreclose further debate, which contradictorily needs to be broken wide open if ceramics is not to fall beneath the radar of critical attention. Van der Walt's mask/vases pose questions that do not arise in relation to her studio ceramics, which are more comfortably positioned in ceramic practice. But when studio ceramics enters the art market in the collector's domain - and clearly this is where van der Walt's ceramics are positioned - it behoves us to interrogate the interface between contemporary ceramics and contemporary art, however unfashionable this cross-examination might be. Van der Walt's experimental work is located on the boundary of ceramic and sculptural discourses. It raises issues of just how we see and assess ceramics. Her superlative exhibition brings into question debates that we are generally more comfortable in ignoring.