

AFRICA AND THE WEST:
A CONTESTED DIALOGUE IN
MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY
CERAMICS

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PhD

2014

AFRICA AND THE WEST:
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of
the requirements of the University of
Brighton for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

April 2014

The University of Brighton

Abstract

This practice-led research in the field of handmade ceramics explores what Africa means and how it is represented in ceramic practice. This is addressed through two research questions. The first is how can ceramics be used to picture, interpret and understand contemporary Africa? The second is what does 'Africa' or 'African-ness' mean in modern and contemporary ceramic practice set in various contexts, institutional and otherwise? The two questions address the construction and representation of African-ness respectively. There are many different grounds for understanding African-ness which are explored in detail.

The critical approach is drawn from postcolonial theory and covers ceramic practice from mid-century to the present in South Africa, Nigeria and the United Kingdom. The research was conducted by a ceramist with other makers in mind. A number of detailed examples or case studies are explored in writing, making and displaying ceramics. This includes the researcher's own ceramic practice which functions as both a case study and an investigation in itself. As an investigation, the theme of clay-as-skin was tested as an example of an appropriate metaphor for expressing ideas about African-ness using ceramics. The practice extends and has a reiterative relationship to the written work.

The outcome of the research is the observation of a general shift from a negative or simplified perception to a more positive and complex view of this heterogenous and multi-faceted area of creative expression. Hybridity, multiplicity, historical reference and anthropomorphism were commonly found in contemporary African ceramics, particularly at intersections of Africa and the West.

The research contributes a better understanding of changes to the representation and understanding of African-ness. This was achieved through the critical discussion of an original combination of literature, exhibitions and displays of ceramics, ceramic objects and the identities of ceramists. While this research offers many examples, including the researcher's own practice, there are still not enough examples and different perspectives available.

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Notes on Style and Formatting

Pronoun usage:

Due to the self-reflective nature of the fourth chapter, which focuses on my own practice, I have adopted the voice of the first person in the text.

Non-English language usage:

'isiZulu' refers to the language spoken by the Zulu people. Linguistically it is part of the Nguni group of languages. It is an official language spoken and understood widely in South Africa.

'Zulu' refers to the cultural and linguistic group that usually speaks isiZulu and may have some shared cultural practices. Some acknowledge the Zulu monarch, King Goodwill Zwelethini, as their traditional leader.

isiZulu words are translated by Kim Bagley unless otherwise stated. Translations appear in the text immediately after the word in [square] brackets. For culturally specific terms that have no equivalent in English, an explanation is provided in-text or foot-noted where appropriate.

Where non-English words are used corresponding plural forms are taken from the rules of that language. For example: in isiZulu normal usage: where the singular prefix is *u-* or *isi-*, the corresponding plural form is usually *izi-* and where the singular form is *i-* the corresponding plural form is usually *ama-*.

Order of names:

All names follow the English convention of first name followed by family name.

Illustrations:

All photographic illustrations were taken by the author unless otherwise stated.

This document contains several types of illustrations which are captioned as follows:

- Images that record materials tests or work in progress in the studio. Captions for these images begin - 'Materials Test:' or 'Work in Progress:' followed by a description relevant to the text.
- Other images that are not of individual artworks. These are captioned with a description, location, photo credit and date.
- Images of complete artworks by myself or others are captioned with the standard format or as requested by the owner of the image or object: Artist, Date, Title, Medium, dimensions, collection, photo credit, photo date. Where these details are omitted, they were unavailable.

Preface

The first time I walked into the ceramics studio at the University for the Creative Arts in Farnham, I came across a pair of pots by esteemed Nigerian ceramist Ladi Kwali in a showcase next to the technicians' office. This was an unexpected yet fitting introduction to the institution's ceramics department, which helped to affirm some initial thoughts about the quiet but deep influence of African makers and their objects on British studio ceramics. These thin-walled earthenware vessels made in Farnham, by Kwali, from local clay, in many ways epitomised what had drawn me to this research and they have stayed in my mind throughout the process. In a sense these pots embody the potential for cross-fertilisation through the movement of makers, ideas, techniques and forms between Africa and the West. Examples like this set the foundation for this project, which contests a simple and straight forward division between Africa and the West in ceramics. To me, these pots, in this location, represent a deep rooted fascination with, and enthusiasm for, African ceramics by people associated with British studio ceramics. African makers have significant profiles within this world, blurring the boundary between the West and Africa.

During September 2013, these two vessels were exhibited as part of *Studies in Form and Substance*, an exhibition of objects drawn from the University for the Creative Arts ceramic and textile teaching collections, at the Crafts Study Centre in Farnham. They were demonstration pieces made by Kwali during her time on tour in the United Kingdom with Michael Cardew (1963) at the then Farnham School of Art. A shallow dish (1984) by Siddig El Nigoumi (1931-1996), a technician and part time tutor originally from Sudan who also worked at Farnham, accompanies Kwali's pots in the same exhibition. According to the Victoria and Albert Museum's biographical record, Nigoumi popularised the use of African techniques in British ceramics. Also featured in the exhibition are textiles from Mali, Ghana and Nigeria. The strong presence of African objects as teaching aids, showing evidence of teaching and demonstrating, confirms the relevance of this research as a timely contribution to an understanding of both British and African ceramics. These works testify to the long history of reciprocal influence between African objects and makers, and British art education. There is an even deeper element of reciprocity in both

teaching and learning too, as several prominent African makers discussed in this thesis were trained in British art schools.

Downstairs in the Crafts Study Centre, the exhibition *Making connections* (August - December 2013) overlapped with *Studies in Form and Substance*. *Making Connections* points out the subtle connections between makers of modern British studio craft primarily through objects drawn from the Centre's excellent collection of twentieth century pieces. Many of the pieces in the show were made by well-known and influential figures in British studio crafts. The exhibition presents some interesting connections between objects by prominent makers. A burnished vessel by Magdalene Odundo, current Professor of Ceramics, is a proud and upright form. Its curved neck gestures purposefully to one side. It is an object that shares the austere and highly crafted values of British studio ceramics, reminiscent in its bold simplicity of work by postwar masters such as Hans Coper and Lucie Rie. However the vessel also reflects multifarious international influences and the highly personal visual language of its maker, an African-born woman based in the United Kingdom.

In the same exhibition, a large earthenware platter made in Dorset by Jonathan Garratt sits inside the same case as a stoneware stool by Michael Cardew made in Abuja (now known as Suleja). The confidence with which they were made is visible in these large pieces. The makers have borrowed decorations and form from African objects made in other materials, namely wood, calabash and textiles. In this pairing they suggest to the viewer the influence of Africa and Africans on modern studio ceramics in the United Kingdom, and of intergenerational continuities between British ceramists.

I approached this research as an artist and an African. The research and self-reflective practice is influenced by my own experiences. I was acutely aware of my white, middle class, English-speaking, urban South African background. My formative education in ceramics, in South Africa, featured elements associated with African, European and Asian traditions and approaches. These included using ratios known as Seger formulae for glaze calculations developed by Hermann Seger in Germany, learning the necessary skills to make slip-trailed earthenware in the English style, learning about *Mingei* aesthetics, while

simultaneously studying Zulu beer ceramics. These elements were sometimes held in contrast to one another, but they were more often intertwined.

The overlaps and interactions between African and British traditions in ceramics together with my own mixed African and Western heritage have led me to this research which explores 'African-ness' in ceramics. A finite definition of 'African-ness' or indeed what is considered 'Western' is fraught with intellectual risk, and in its totality, is impossible. Therefore, comprehensively defining these two areas, even for the field of ceramics, is beyond the remit of this work. Instead, I intend to show how these two definitions, 'African' and 'Western', are muddled and indistinguishable by focussing on notions of 'African-ness' that are on the borders. They are in this blurred territory to begin with.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the late Juliet Armstrong, Jonathan Garratt, Michael O'Brien, Lawson Oyekan and Lowery Stokes Sims for their interviews or studio visits. I am grateful to Tony Bukenya, Ian Calder, Wendy Gers, Kibudde Ronald Mpindi, John Steele and Nicolene Swanepoel for correspondence and images; to Luisa Cacciotti and Hannah Facey for images. Jenny Stretton has enabled my access to ceramics at the Durban Art Gallery. Gail de Klerk has given details on the Corobrik collection. Thanks are due to Stephen Knott for his close critical reading, proof-reading and advice on structuring the written work.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the following people at the University for the Creative Arts (UCA): Jean Vacher, archivist at the Crafts Study Centre for facilitating access to the Michael Cardew Archive; technicians in ceramics and glass for their efficient practical help; teaching staff for their advice in the studio; postgraduate colleagues for their fair critique; Beytan Erkmen and David Summerill for photography.

The research office are acknowledged for their tireless work to support research students, and Professor George Barber for his enthusiastic support. The research student community at UCA Farnham has been a source of friendship, support and debate. Thank you to my patient and supportive supervisors, Magdalene Odundo and Simon Olding.

This degree was funded through the award of an Emma Smith Overseas Scholarship. A research visit to the Museum of Arts and Design was enabled through UCA's Student Support Fund.

I could not have done this work without my supportive partner, family and friends in the United Kingdom and South Africa.

Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Signed

Dated 17 December 2014

Introduction

This thesis addresses the problematic issue, 'what does Africa¹ mean and how is it represented in ceramic practice?' This research is a practice-led project which foregrounds making and studying ceramics in the context of their production, sale and exhibition. It has been conducted by a ceramics practitioner and the primary audience is composed of practitioners working in craft media, and in particular, ceramics. This issue of meaning, when phrased as a question, is problematic to answer, or at least, it may elicit many answers depending on different viewpoints and definitions of Africa. This is because the way Africa has been interpreted, represented and defined is varied and complex, even when limited to the relatively small field of handmade ceramics and its interactions with the West², the focus of this research project. The central concern of this research, the issue above, has been separated into two questions that cover the representation and construction of 'African-ness' in ceramics.

The first question is: how can ceramics be used to picture, interpret and understand contemporary Africa? This question is about constructing African-ness. It focusses on making ceramics, and it is answered by asking myself and other artists how and why ceramics are made and what this can tell us about Africa and African-ness. The aim is not to give Africa a fixed definition through the analysis and production of ceramic work, but rather to explore multiple meanings, possibilities and inflections to give an updated sense of the diversity of work from and about the African continent. The second question is what does 'Africa' or 'African-ness' mean in modern and contemporary ceramic practice set in various contexts, institutional and otherwise? This question is about representation. It is about meaning and significance. This includes assessing the public and private display of ceramics, and how ceramics made in Africa, or by Africans, is defined and valued in Africa and the West. These two questions are explored and answered through both this written thesis, as a discussion and

¹ Africa in this research refers to the entire geographic continent and its islands and includes North Africa which is frequently excluded from discourse.

² Though some may find this term to be too generalising, I have found no better alternative. It is generally taken to mean Western European nations, such as the UK and France, and often includes the USA.

analysis of range of writing, exhibitions, museum displays, ceramic works and makers, and through my own accompanying creative practice and written reflection on it. With these two questions there are two threads that run through the thesis which are closely related and sometimes overlap, but are not identical.

There are many possible ways to approach understanding 'Africa' and 'African-ness'. Current dictionaries³, for example, define 'Africa' by physical position and boundaries, the geographic landmass, the continent. Whilst definitions of 'African', from the same publisher suggest a more complex, inflected interpretation. According to Oxford Dictionaries, the noun is 'A person from Africa, especially a black person' or 'a person of African descent', the adjective is 'relating to Africa or people of African descent'. In Collins dictionaries the noun is 'a native, inhabitant, or a citizen of any of the countries of Africa' or 'a member or descendant of any of the peoples of Africa, esp [sic] a black person.'⁴ Collins' adjective is 'denoting or relating to Africa or any of its peoples, languages, nations, etc'.⁵ These definitions are broad, and indicate that race, heritage, location, nationality, history and style are some of the many ways to explore and attempt a working definition for a quality of African-ness. This research applies some of these grounds for understanding African-ness to the field of ceramics. They are African-ness by location, heritage, birth, inspiration (or sourcing) and style. Race and ethnicity are considered too, as is hybridity, in line with the postcolonial theory that underpins the research.

This research shows how significant museum reforms, progressive art shows, shifts in critical writing and education have altered the way that Africa has been represented through ceramics, particularly since the end of the modern colonisation⁶ of Africa by Western nations (mostly from the late 19th and

³ Oxford Dictionaries Online [at] www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/africa and Collins [at] www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/africa

⁴ www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/african

⁵ www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/african

⁶ Nigeria was independent from 1960, South Africa was made a union in 1910 after European colonial rule over most of its land from 1652, and Apartheid was dismantled in 1994. Most African states colonised by Western countries gained independence between the 1950s to the 1980s.

through most of the 20th century). Since then, many of the stereotypically negative or exotic representations of Africa that had taken hold in the West have been updated, although, as will be discussed in chapters 1 and 2, some problems remain.

Various terms for ceramic objects and their makers are used in this thesis. The descriptors in the title of the research are (uncapitalised) 'modern and contemporary' ceramics. These are principally temporal descriptors used to indicate that the research covers or refers to ceramics made from the mid-twentieth century to the present. As far as is accurate or practical, terms used in this thesis are meant to be understood literally. However, as Glenn Adamson says, in *The Invention of Craft*: 'There is no way of talking about modern craft that is neutral' (2013: xxiv). Adamson is referring to the constructed nature of the activity, genre and movement known as modern craft. This in itself is a subject for another thesis, so for the purposes of this research, this lack of neutrality is acknowledged but not explored in detail. The solution is to use a few terms and acknowledge that while I try to use them as neutrally as possible, outside of this thesis, they are not necessarily understood that way.

The term 'ceramics' is used rather than pottery. This is because 'pottery' implies form whilst 'ceramics' implies the material. 'Ceramics' therefore encompasses a broader range of objects. A single term also helps to avoid one term appearing higher up in a hierarchy of value. The term pottery is used where there is a specific reference to pots or vessel forms exclusively or when referring to a source that specifies that term. In line with the theoretical approach outlined later in this introduction, it is not presumed to indicate an object of lower status. Likewise, the term 'ceramist' describes a person who makes ceramics in this thesis. The word potter can often be used instead, but ceramist is intended to be a broader, material-specific, neutral term, though it is not without its own origin and history of use.

For clarity of meaning, it is often necessary to use the term 'studio ceramics' to specify consciously non-industrial ceramics. A broad definition of a studio ceramist is one who both designs and makes the work alone or in a small group on a relatively small scale (Watson, 1994:12). This differentiates studio

ceramics from industrial ceramics, ceramic design, ceramics for building or functional industrial purposes. Most objects in this thesis can be described as studio ceramics, part of studio craft, by this definition. This term also has its own history. 'Studio pottery,' which then became 'studio ceramics' as work diversified and attitudes changed, is commonly used to refer to a creative movement with an associated group of makers (including Hans Coper and Michael Cardew), literature, conventions, detractors and history. Oliver Watson (1994: 12) wrote that this movement has grown and diversified over time. It emerged from the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century, emphasising individual craftsmanship and artistic expression and in opposition to industrial production. In this thesis it is mainly used to denote the small-scale designer-maker, but where relevant, reference to the movement is made with awareness of the history of studio ceramics/pottery. Adamson (2013: xvi) argues that the opposition between craft and industry is geographically Western and goes on to say that 'it became a means of dividing the globe into contrasting productive spheres. Craft was a crucial prop in the theatre of imperialism.' (2013: xvi). This is particularly pertinent to this research in the sense that African ceramics, that can be fitted into the 'studio craft' category presents the kind of Africa-West hybridity that this research is fundamentally concerned with. Much of the ceramics made in Africa and discussed in this research can confidently be called 'studio ceramics' by Watson's definition and historiography.

For the purposes of this research 'African ceramics' refers to ceramics from the continent or made by Africans, both historic and more recent, and can include rural and urban work, and studio ceramics/pottery. The descriptor, Africa, is used primarily to indicate where the work was made or to differentiate it from work made elsewhere. It does not necessarily indicate anything about how it was made or what it looks like. In this research it is mainly to differentiate it from British ceramics.

The tools that writers have tended to use to address these issues of representation, particularly in the disciplines of cultural and literary studies, include feminist and postcolonial theory. This expansive and heterogenous body of texts, mostly written in the wake of Western colonialism, point out the

unequal power relations between Western Imperialists and their subjects, often drawing attention to lasting patriarchal structures that continue to affect how people see themselves, their communities and other people. The notion of speaking for someone or telling their history from a privileged position of power is a central problem identified within this area of theory. Another important legacy of postcolonial theory is acknowledging hybridity, multiplicity and interdependence. These key approaches, which are relevant to how Africa has been represented, have been written by Homi K. Bhabha (1994), Stuart Hall (1992, 2001) and Edward Said (1978, 1993). This research is not a critical analysis of these texts or a postcolonial critique of ceramics. Rather, the ideas in these writings concerning power relations and hybridity provide intellectual context for exploring the representation and construction of African-ness in ceramics. For the benefit of the intended audience, ceramics practitioners, this research focuses on its practical application for the ceramist expressing ideas through clay (and for those interested in ceramics as a creative medium). In an effort to counteract simplistic and stereotypical representations of Africa and demonstrate an awareness of the power relations at play, my approach to making ceramics for this research involves drawing from firsthand experience as a white South African, with self-awareness. This also means that this research adds another voice to the multiple voices that speak about the continent and its cultures. Moreover, while a working definition of African-ness is offered in the conclusion, I address the question of what Africa means by creating works that explore and open up the question rather than comprehensively answering it because claiming to completely understand the meaning of whole continent would be to speak for others.

Because Said and the scholars who followed on from him were predominantly scholars of literature, it is logical to seek out subsequent practical examples in the field of creative writing, where they are long established. An example making use of first hand experience to speak about Africa in the field of creative writing is Pius Adesanmi. Adesanmi has contributed to the field by offering an informed, autobiographical, human-centred perspective on Africa. In his collection of essays and short stories, *You're not a Country, Africa* (2011), Adesanmi shows how his experience of growing up as a child in rural Nigeria has formed his adult identity as an African scholar and intellectual. In a story

called *Oju L'Oro Wa!* Adesanmi describes a simple incident in a bank in Canada where a caucasian woman insists on speaking to a bank teller face to face rather than using internet banking. Adesanmi recounts this moment to introduce a discussion of the relationship between communication and technology in Nigeria:

She spoke English. I heard Yoruba. She said: I prefer to see your face. I heard: *Oju l'oro wa* (The face is the abode of discourse). Unknown to everyone in that banking hall, an entire ideoscape of cultural significations had jumped into the elderly woman's conversation with the teller and I was processing it in situ. (2011: 100)

Although living in Canada at the time, the idioms, experiences and language of his birthplace influence how he sees the world. Like Adesanmi I will draw on my own experience of Africa to make informed political and social comments. Through anecdotes like this one, Adesanmi claimed the power of representing himself and his own community through writing. Works like Adesanmi's and, potentially, my own, engage in the production of positive and empowering identities by placing one's own experience at the centre.

I aim to participate in the debate about 'African-ness' in a similar fashion in my work, *Exterminations Tents* (see figure 1 and chapter 4), the main series of ceramics produced as part of this research. The contribution to knowledge lies in presenting this original creative work in combination with the detailed critical context in the written part and through making my making processes explicit. The idea for the form of these pieces comes from the practice of covering houses with tarpaulin tents during fumigation which draws directly from my experience of growing up in the suburbs of Durban, South Africa. In Durban this is a common fumigation technique that I have observed in my own community. These ceramic tents are meant as metaphors. In the work I aim to move beyond limitations of constructed stereotypes and generalisations pointed out as unhelpful and problematic by theorists such as Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). Stereotypes tend to remove the subtle, 'human' elements from representation. Owing largely to the work of Said, alternatives to this problematic history of representation are now being offered.

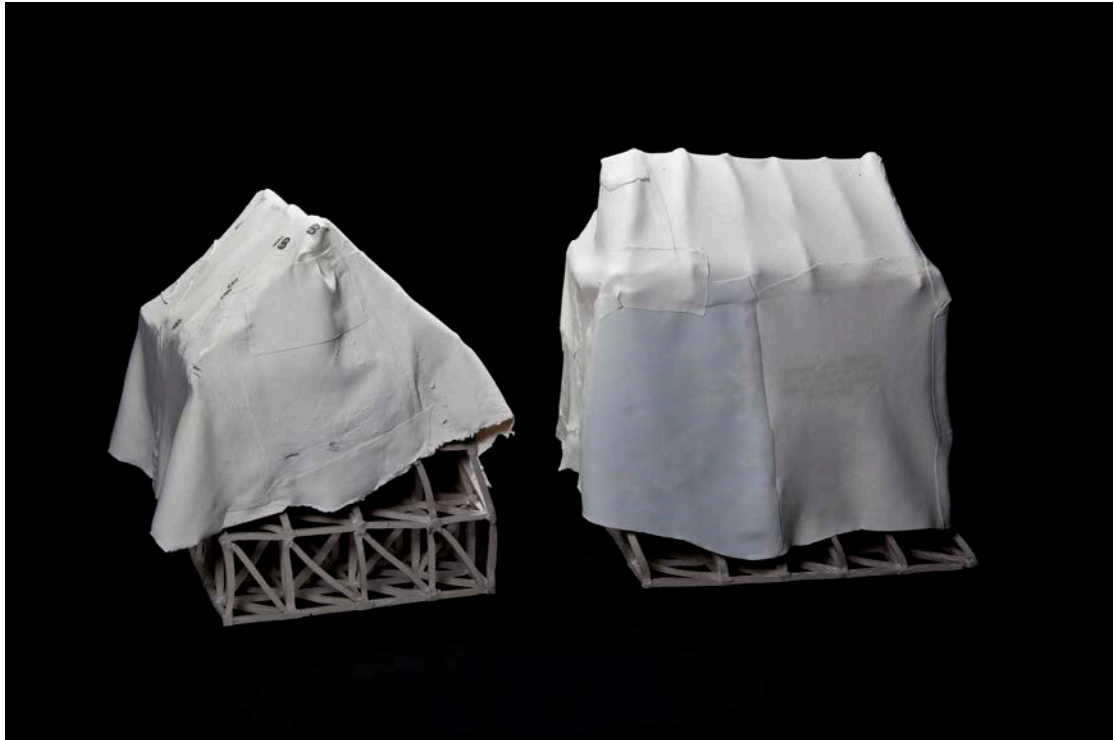


Figure 1: Bagley, K. 2012-2013. Studio photograph of two pieces from the Extermination Tents series. Paper porcelain with screen-printed iron oxide, stoneware. Photo: David Summerill, 2013.

Said's text is a good theoretical anchor for this research. After publishing *Orientalism*, Said 'invigorated' studies that foregrounded non-European discourses in many geographic locations, including areas of Africa (Said, 1995: 340). Said himself recounts that a body of scholarly work after *Orientalism* tended, especially at first, to focus on similar models of power and dominance to revise histories and cultural narratives:

Re-thinking and re-formulating experiences that had once been based on the geographical separation of peoples and cultures is at the heart of a whole spate of scholarly and critical works (1995: 353).

In practice, this has led to multiple revisions to existing historical accounts. Notably, *Visual Century*⁷, an extensive four volume text that covers 100 years of South African Art History as told by 38 different art historians. In writings, or re-writings, such as these, critics, theorists and scholars have sought to be more inclusive, presenting multiple perspectives and including the experiences of marginalised artists and those using marginalised materials such as clay, wood or glass beads. In *Visual Century* this means including perspectives of

⁷ Series initiated and edited by Gavin Jantjes, Mario Pissarra and Lize van Robbroeck, published in 2011.

both black and white artists and historians, and incorporating oral histories such as in Nessa Leibhammer and Vonani Billa's chapter (2011: 68-91) in Volume 1 (1907-1948) which is a community's own perspective on its early twentieth century art objects in Elim, Limpopo in South Africa.

A very good example of these revisions in clay are Zulu ceramics ⁸ which are covered in chapter 1 of this thesis. In the museum and gallery world, this re-interpretation prompted changes to official policies for collecting objects, changing the names of departments, rearranging objects, and a new focus on providing adequate information about works on display. These issues are the focus of chapter 2.

The relationship between ceramics, contemporary visual arts, and representations of Africa is central to this research. The written element of the thesis involves a critical-historical approach where I examine exhibitions and museum displays together with the work and perspectives of a selection of contemporary ceramists (chapter 3). They are used as a lens through which to observe the notion of 'African-ness'. The selected groups of exhibitions, displays, and individual artists have been chosen because they demonstrate a cross-fertilisation between Africa and the West that challenges colonial traditions of representing Africa. For example the British Museum is a Western institution that houses a large collection of ceramics from Africa and work produced by Africans, but it also includes works by Africans who worked directly with Western studio ceramists as students, teachers or demonstrators, or side by side. This historic and continuing connection between African makers and the traditions of studio ceramics in Britain demonstrates a complicated power dynamic between Africa and the West in ceramics.

The visual, material, ceramic practice element of the research is closely related to this critical-historical written work. The ceramic practice is a supplementary investigation in itself and a case study that forms part of the written text. It can

⁸ What is here called Zulu beer pottery or ceramics refers to a style of low-fired and usually burnished ceramic vessels associated with brewing, storage and consumption of *utshwala* or sorghum beer, an alcoholic beverage and nutritious drink enjoyed daily and for celebrating happy occasions and venerating the ancestors (Armstrong 2008: 414). They are associated with isiZulu speaking people living in South Africa.

be likened the artists and their work discussed in chapter 3, but offers more detail and reflection on the making process, which is a system of signification in itself, as well as a visual interpretation and reflection on some of the theoretical issues covered in the first 3 chapters. For this ceramic practice, the central metaphor in the research is clay-as-skin. This metaphor has been used to create a body of work in which I explore personal narratives and in doing so suggest ways that clay can be used to represent and reconfigure how Africa and 'African-ness' are perceived and understood.

Focusing on skin as the main theme and metaphor might immediately suggest racial difference, probably the most obvious problematic area for colonial and postcolonial African-Western relations. However, the notion of skin when interpreted more broadly can be used to signify other more subtle and philosophical issues that provide insight into African identities and representation, and the notion of representation itself: suggesting an edge, a margin, a protective layer or even a suffocating layer. Skin is also visual and tactile, like ceramics. These connotations make this metaphor relevant to exploring the construction, and representation of African-ness in this particular medium. This was to some extent a supposition made at the beginning of the research which is what makes producing these ceramics not just a case study to observe, but an investigation or test case in itself. The aim was that this metaphoric and symbolic idea can also be used as a starting point to explore ways of understanding and commenting on issues relevant to Africans, that is offering examples of constructing African-ness. Working with this metaphor and its symbolic potential while simultaneously producing the written investigation of how Africa has been represented in museums, galleries and by other artists makes for research that operates on many levels of meaning, offering material, symbolic, philosophical and metaphoric angles to the topic of constructing and representing African-ness.

Deciding to use the skin theme was the result of finding one theme that worked literally or symbolically with many aspects of the research project: the concepts of construction and representation, existing notions or expressions of African-ness, the medium ceramics and postcolonial theory. This enabled me to use the theme to acknowledge, relate to and build on past expressions or

representations of African identities and offered the possibility to subvert or offer some new interpretations. This makes the ceramic practice (materials, ideas, forms, techniques) an integral part of the research methods.

These metaphorical interpretations of skin formed a basis for my ceramic work which is based on three motifs with personal resonance and direct relevance to the place where I grew up in South Africa. The first is Nguni cattle in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, which are famous for their beautiful and varied hides. I then move on to the commercial practice of marking cattle with ear tags. The final motif is from the practice of using large tarpaulins to entirely cover suburban houses in the city of Durban during fumigation for wood boring insects. The extermination tents, the most abstract skin metaphor, were most fully developed as a series, and form the main installation of the exhibition which accompanies this text. This new work must be considered within the context of the way in which 'African-ness' has been portrayed and constructed in the past.

Images of Africa in the West

The ceramics-specific literature is reviewed in chapter 1, but first it is useful to situate the research, including the creative practice, within the broader field of images or representations of Africa in the West. To do this I draw on examples from literature, creative writing, ethnography and a popular museum show which allow me to show how I have approached this practice-based research and how it relates to postcolonial theory. I introduce, and put into context, the key themes and concerns that are explored through more detailed examples in the following chapters.

Representation in the context of this research, is a term drawn from cultural studies. Stuart Hall's simplest definition for this complex idea is: 'the production of meaning through language' (1997: 28). For Hall, to focus on representation is to explore meaning; how it is made and how it changes. Representations are acknowledged to always be constructed rather than absolute or true versions of the reality they represent (1997: 13-64). In this case the main language is visual: ceramics, displays and exhibitions of ceramics, photographs of ceramics and drawings of ceramics. It can also be textual, as in writing about ceramics for

example in books, museum catalogues and artist's statements. It is also a material language, in that clays, glazes, making methods, ideas and forms used by artists are a system for making meaning. The meanings of objects are constructed in many ways by ceramists themselves, as well as by curators, museum personnel, historians, writers and gallery owners. Audiences also construct their own meaning during their encounter with the objects in various settings. Regarding representation, in this research there are two related areas of interest: first, there is the discussion of what ceramics from Africa mean and what this may say about Africa within the context of their display and use, and second, there are the meanings created by ceramists using clay as a medium of expression.

The theories of representation employed here are postcolonial. The research is titled, *Africa and the West*, which suggests a project that has been deliberately set up to focus on Africa in terms of Western colonialism. It explicitly works across different cultures with histories of inequality, oppression and dominance. Consequently, postcolonial theories of representation establish a logical theoretical framework. Postcolonial theory encourages us to be explicitly aware of power relations, often unequal but inter-dependant, within the production, dissemination and reception of culture right through to the present day. These relations are usually observed between the coloniser and the colonized or their descendants. Postcolonial theory also suggests cultures are heterogenous and should be represented as such. The writers and key texts that are relevant include Edward Said (*Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)), Homi Bhabha (*The location of culture* (1994)) and Stuart Hall (*Encoding and decoding in the television discourse* (1973), *Representation* (1997)). They drew from aspects of feminist criticism, post-structural theory and semiotics in their analysis of literature and media.

I did not use semiotics or these other areas of philosophy as an explicit theoretical framework, but I am aware that they indirectly influenced this research. For example, I have applied aspects of semiotics in my own practice. I use metaphors, signs and symbols to create objects that are intended to have meanings (see chapter 4). The process of making ceramics can be considered a semiotic system in itself. There are different semiotic systems at work within

this thesis. They include museum and exhibition curation, the identity of makers, making processes and the ways historians and commentators have written about ceramics. I acknowledge the potential relevance of semiotic analysis but do not delve into semiotics in any detail. Instead, I approached this research with a more generalised understanding that objects have meanings. The focus is on exploring these meanings which can and do change in different contexts. The theoretical approach is postcolonial, that is, there is an awareness of the complex and continuing legacy of colonialism on culture.

Edward Said, drawing on feminist criticism, showed that the exotic 'Oriental' 'Other' was represented by Western writers in a negative and oppressive manner in *Orientalism* (1978). In doing so Said provided a model for many other literary critics, and scholars in other areas, to analyse power relations and the interdependence of the coloniser and the colonised. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) Said took this idea further, broadening his critique to Western mainstream culture, pointing out that despite the official end of colonialism it continues to influence the culture and lives of people all over the world. Homi Bhabha (1994), influenced by Said, has written about representation, the inevitable hybridity or lack of purity in culture, and its complicity in politics and perpetuating power relations:

Cultures come to be represented by virtue of the processes of iteration and translation through which their meanings are vicariously addressed to - *through* - an Other. This erases any essentialist claims for the inherent authenticity or purity of cultures which, when inscribed in the naturalistic sign of symbolic consciousness frequently become political arguments for the hierarchy and ascendancy of powerful cultures. (1994: loc. 1787)

What we learn from the postcolonial approach to representation is that the voices of individuals should be heard. Speaking for or representing 'Others' from a privileged position is difficult and potentially detrimental to how well they are understood. We can use these insights to show the many different histories and individual representations. We can also use this approach to show the complex web of interconnections between people across cultures in the field of ceramics.

A postcolonial approach is however, not without fault. Gayatri Spivak's essay, '*Can the subaltern speak?*' (1988: 66-111), reminds us that, while useful, postcolonial analysis can be problematic because it sometimes emulates or repeats rather than subverts the dominance of the coloniser. It is very difficult, according to Spivak to get the oppressed, deprived 'Other,' the subaltern, to speak for him or herself and to move beyond the established patriarchal dominance and elitism in scholarship. Analysis and awareness does not necessarily lead away from oppression and cultural dominance.

Principally, these writers point out that there is a history of presenting non-Western cultures in the West as simplified exotic 'Others'. Today, this is still discernible, but can be challenged, subverted and reversed. There is a complex and inseparable mix of hybrid representations of cultures that emerged as a result of colonial encounters and which continue to have an impact today. Examples of this are now discussed to show the theoretical framework in action.

The way Africa has been seen and interpreted across the arts is rich and at the same time complicated and contradictory, from the exotic stereotype set up by Joseph Conrad in his famous novel, *Heart of Darkness*⁹, to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*¹⁰. These two literary examples were both set in the late nineteenth century, Conrad's on the Congo River and Achebe's in Nigeria. They present powerful images of European colonial intervention in Africa. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* created images of 'cannibals' and 'savages' in Africa that have proven hard to shift in the West. Africanist scholars have accused Conrad of racist representations of Africa, which characterised the continent as an exotic, distant land peopled by inhuman 'Others'¹¹ devoid of their own history. Achebe offered a stinging critique of Conrad's novel in *An Image of Africa*¹². The critical approach of thinkers associated with postcolonial studies, such as Said, who also refers to Conrad's text in *Orientalism*, is key to understanding

⁹ Conrad, J. (2007), first published in 1899.

¹⁰ Achebe, C. (2010), first published 1958.

¹¹ The 'Other' is used here and elsewhere in the text in the philosophical sense thought to be first used by Hegel to denote that which is not the self and hence different.

¹² Achebe, C. (2010). *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, first published in 1977.

the complex and diverse representations of Africa that depart from Conrad's exoticisation. This is because Said (1995: 349) points out that:

any attempt to force cultures and peoples into separate and distinct breeds or essences exposes not only the misrepresentations and falsifications that ensue, but also the ways in which understanding is complicit with the power to produce such things as the "Orient" or the "West".

Seventy years after Conrad published *Heart of Darkness*, (and almost twenty years before publishing *An Image of Africa*) Achebe offered an edgy African perspective on pre-colonial Nigeria in the 1890s in *Things Fall Apart*. This novel showed the effects of imposed colonialism on existing systems of government in Nigeria. Achebe's very human characters have faults and personalities which indicates that he has adopted a humanistic approach to representing Africa.

Scholars, intellectuals and artists continue to move beyond the Conrad-type image, formulating new representations of Africa today both to respond to, and counteract, the interruption caused by its colonial history:

The question of what Africa means has exercised the minds of some of the continent's best thinkers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It stands unanswered at the ideological core of pan-Africanism, Negritude, nationalism, decolonisation, and all the other projects through which Africans have sought to understand and restore their violated humanity. (Adesanmi, 2011: ix)

Adesanmi points out that there is no single unifying theory that can be applied to 'Africa' to ascertain what it means to come from this vast and varied place. He points out a number of ways of thinking that have been used to further this ongoing debate. Examples of Africanist scholars who have formally examined these ways of thinking include Valentin Y. Mudimbe. In *The Invention of Africa* (1988), an examination of philosophy and knowledge and Africa, Mudimbe points out how Western knowledge systems simplified and denied philosophical complexity and originality in Africa during colonialism. Tradition and modernity were separated, and African history disavowed, especially through disciplines such as anthropology:

Although in African history the colonial exp erience [sic] represents but a brief moment from the perspective of today, this moment is still charged and controversial, since, to say the least, it signified a new historical form and the possibility of radically new types of discourses on African traditions and culture. (1988: 1)

Examining what he calls 'African *gnosis*' (as he argues it cannot be called African philosophy) Mudimbe (1988: 200) concludes, in the same positive spirit as Adesanmi, that:

the geography of African *gnosis* also points out the passion of a subject-object who refuses to vanish. He or she has gone from the situation in which he or she was perceived as a simple functional object to the freedom of thinking of himself or herself as the starting point of an absolute discourse.

After the preface that I have quoted above, Adesanmi then ponders the meaning of Africa in essays based on his experience of, and relationship to, Africa. He understands his creative contribution is part of a broader project of representing or revealing Africa from an African, and a global perspective, both in the present and the recent past. His approach in *You're Not a Country, Africa* (2011), and Achebe's approach in *Things Fall Apart*, is to *produce* meaning that explores the question of what Africa has meant rather than attempting to answer it directly.

Pointing out the socially constructed quality of representations is the principle legacy of postcolonial theory. Elements of postcolonial theory inform the approach to the research in that I am sensitive to issues of representation including exoticism, stereotyping and other forms of power imbalances. I am not applying the entire heterogenous body of texts known as postcolonial theory to ceramics. This would demand analysis that is beyond the scope of this research which is ultimately focused on the physical and intellectual act of making ceramics. Instead, while bearing this body of thought in mind, I am taking a sensitive approach to the notion of 'African-ness' by first pointing out that there are multiple perspectives and then presenting my perspective as one among many. In this way I emulate the likes of Adesanmi by also presenting my version of Africa with nuance and originality and by doing so add another human-centred voice to the debate. I also seek out comparable elements of nuance and sincerity in other people's work.

The primary aim of this research is to develop a body of ceramic work using a selection of specific motifs and to seek detailed, critical context for this practice. The chosen motifs are ones which I subjectively define as relevant to exploring

my own identity as African, and which provide scope for exploring and reflecting on issues of identity and representation. This is discussed in detail in chapter 4. My aim is to offer an original and personal representation of Africa that echoes Adesanmi's approach, which avoids the pitfalls of claiming to speak for an entire continent and its diaspora. By beginning from the personal and then working outwards towards more general issues of representing 'African-ness', the intention is to emphasise the connections between things but resist generalisations. The research also provides an original analysis of contemporary ceramic practice in the areas that are complementary to my own body of work.

Adesanmi quotes from a poem by Abioseh Nicol in order to articulate a personal representation that presents Africa as a differentiated idea rather than as a geographical landmass or a broad cultural identity: 'a concept fashioned in our minds, each to each, to hide our separate fears, to dream our separate dreams' (2011: x). This 'Africa' is complex, subjective and deeply personal. In the spirit of Nicol's poem, this research is more likely to complicate and expand rather than simplify views of Africa. The intention is not to formulate a set of aesthetic features or specific forms that mean 'Africa.' While this may seem antithetical, it is argued that this is a necessary and positive potential outcome, which prioritises constant analysis and revisions of existing perspectives for better understanding. The research has been conducted in the spirit of an open and ongoing dialogue.

Two defining parameters in the research respond to the skin-clay metaphor and the sensitivity encouraged by post colonial theorists when representing Africa. First, the research is narrowed through the methodological approach. This means grouping together relevant thinkers, writers and makers (including myself) who work on similar themes, as a lens which can be used to represent, present, interpret and understand Africa today.

The second defining parameter is the field or medium, which focuses the research on contemporary ceramic practice, with some discussion of ceramics from the recent past that could be described as modern. I pay particular attention to South Africa, the United Kingdom and Nigeria. Western museum

collections also play a significant role. This is because of the well developed, and at least partially documented, studio ceramic traditions in these three areas which share certain characteristics. The focus on English-speaking African countries, and Britain, reflects the shared experience of British imperialism. Bringing together English-speaking Africa distinguishes it from other colonial experiences and allows the research to be more focused, rather than broad and general. In addition, South Africa is where I am from and English is the language I speak. This is appropriate to my critical approach and research methods because it provides a foundation from which I can speak with a degree of authority.

This research reflects the perspective of an artist working with fired clay, trained in the conventions, both ideological and technical, of studio ceramics. I use my hands as my primary tools and I make work that is intended to be shown in art galleries. My objects are primarily made for contemplation. Strong elements of touch, or skin contact with the material, during making, are closely linked to the central metaphor used in this research: clay as skin. Not only is the skin and body of the artist integral to the making process within studio ceramics, but this research proposes that its forms and methods lend themselves to representing skin.

Throughout the research this central metaphor of 'clay-as-skin' is used to address the research question. This connection between material, clay, and subject matter, skin, emerges from both previous practice, and from close observation of how studio ceramists often operate. I pay particular attention to how studio ceramists produce objects that are themselves hollow forms, which are like skins, either because they are vessels with a hollow interior or because ceramists tend to work with, rather than against the limits of their tools and experience. This often means hollowing out solid forms to make them lighter, and their walls even ¹³. On a practical level this helps the pieces to dry more quickly and easily. This in turn facilitates even firings with minimal cracks or breakages. This works well with firing techniques that use bonfire, electric or gas kilns because they tend to have relatively short firing cycles. The ceramists

¹³ It is acknowledged that not all objects categorised as studio ceramics are hollow forms, but these are exceptions rather than rules.

who fall within the scope of this project all use this sort of technology. These are ceramists who tend to work alone or in small groups with equipment, tools and technologies for the handmade production of small batches of work.

The ceramic, when thought of as a hollow form, is an outer layer: a skin around its contents. The vessel's function as a container is an essential part of design. If the piece is figurative, zoomorphic or anthropomorphic the clay surface will usually represent the skin of that form.

However, my definition of 'skin' is broad. It is not limited to a simple, though rich, analogy between ceramic vessels and human skins. Zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms play vital roles in the research, giving context to my own practice. Zoomorphism and anthropomorphism in ceramics in this research refers to objects that are like animal or human bodies in some way, literally (a vessel that looks like a human body for example) or metaphorically (references to the lip or shoulder of a jar for example). These terms therefore refer to our physical relationship with ceramic objects and how we can see ourselves and others in them.

The prevalence of vessels and anthropomorphic forms in collections of African ceramics in particular were also factors that prompted my interest in this metaphor as a starting point for making. Marla Berns, a specialist on Nigerian ceramics, describes anthropomorphic pots made for ritual purposes across the upper Benue river valley as follows:

The specificities of their form and iconography help define and defend human vulnerabilities and signify the control people seek to exert over their destinies and survival. (2011: 475)

Berns is saying that the anthropomorphic qualities of these forms are used to talk about, symbolise and even affect human characteristics both physical and emotional, making them powerful objects for people to identify with and use to think about themselves whether in the context of social rituals or in a more private sense. This idea of making or commissioning a clay object to help, for example, to take control of one's own body or situation lends itself to one of the goals of this research, which is to produce objects that help me to understand and explore my own subjective story as one of many different voices from

Africa, but which also remain open ended enough to resonate with other people who may also notice anthropomorphic qualities in my works.

Berns, citing Nigel Barley, Nicholas David and others (2011: 474), also emphasises the analogy between the transformation of the vessel from raw to fired, with transformation in people's lives, like, for example, reaching adulthood. The power of hollow ceramic forms, and especially anthropomorphic forms, to express and embody change, including healing, is a powerful metaphor appropriate to this research which is strongly resonant with the *Extermination Tents* series discussed in chapter 4.

Unglazed, usually brown pots or pot fragments, such as those in figure 2, seem to be the most typical objects on show in archaeological museums. Their prominence in these collections creates an association between ceramics, and especially handmade ceramics, and the early history of human culture. This makes them appear to be an intrinsic part of human culture and therefore perpetually relevant, though to some their appearance in these museum collections will make them appear backward, outdated and obsolete. The former is suggested and pursued in this research. The latter is not useful to counteract the historical stereotypes that have trivialised African creativity both past and present.



Figure 2: Iron Age Urewe Archaeological ceramics from East Africa, reassembled. Nairobi National Museum, 2008.

African objects, when categorised as ethnographic or anthropological, including ceramics, may carry some negative associations that come from flawed nineteenth century and earlier twentieth century museum practice (Coombes, 1997: 215) that complemented or enforced Conrad's negative image of Africa as inaccessible and subhuman (See Annie Coombes (1997) for detailed discussion of this complex area). As late as 1990, an exhibition at the Royal Ontario museum continued to give such impressions. The controversial exhibition, *Into the heart of Africa*, showed historic African objects and the way they were collected, but omitted a positive African voice or any clear sense of resolution (Schildkrout, 1991: 19). This left the original context of their collection and display without sufficiently clear criticism, engendering presumptions, by audiences, that the curator, and by implication, the museum, had put together a racist show (Schildkrout, 1991: 17).

These collections can construct an idea of primitive backwardness. Others can promote the seemingly more positive notion of an unspoilt, often anonymous, primitive, which is discussed in chapter 2. This chapter includes a critique of the

anthropological and ethnographic tendency to categorise objects using problematic 'tribal' labels. These practices account for the large collection of African ceramics at the British Museum, London which are far more extensive than collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. As discussed in chapter 2, attitudes might have changed in these institutions, but the past cannot be easily erased.

Figurative sculptures from Africa, usually wood and metal but including some fired clay objects, are frequently acknowledged as an important influence on European Modernism in art ¹⁴. A major criticism of this narrative is that these objects were considered for their formal qualities, away from their initial context of production and use. This reception of figurative sculpture has had a lasting effect on how these objects are understood, or rather misunderstood, and displayed in museums. This is also discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

Today, in the museums sector, 'Africa' is receiving an ever more detailed and in-depth historical interpretation of its arts, including ceramics. The 2011 exhibition, *Central Nigeria Unmasked: Arts of the Benue River Valley* at the Fowler Museum, which travelled to several other venues in the United States and the Musee Quai Branly in Paris, is an example of this complex and open interpretation. The researchers for this exhibition were thorough. They focussed their attention on the historical arts of a relatively small geographic area in Nigeria including anthropomorphic ceramics from the upper Benue river valley. Though a substantial amount of the work covered in the exhibition has not been widely shown or interpreted before, the publication accompanying the exhibition contained speculative reinterpretations of the origins and contexts of iconic pieces of sculpture in Western museums, such as a group of large wooden figures attributed to the 'Mboi' group which Berns argued could not be attributed to a specific ethnic group or area because of limited evidence (2011: 559). The text highlights the complex web of makers, dealers, runners, collectors,

¹⁴ In April, 2000 the galleries for African, Asian, Oceanian and American art were opened at the Louvre, Paris, primarily an art museum. The new galleries are a satellite of the Musee du Quai Branly, the new ethnographic museum which effectively replaced the ethnographic section of the Musee de l'homme and the Musee nationale des Arts d'Afrique et d'Oceanie. Though not without controversy, the presence of and connection between both the Quai Branly and Louvre galleries acknowledges the parallel importance of African objects to the history of Western art and their implication in colonialism in the form of ethnography.

interpreters and other market forces that add and remove layers of meaning, authenticity and value to works across places and time. This exhibition not only brought to my attention the powerful metaphors of healing that can be expressed using anthropomorphism, but also serve to further counteract simplified readings of historic African objects that I seek to question within this research.

The shifting meanings and ambiguities detailed above make clay a particularly relevant medium for addressing the representation of contemporary African identities, which are themselves shifting and uncertain. Ceramics from Africa are particularly interesting because of the visual associations with archaeology and anthropology. Unlike other mediums such as wood and metal, ceramics are not usually associated with modernism's love of African forms. British ceramists like Michael Cardew and his followers celebrated, and in their own way exoticised, 20th century African ceramics in the West, though in a different way from the early Modern *avant-garde*. These different ways of framing African ceramics are taken into account in this research as a background to my practice that seeks to 're-humanise' the way the continent is interpreted through its arts. 'Re-humanising' Africa and Africans in cultural production, following the lead of Adesanmi and Achebe, but using ceramics, is a way of confidently asserting an African identity in a postcolonial situation.



Figure 3: Advertisements visible from a South Kensington tube station platform, 2011.

Figure 3 gives a good indication of the image of Africa as it is presented in the West, which is worth brief consideration here. It shows an advertisement for Oxfam displayed right next to a poster advertising Grayson Perry's exhibition at the British Museum, *The Tomb of the unknown Craftsman*. These two posters neatly juxtapose two common ways the continent is seen from the outside: as needing foreign aid, and as the point of origin of mysterious, exotic, and often anonymous objects often found in museums. Perry's exhibition provides many opportunities to begin discussions about some common issues and tropes relating to the representation of Africa in museums. These include artists mining colonial archives for use in contemporary practice, and the problematic notion of representing the 'Other.' However, Perry only pays limited attention to the source of his objects, making his work more about entertainment and personal taste than a serious critique of representation.

Advertisements tend to present a negative, emotive narrative of Africa as a dire place full of helpless people who rely on assistance from outside (read: Western) donors. This aid agency aesthetic solicits guilt. By contrast, the poster of Perry's show - which shows his *Rosetta Vase* (2011) - introduces the artist's playful but complex interpretation of a selection from British Museum's collection, which included several African objects.

Alongside his selection of British Museum objects Perry showed his own work: *I have never been to Africa* (2011), which dealt specifically with representations of Africa in the media and museums (figure 4). This piece includes visual references, in the form of transfers, to the background story of colonialism and world media coverage that is an indelible part of the British Museum's history, and consequently, the way Africa is seen and understood. Perry admits his combined emotions of guilt and fear about the continent, as implied by the pot's caption:

When I think of Africa I feel guilt and fear. I only have the impression of a continent brought to me by old photos, stories, the TV news and artefacts I encounter. This I imagine is not the 'real' Africa. That is in someone else's head. (2011: 60)

The guilt element of the caption is related to what advertisers appeal to in the Oxfam advert.

The right to publish this image has not been granted.



Figure 4: Perry, Grayson, 2011. I have never been to Africa. Glazed ceramic. 81x45cm. Photo: British Museum Press.

Figure 5: Kongo, Democratic republic of Congo. 1901. Carved tusk, ivory, Length 81cm. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

This piece is decorated with transfers of archival and press images; mediated images of Africa. One of the 'old photos' Perry refers to in the caption has been reproduced, on his pot, as a transfer print, (figure 4), to the right of the queen's skirt. This image recalls ethnographic photography. Historically this is a significant medium that has been used by Europeans to depict Africans. The photograph, taken by a British geologist, depicts six young people carrying ceramic pots and wearing non-western clothing. Ethnographic images emphasise ethnicity through dress and racial classification which turns

individuals into types. Scholars including Nicholas Mirzoeff, who subjected Herbert Lang's Congo photographs (1998: 167-187) to postcolonial reinterpretation, have argued that ethnographic photography is a way of exerting power and control over those depicted. Tamar Garb writing on contemporary South African photography said:

Frequently referenced is the anthropological and ethnographical past that has provided the conceptual framework through which Africa's peoples have routinely and repeatedly been pictured. Vexed, controversial and compromised, this massive and complex archive, still only partly uncovered and understood, has become part of the material culture of the present, ripe for appropriation, reappraisal and critique. Its fictive languages - ways of dressing up, adorning and delivering its subaltern subjects - function like figures of speech to manage and master the unknown. (Garb, 2011: 11-12)

By using this image, Perry is entering into the debate about the appropriation of ethnographic photography from colonial periods in contemporary art, exposing how these were used to construct images of the 'Other'. The image used by Perry is not new or unfamiliar to ceramics audiences. It was also used to illustrate Nigel Barley's excellent text on African ceramics *Smashing Pots* (1994), from the British Museum exhibition of the same name (figure 6).

The right to publish this image has not been granted.

Figure 6: Wayland, E. Karamajong water carriers, Uganda. Photograph. British Museum collection. Photo: E. Wayland.

Perry included a carved ivory tusk in his exhibition (figure 5). Ivory, the exotic bounty that drove the Europeans up the Congo river in *Heart of Darkness*, is here decorated with images of Europeans by a craftsman of unknown origin. In

placing *I have never been to Africa* beside objects like the tusk Perry is making a critical judgement on past and existing depictions of the continent from both insiders and outsiders, including representations of Africa constructed by the British Museum.

Perry exposes his guilt of not knowing, yet continues to perpetuate his own fantasy. He marvels at the peculiar imperialist circumstances of an object such as the carved tusk, or the form of a Boli power figure also on exhibition, yet he only seems to make a cursory comment and then relinquishes responsibility for his ignorance. My suspicion of Perry is also raised by Ezra Shales' exhibition review in *The Journal of Modern Craft* (2012: 231-236). Perry's exhibition is an important and largely positive contribution to the ongoing debates of representing the African 'Other' and it had a friendly and popular appeal as well as a general veneration for all craftsmen of the past from all over the world. However it lacks the level of sensitivity that could really shift public perception. His work does allow me to introduce several key themes relevant to this research. One theme is the depiction of the 'Other' which Olu Oguibe ¹⁵ addresses. Oguibe points out the inevitability of dealing with or attending to the Other, when making visual art. He says:

Invention and contemplation of the Other is a continuous process evident in all cultures and societies. But in contemplating the Other it is necessary to exhibit modesty and admit relative handicap since the peripheral location of the contemplator precludes a complete understanding. (1999:326)

For Oguibe it is necessary and inevitable to represent or look at 'Others' but he suggests that caution, openness and being self-aware are paramount. Perry does this to an extent in this exhibition by acknowledging that his reading and representation of Africa is flawed and subjective because it is devoid of first-hand experience. He does this by matching the objects with text, including the title, *I have never been to Africa*, and by the way the exhibition is punctuated with captions, emphasising craftsmanship, humour and honesty about the limits of his experience. Perry clearly admits the impossibility of passing a viable judgement on the region through experience of objects and reliance on

¹⁵ Oguibe is an artist and scholar associated with contemporary African art and postcolonial studies.

mediated narratives alone. Perry's exhibition therefore amounts to an uninformed, subjective and personal narrative that could be considered naive. This means that Perry's exhibition is problematic for my research because it does not add any new depth or sensitivity to the representation of Africa.

This research is timely because African art has recently been particularly visible in the United Kingdom, contributing to the complex dialogue between Britain and Africa that has existed since the colonial era, though ceramics tends to be overlooked. In the June 2013 issue of the *Museums Journal* Felicity Haywood draws attention to the ways UK museums are collecting and displaying more contemporary African art than ever before (2013: 30-33). The online journal *Interpreting Ceramics* has recently put out its first print publication, *Interpreting Ceramics: Selected Essays* edited by Jo Dahn and Jeffrey Jones (2013). While this collection of 19 pieces of commentary, research and critical reflection is dominated by voices and subjects from the USA and UK, three essays focus on African makers and their concerns (Ozioma Onuzulike and Wilma Cruise on their own work, and Elizabeth Perrill on Azolina MaMncube Ngema) and three more (by Garth Clark, Matthew Partington and Alison Britton) refer to the continent as a source of inspiration or a significant site of creative production. Considering this publication, it seems that ceramics has a significant role to play in this time of increased critical attention.

Over the course of this research, contemporary art from Africa that unravels complex and varied stories of contemporary life in the continent has commanded particular attention in Europe. For example, El Anatsui had a monumental piece of work installed on the facade of the Royal Academy in London for the 2013 summer show. In 2012 *We Face Forward*, a large and well attended exhibition of recent art from West Africa, was held in Manchester. In the summer of 2013 Meschac Gaba's *Museum of Contemporary African Art 1997-2002*, recently acquired by Tate Modern, was on show accompanied by a number of events and displays about the continent. Angola won the 2013 Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale with their first national pavilion. During this moment of broadening appeal, when African art is being observed and critiqued with increasing sophistication, subtlety and deeper knowledge, it is a good time to assess the importance of African ceramics. This is partly to harness the

increased attention, but also because the history of ceramics and particularly colonial ceramics programmes and interventions are evidence of such strong African-British connections. It is an appropriate time to revisit these connections in order to promote a more open and accurate understanding of shared histories between Britain and Africa, so young artists and interested parties can better understand the present.

Throughout this research I sought to culturally situate my own clay work, and that of my contemporaries. This is because ceramics, like some other craft media, has the potential to cross disciplinary boundaries. Ceramic objects may have been dismissed as ethnographic or everyday and used to represent Africa as timeless and archaic, yet scholars such as Berns are pointing out their historic complexity and cultural value. Clay can be used as one of the ways to subvert historic representations that continue to affect public understanding.

Many museums in the West have taken objects far away from their initial point of production or use. As a consequence, the representation of Africa in some parts of Africa and outside of metropolitan centres relies on text-based forms of representation, which are addressed in chapter 1. Public spaces such as museums and galleries are places where the dominance of textual representation of Africa can be challenged because museums encourage the encounter between people and objects and illuminate this experience through exhibition catalogues and texts. In chapter 2 I pay attention to display of ceramics in temporary exhibitions and museum displays, discussing the ways in which this powerful context for ceramics contributes to perceptions of the continent. The maker's perspective is then provided in chapter 3, with a selection of pairings or groupings of artists associated with Africa who demonstrate various approaches to representing Africa through their production. These chapters provide the broader context for my own ceramic practice, which is accounted for and analysed in chapter 4.

Chapter 1: Writing on ceramics

In the last 60 years, the most extensive body of English language texts about contemporary African ceramics and their relationship to the West have come from South Africa, Nigeria and the United Kingdom. The texts have significant shared or intertwined aspects that relate to the ceramics histories of African countries and the West. They offer examples of varied constructions of 'African-ness'. This chapter is a review of these relevant critical and analytical texts, but also includes less obvious texts including instructional manuals and monographs. These publications are integral to understand the relationship between Africa and the West in ceramics, and are especially useful considering the lack of analytical texts to draw from.

Even though this research is centred on objects and makers, texts are significant sources because they show how people perceive and categorise ceramic objects and ascribe them identities. They also tend to have a much broader reach than the singular material objects they are about. Edmund de Waal, a leading writer on the British and international studio ceramics scene notes that, '[w]riting on ceramics has helped to create — and delimit — the spaces in which ceramics operates' (2003:11). De Waal discusses the example of the extensive literature available in English on the relatively well-known *Mingei* movement, that mostly distorts Western perceptions of taste in Japanese ceramics. De Waal demonstrates that it is important to be aware of gaps and inconsistencies between objects and texts. This notion becomes particularly important in geographic areas where public access to major museum collections and exhibitions is not possible, as is the case for many parts of Africa.

The review begins with texts that are not overtly about Africa, but mention the continent and its ceramics in some form. These texts give some indication of how Africa has been perceived from the outside. Particularly with older texts, there is a tendency to frame African ceramics as exotic and 'Other', in line with prevailing attitudes of the Conrad-type image discussed above.

The remaining texts under review have a narrower scope. Michael Cardew features regularly, as both artist and writer, indicating the dominance of his persona and his role as a gatekeeper between West African and British studio ceramics. The relationship between studio ceramics in the West and ceramics made in Africa is covered to some extent in the literature, but tends to be dominated by the Cardew-Abuja narrative, much like the *Mingei* narrative in Japan that de Waal talks about. The section on British studio ceramics and its relationship with Africa ends with a brief review of instructional manuals. The outlook that artists adopt towards their choice of materials, processes and the forms they make continues to be passed on through these texts as they are rarely impartial how-to guides. This makes them integral to the dissemination of studio ceramics values in both Africa and the West.

The focus then shifts to texts that deal explicitly with African ceramics. The weight of the history of ceramics, with its slow-changing technologies, and its association with archaeological or anthropological museum collections is a dominant part of the discourse. Many of the texts are published by museums. In these texts the focus is primarily on vessel forms. Purely figurative work is given less attention and is found less frequently in collections. These texts tend to combine studio photographs of ceramic objects with archival or fieldwork images of ceramists at work which are informative but often this approach perpetuates the tradition of ethnographic photography, whereby pieces appear primitive or exotic. The current trend in research and publishing is increasingly moving away from the tradition of the anonymous ethnographic image, by naming ceramists and attributing works to individuals or at least to cultural groups where this is possible. This is particularly apparent in recent writing about the varied ceramic production in South Africa.

The body of writing on South African ceramics has exceptional depth when compared to work from other parts of the continent. The written work on Zulu ceramics, in particular, is an area that is increasingly well represented in the literature.

Examples of both shifting and established power dynamics of race and gender in African ceramics, particularly in South Africa, can be understood through feminist readings of the subject by scholars such as Moira Vincentelli.

The anthropomorphic relationship between the ceramic object and the human body is well reflected in the literature under review in this chapter. Analysis shows how the relationship is reciprocal and reflective; we seem to understand ceramics because they can be like our own bodies, physically and metaphorically. Many ceramic objects such as domestic utensils are designed to have a physical relationship with our bodies. This is apparent in something as simple as a handle for holding. This metaphoric or literal physical relationship with ceramics gives a sense of the medium's potential, both in my practice and as a model for others making and analysing ceramics. A focus on these anthropomorphic and tactile qualities within ceramics will help contribute towards re-humanising representations of Africa, allowing issues such as the exotic or notions of the primitive to be sidelined.

Museum displays and curated exhibitions are also considered visual and material 'texts' but they are reviewed in chapter 2. These varied forms of written and object-based texts all contribute to the manner in which 'Africa' is represented in the field of ceramics.

General texts: Projecting primitivism and exoticism

Some writers position African ceramics as an underdeveloped and primitive 'Other'. For others the exotic 'Other' is a more positive attribution, where many kinds of African production are regarded as unspoilt alternatives to Western industrialisation.

In *Ceramics* (1971) Philip Rawson¹⁶ produced a philosophy of aesthetics for the medium of ceramics, aimed at people who collect or appreciate them. On the page where 'Africa' is indexed as a term (14), the word is not directly used. It is left to the reader to discern that Rawson seems to equate 'Africa' with a

¹⁶ Rawson's professional subject specialism is Asian art which accounts for his emphasis on Asian examples.

timeless, primitive ceramics. In this way he ideologically positions African ceramics as a definite 'Other' to both ancient and modern European ceramics. In the text, Rawson attempted to articulate the symbolic language of pottery shapes, what he calls 'Symbolism of Form' (1971: 64). Within that, he creates a geographic and broadly cultural continuum to describe how space has been used by ceramists. Oriental ceramics lie on one end with their more fluid and open use of space; and European and classical Greek ceramics that show a more contained use of space, on the other. He acknowledges that this model is a generalisation that does not work for modern production, but implies that it is broadly applicable to a de-historicised ancient period that all museum pieces appear to occupy. African ceramics are placed in the continuum close to Oriental ceramics:

The same kind of undefined and mysterious space is projected by African Ceramics, whose strangely marked rhythmic sequences of surface striation may seem to have an inner significance only, as if they were crystallizing forms and measures absorbed *from* the untransformed environment, not projected outward upon it. (Rawson, 1971: 119)

Rawson has set up generic categories for 'Oriental' and 'African' ceramics which refer to an unspoilt ideal encompassed by the notion of 'primitive' ceramics. He generalises and differentiates between the different, roughly continental divisions and places Africa in the category of mystical, raw and free, more Dionysian than Apollonian.

Rawson then brings the two ends of his continuum together by poetically suggesting that all pots, regardless of geographical or cultural origin are universally imbued with an anthropomorphism:

The fixed point of reference in all stipulated modes of space is, of course, the axis vertical to the ground which pots share with men. (Rawson, 1971: 119)

By drawing attention to the anthropomorphic language of pots, Rawson, who focused on looking at pots, echoes Cardew, a maker of pots who talked about an element of 'life' in good pottery (Cardew, 2002: 264-265).

The tendency towards anthropomorphism in ceramics, in both their form and how they are described, is a key theme in this research. Working with and

extending this anthropomorphic visual language is central to the development of my creative practice that accompanies this writing. Cardew is one of the most well-known studio ceramists of his generation, who spent time working in Ghana and Nigeria as an artist, educator, enthusiast of local ceramics, and colonial employee. Cardew describes considerations of form and function in teapot making with descriptions that include 'virtue' and 'personality' (Cardew, 1969: 132). On making jugs and pitchers, he introduces them as 'the most lively and athletic of all pots'. He extends his metaphoric language: '[o]f all thrown pots, pitchers are the most apt to be like human beings, one knows of pitchers that seem almost to be portraits.' (1969: 118)

In describing this commonality between pots and men as their defining feature, we are able to detect a redeeming sense of humanity in Rawson's perspective. The reciprocal, physical relationship that people seem to have with ceramics, particularly vessels and hollow forms, can be related to ideas around 'humanising' as raised in the introduction, with reference to Adesanmi in literature and Berns in relation to the ceramic history of the Benue river valley. Rawson's perspective, though in some senses outdated, adds to the argument that ceramics, and the language used to describe pots, is a potent medium for talking about personal and group identities, as its audience can identify with the medium in a physical manner.

More than 30 years after Rawson, another significant writer on ceramics, de Waal, only makes a passing reference to Africa as the place where Cardew worked in his broad survey of 100 years of ceramics, *20th Century Ceramics*, (2003). This suggests that Cardew literally *is* Africa in international 20th century ceramics and even more so for British studio ceramics. In contrast, his *The Pot Book* (2011) is far more inclusive, with several specific references to Africa. These include individual artists based on or associated with the continent: Ladi Kwali (158), Magdalene Odundo (205), Hylton Nel (201), Khaled Ben Slimane (256), Cardew (42), Halima Cassell (45) and Helga Gamboa (106); co-operative studio, Ardmore (13); and cultural or linguistic designations, Zulu (305) and Ganda (107).

The entries for these last two cultural groupings are both illustrated by unattributed British Museum objects which suggest the continuing influence of the early ethnographic collections that now form the British Museum collection. Examples of Cardew, Kwali, Slimane and Odundo's work can all be found in the Sainsbury Africa Galleries at the British Museum alongside the amaZulu and Baganda pots. This example places the British Museum collection in a position of significant influence on public perceptions of African ceramics, both old and new, in London and internationally. Potentially negative ethnographic associations remain.

De Waal picks up on the irony and complexity of the relationship between contemporary the makers of Zulu beer ceramics and well-intentioned academic researchers. These researchers sometimes act as promoters and have the power to emphasise, and impute authenticity to, certain types of ceramics above others. This highlights power imbalances in society more generally, and more specifically between formally educated academics and informally educated ceramists. There is an intertwined relationship. Ceramists rely on galleries and specialist collector's markets to achieve high prices for their work and galleries and collectors are informed by educated 'experts' who ultimately still hold the power.

More detail on the body of literature about Zulu ceramics is reviewed later in this chapter, but what de Waal is raising here has currency in terms of the power and sway held by Cardew. This is because Cardew, like academic researchers in the Zulu context, is positioned at the intersection of Africa and the West in ceramics where he could act as a gatekeeper between African ceramists and Western audiences.

British Studio Ceramics: Cardew and Africa

Many books have included Cardew's time in Africa, including Oliver Watson's (1990) brief history of British studio ceramics. However, none describe the ceramist's time in Africa as extensively as Tanya Harrod, in her book *The Crafts in Britain in the 20th Century* (1999) and the recent detailed biography (2012),

The Last Sane Man, that she described as an accompaniment to the longer, broader text ¹⁷.

Harrod describes the contrast between Cardew's two lives in Britain and West Africa. Harrod indicates the importance of Africa for Cardew:

Michael came to realise that Nigeria provided an extraordinarily inspirational environment for an artist. He was away from the narrow world of British studio craft and he responded creatively to Nigeria's majestic beauty and all its art forms - its textiles, metalwork, mud architecture, carving and, above all, its pottery. (2012: 235).

This in turn suggests the importance of Cardew's experience of Africa on the development of studio ceramics in the UK. His time in West Africa enabled him to produce distinctive and original shapes within British studio ceramics circles. Harrod explains the origins of the design for his Gwari-style casseroles which he first made at the Pottery Training Centre in Abuja. They have three handles and a distinctive ridge, which comes from the shape of Gwari cooking pots which Cardew saw and first admired during his tour of the Northern region in the 1950s (2012: 263). In his hard, glazed, stoneware, Cardew combined forms or motifs usually made in the softer, hand-built earthenware with unexpected materials, creating hybrid objects in both material and form.

If Cardew is not introduced as the potter who worked in Africa, then he is introduced as Bernard Leach's first British pupil. Alison Britton wrote of Cardew:

Michael Cardew, the potter who worked for many years in West Africa, wrote of the impact of Leach's view, as if it were David taking on the Goliath of Wedgewood. (1993: 9)

Leach was heavily involved with promoting Mingei philosophy from Japan and these anti-industrial philosophies had an impact on the young Cardew.

Leach described Cardew as follows:

He has led a strange and rich life. . . I believe that this richness lies within Michael Cardew and is due to a tension in his make-up, a good intellect on one hand and on the other a strong heartbeat which always makes him lean towards the intuitive and primitive. It was the latter which drew him to Africa where, first on the Gold Coast and later in Nigeria, he has worked for twenty-three years, making both

¹⁷ Harrod, Book launch speech, September 2012, London.

his own dark olive and rust stoneware, with a few selected men students at Vume or Abuja, or going his rounds as pottery officer, protecting the indigenous native women potters from exploitation, and, no doubt, keeping a weather-eye open for any likely potter's raw materials he might come across. (Leach, 2002: 11) ¹⁸

Both Britton's and Leach's somewhat romantic comments suggest the exuberance and independence of Cardew's character which is also evident in his own writing style in *Pioneer Pottery* and *A Fatal Impact*. The lectures and demonstrations that he gave in the UK and USA no doubt helped him to popularise what he did in Africa.

Cardew is a central figure as an advocate for African ceramics. He tried to blur the boundaries between West African and British ceramic traditions with varying degrees of success, incorporating designs he observed in Nigeria and Ghana in his own work and facilitating the production of a Nigerian stoneware at the Abuja training centre.

Cardew must be understood in the context of other colonial, and post-independence employees in Nigeria who had a role to play in arts education. Onuzulike (2013) notes that it was an early report by education superintendents Kenneth Murray and A Hunt-Cooke in 1938 that sowed the seed for colonial postwar ceramics training projects facilitated by Europeans, such as the Abuja training centre set up by Cardew in 1952. Though not a governmental intervention, other neocolonial projects, such as Ardmore Ceramic Art in South Africa, can also be considered in the context of Cardew's colonial work. Ardmore was established, and continues to be run, by a white, University educated ceramist and continues to provide technical support, education and training to ceramists from the surrounding area with the idea that the artists earn a living from their work and are able to improve their quality of life.

In the context of British studio ceramics, Harrod grouped Cardew with Norah Braden and Katherine Pleydell-Bouverie as the three most talented pupils of Leach (1999: 38). Cardew's legacy included passing on his philosophies and skills to other British ceramists and teachers of ceramics who went on to make

¹⁸ Leach, foreword to *Pioneer Pottery*, 2002 edition by Cardew.

an impact in the field. This included Helen Pincombe, Paul Barron and Henry Hammond at the Farnham School of Art, as well as Gwyn Hanssen, Charlotte Bawden and Katherine Pleydell-Bouverie. The importance of the self-sufficient potter, following through each step of the process by him or herself was emphasised by Cardew (Harrod, 1999: 225), both in his teaching and through his writing. His instructional book, *Pioneer Pottery* (1969), remains in print today and continues to have an impact on ceramists and students of ceramics such as Jonathan Garratt¹⁹. The book covers aspects of Ghanaian and Nigerian ceramics traditions together with British studio ceramics made in the Leach tradition.

Cardew's time in Africa affected not only his own work and attitude to work, but also led him to become an enthusiast of Nigerian pottery. *Pioneer Pottery* (1969) is mentioned in the preface to the catalogue (1970: 5) for *A Potter's Art in Africa*, exhibited at the British Museum by William Fagg and John Picton in 1970. Fagg and Picton acknowledge his contribution to increasing the awareness of African ceramics, commenting that Cardew 'may be warmly commended for the love and enthusiasm for African pottery which he is capable of imparting to all his readers or hearers' (1970: 5). Harrod also states that Cardew was an advocate for African ceramics in institutional contexts. He advised colonial and governmental organisations worldwide, put on many exhibitions and gave lectures to spread his message.

His work with, and attitude to, the rural female ceramists in Abuja is particularly interesting and forward thinking, though not without its faults. As Harrod points out, there are some uneasy and contradictory moments where Cardew was patronising and possibly even racist. He failed to attract the black audience he desired when touring with Kwali in the US in the early 1970s, possibly due to his own dominant presence. ('Black Americans, as Dixie Lee Worcester had observed, did not want their cultural heritage to be presented by a white man.' (Harrod 2012: 351)). Cardew was most definitely a positive supporter and promoter of retaining the skills of Kwali and her peers in Nigeria, seeing them as preferable to importing European ways of making, but the manner of his

¹⁹ See chapter 3 for more on Garratt

promotion of their cause seemed to take a form of paternal ownership over the whole enterprise that may have set back his good intentions. In *Fatal Impact* (1979) Cardew suggests that the so-called 'primitive' was something to admire, protect and emulate, something special that had been lost in Western societies. This is an example of where this discussion of ceramics has clear parallels with political and social issues that concern Africa and Africans.

The heroic characterisation of Cardew sketched by Leach is tempered by Harrod's biography. Cardew's personal connection to Africa is strongly apparent in Harrod's work, it was an environment where he felt creatively at ease. He also had the deep, though seemingly unequal personal relationship with Ghanaian ceramist Kofi Clement Athey which drew him back to the continent for reasons that complicate a simplistic reading of Cardew's links to the continent. According to Harrod's analysis, Cardew's time in West Africa was about life and relationships as much as it was about art.

Cardew was an anarchist who rejected aspects of his middle class upbringing, though Harrod (2012) notes that he was not politically active in Nigeria. Africa may have provided an (imperfect) escape. For Cardew, the ceramics he saw in Africa were a welcome antidote to what he perceived as the coldness of British industrial ceramics. The environment, the people and the art were muses and facilitators for Cardew's own practice. Cardew did manage to facilitate the making of some interesting stoneware in Nigeria, though he never quite managed to create a thriving new tradition with popular appeal:

If the aim of the Training Centre was to produce a cadre of potters who shared his hard-won skills, Michael had to acknowledge failure. What he did succeed in doing was to set up a workshop peopled by a team of people who were arduous, thrilling and infuriating to work with. Together, he and they made some inspiring pots. (Harrod, 2012: 287)

Attempting to pass on his studio ceramics skills and values through the Abuja Pottery Training Centre may not have endemically changed ceramics in Nigeria. However Cardew's ideas and approaches disseminated in person or through his writing have had a pervasive impact on studio ceramics practiced in many areas including South Africa. Both Esias Bosch and Hym Rabinowitz, South African stoneware ceramists, spent time with Cardew directly or with Ray Finch

at Cardew's Wenford Bridge pottery. Their potteries are in many ways far more accomplished than those of Cardew's Nigerian apprentices. On a trip with Cardew in 1960 to Nigerian potteries set up by Cardew's apprentices, Bosch wrote:

Being an African myself I had a much better understanding of the conditions that Cardew must have found terribly frustrating. It was very clear to me that the answer lay in improved technical education, in order to bring these promising craftsmen to a basic understanding of the machines used in a Western-style pottery workshop. (Bosch and de Waal, 1988: 28)



Figure 7: Walford, A. Photographed 2008. Teapot. Celadon-glazed stoneware, bamboo. Collection of the artist.

Together with Cardew's writing, Leach, and the British studio ceramic tradition in general, has had a strong influence on the work of South African ceramists, including Hilda Ditchburn and Esias Bosch. South African potter, Andrew Walford has a distinctly Anglo-oriental style (figure 7) and described himself as born with Leach's *A Potter's Book* (1945) in his mouth (Walford, 2001: 50). De Waal describes Leach's work as 'a manual and a polemic' (2003: 93); it is an intuitive, intelligent combination of function and beauty that results from his familiarity and physical experience of using materials. Leach talks about the role

and importance of the artist-craftsman in the industrial age and is critical of what he perceives as bad design in the majority of industrial ceramics which he blames on a distance and unfamiliarity with the material. For Harrod, the value of *A Potter's Book* lies in:

His sweeping rejection of industrialisation, his promise of spiritual enlightenment and his confidence about aesthetic standards went far beyond the step-by-step didacticism of a how-to-do-it book. Instead Leach offered the promise of a spiritually fulfilling way of life. For those in search of certainties *A Potter's Book* became a bible for a war-torn generation and after the Second World War Leach began to seem like the founder of the studio pottery movement. (1999: 38)

Oliver Watson (1990) asserted that instructional texts on the subject of studio ceramics are one of the 'distinct categories' of writing on ceramics (1990: 12). These 'how to' manuals present instructions on how to make studio pottery and are often illustrated with images of good pots. They tend to offer both literal tips and a philosophical approach to the material and practice, making them influential on several levels. Together with *A Potter's Book*, *Cardew's Pioneer Pottery* is an instructional work that is pertinent to the research. They both remain widely available internationally and are likely to be found wherever ceramics is taught, in the UK and South Africa.

Cardew's book is perhaps one of the most successful instructional texts in studio ceramics. The writing is clear and concise with an instructional but motivational tone that could be responsible for its longevity. It also covers all aspects of the production process from making tools and machinery to testing materials, processing clay and making pots and it inspires independence, diligence and tenacity. The book was written after Cardew's return from Nigeria based on his experience of running potteries and teaching in Ghana, Nigeria and to a lesser extent, in the UK. Hand building, throwing and 'a simple kind of slab-moulding' (104) are all covered with reference to Kwali, Nupe and Yoruba traditions, as well as the traditions of Anglo-Oriental ceramics taught by Leach. He also writes about prospecting for and processing materials. To Cardew, the making of utilitarian pottery is in itself a celebration of the merit and value of pottery made in 'under-developed regions.' Continuing to make objects by hand, in, and beyond, the industrial age is also important.

According to the literature that comes from and tends to focus on the West, Cardew in many senses is the central mediator and promoter of African ceramic traditions, and hybrid cross-cultural works, in the West in the twentieth century. His enthusiasm for African ceramics has been echoed by other scholars interested in the continent such as those associated with Zulu beer ceramics and by his successor in Nigeria, Michael O'Brien, who is discussed in more detail in chapter 3. According to these publications, Cardew, as a writer and a ceramist dominates. He is seen the bridge between Africa and the West because of his close affinity with ceramics in both regions, combined with his public profile and his presence in post-war gallery exhibitions. As there is a limited body of scholarship on African ceramics, we tend to over-depend on Cardew's accounts, potentially overlooking a wider body of texts.

Publications and collections in Africa

Despite a general lack of published information outside of the writings on and by Cardew, there are other key publications that focus on African ceramics. This small body of texts form the relatively thin written narrative that designates ceramic objects as African, by geographic origin, production method, style or theme. Several examples in this section take large collections of ceramics from outside the continent as their starting point. In the *African Arts* special issue on ceramics in 2007, Barbara Frank points out that scholarship in African ceramics lacks both breadth and depth (2007: 10, 15-16). In this review I pay particular attention to writing that operates on the cusp between Africa and the West to demonstrate that these two broad categories still have gravitas and supply a model on which to investigate making, collecting, displaying or exhibiting. In addition, focussing on anthropomorphic readings of ceramics, which are to be found in these writings, is a helpful way to approach representing Africa in ways that move beyond the dominant positive or negative stereotypes.

In *Smashing Pots: Feats of Clay from Africa* (1994), Barley uses pots²⁰ from the extensive British Museum collection to introduce and illustrate domestic,

²⁰ Large, figurative sculptures ('terracottas') from the British Museum collection are beyond the scope of this publication and the exhibition that it accompanied. It does include a number of pots with strong figurative elements and Barley notes that the distinction between pots and figurative sculptures varies between different contexts.

spiritual, gendered, social, narrative and anthropomorphic themes in African ceramics. These themes reoccur in more recent literature including Vincentelli (2000, 2003), de Waal (2011), Elizabeth Perrill (2012), Juliet Armstrong (2008), Armstrong, Dieter Reusch and Gavin Whitelaw (2008), and Berns (2011). Barley's book is to some extent a model text for scholars on and off the continent and its commentary on anthropomorphism is particularly relevant in the context of this review.

Using ceramics as a model for thinking, and as a metaphor for people and processes, is central to Barley's text. Barley cites Claude Lèvi-Strauss in relation to the symbolic potential in pottery; in the metaphoric and literal; and the transformative sense described in the anthropological text, *The Raw and the Cooked*²¹ (1970). In this book Lèvi-Strauss aimed to:

show how empirical categories - such as the categories of the raw and the cooked, the fresh and the decayed, the moistened and the burned, etc., which can only be accurately defined by ethnographic observation and, in each instance, by adopting the standpoint of a particular culture - can nonetheless be used as conceptual tools with which to elaborate abstract ideas and combine them in the form of prepositions. (1970: 1)

Barley draws regular parallels between African and Western social usage of ceramics which puts the ceramics in context for most readers; this humanises the makers, resisting a historic tendency towards presenting 'Other' cultures as absolute in their difference. These comparisons sit within a sensitive text directed primarily at a Western, non-African audience. It originates from the British Museum, an institution that can be implicated both as a temple to accrued colonial wealth, and at the same time, a protector and promoter of important cultural artefacts. Barley is also careful to present specific examples of ceramic objects or particular cultural groups throughout the text to help avoid generalisations.

In a footnote, Barley writes that, 'African potters, like most non-western craftsmen, are usually recorded simply by tribal identity or otherwise anonymous. By contrast, the identity of the anthropological collector is carefully

²¹ Curators Martina Margetts and Britton invoked Lèvi-Strauss in the title and curatorial mandate of an important Crafts Council funded exhibition: *The raw and the cooked: new work in clay in Britain* (1993).

preserved' (1994: 156). This demonstrates Barley's awareness of, and sensitivity to, historic and continuing difficulties with attribution, authority and positions of power in collecting African ceramics. Although this may not be the case in some of Barley's other books ²², in *Smashing Pots* Barley criticises this colonial late nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropological understanding through self-reflexivity and through his attention to the potency of anthropomorphism.

Despite Barley's sensitivity to this issue, the problematic location of power rears its head quite literally as the name of the collector is always recorded, whereas the maker remains anonymous. The name of the artist is usually an important manner of validation associated with art practice today but is difficult to apply retrospectively.

Barley principally discusses the hand-built, low-fired pots made by women. Barley uses many examples of how ceramics can be used to discuss the limits or margins of social and cultural relations. He discusses gendered power relations, for example by referring to a Dogon myth about the origin and attitude to women's pottery production (1994: 53,57). Barley also highlights how European scholars, by privileging men's work, have tended to be more interested in metal work than pottery, accounting for the lack in published information on pottery and small clay objects. Barley also shows that in some societies ceramists are marginalised and treated as ambivalent from within their own societies. Barley's example is Dowayos of Cameroon, where ceramists live separately from others and are regarded as different: either negatively, as 'dirty' or positively, as wealthy (Barley, 1994: 63-64). Sociological margins, gendered or otherwise, that can be explained through pottery give Barley's analysis depth that many earlier writings, such as Felix Nilant's (in a section to follow on South Africa) lack.

In his text, Barley follows the precedent set by previous British museum staff members, then working within the ethnography department. The curatorial perspective presented in *A Potter's Art in Africa*, a catalogue by Fagg and Picton

²² For example, Barley's humorous and popular text: *Notes from a Mud Hut: the innocent Anthropologist* lacks sensitivity and has many generalisations.

(1970), emphasised formal and aesthetic elements of the pieces in the collection, writing about them unapologetically as art objects rather than as ethnographic artefacts. The approach demonstrates a forward thinking, celebratory and critical attitude in regard to categorising objects, art versus craft debates, and institutional collecting. This is in contrast to Rawson's²³ vague approach. Both vessels and figurative objects are included and given the same level of recognition. Margaret Trowell's ethnographic writing is the most frequently cited in the catalogue essay. The essay begins by briefly tracing ceramics back to its earliest origins worldwide, then in Africa specifically, adding the familiar validating construction that tends to emphasise the long history of the craft.

Gendered production is briefly considered and, as in Barley's text, for Fagg and Picton, most ceramists in Africa are women. The exhibition was arranged in cases 'on a geographical and cultural basis' (1970: 14). Fagg and Picton give a brief technical and cultural background for each group of objects. There are inconsistencies in depth and specificity which illustrate the uneven character of the collection and research surrounding the objects in it. Where the collection is less representative of a specific area, the authors alert their readers. The authors indicate that ceramics from some parts of the continent have been collected in greater numbers than others. More pieces are usually collected from one area because there has been direct British involvement (1970: 5). Known accession details are recorded in the catalogue including named collectors and donors, accession dates, the area the piece is from or the name of the group that made it. Like Barley's text on essentially the same collection, no individual ceramist can be named, despite the authors' best intentions to celebrate these unknown makers.

In yet another book published by the British Museum, Spring (2009) emphasises the diversity and global nature of African production, including both ancient and contemporary work from across the continent. Illustrations of artworks are inevitably representative of British colonial and postcolonial involvement as they are drawn from the British Museum. Spring makes the

²³ See pages 46-47

general comment that pottery and metalwork provide ways of understanding 'men's and women's bodies, their powers and roles in society' (2009: 10) and adds that: 'Potting is also often used as a general way of understanding human change.' (2009: 111). The human dimension of ceramics is again²⁴ affirmed. In this brief, simplified, essay (2009: 110-121) Spring also refers to the long history of the craft. He emphasises its apparent simplicity, in both material (earth) and tools (primarily hands, or a few simple objects). Spring emphasises variation and versatility that emerges from this seemingly simple technology. This shows that simplicity does not imply a lack of sophistication.

A more recent, necessarily subjective and personal collection, is documented in detail in *From Hearth and Altar: The Keith Archepohl Collection* (2005). This catalogue documents a significant Western collection of African ceramics from a wide geographical range (including works from North, West, central, East and South Africa); a private collection that was started in the 1980s from which a significant proportion was recently bequeathed to the Art institute of Chicago. The author, Kathleen Bickford Berzock, emphasises the subjectivity of the collector more so than Barley by beginning the text with an interview with the collector. In the interview Archepohl expresses joy at the beauty he sees in looking at the subtle variations between pots (2005: 12) and talks about 'variations on a theme' informing his own practice as a printmaker (2005: 15). He liked the anonymity of the works he collected. Beyond the aesthetic and material qualities of pots he felt that the most important information he required was the region they came from, which seems strange for an aesthetically motivated and relatively young collection. This shows that the collection was formed by an artist rather than an art historian or anthropologist who would be expected to be interested in knowing more contextual information.

The interview is followed by an introductory chapter, 'Ceramics in Africa,' and then by essays that group the work by region which give context to pots in collection. This includes notes on their function, production and collection. Each region is introduced archaeologically and on early historical lines contributing to the archaeological narrative of African ceramics. The pots in the collection vary

²⁴ See discussion of Marla Berns' writing on pages 33-34.

in age from the eighth century to the twentieth. The majority are from the nineteenth and twentieth century.

All items are vessels but several are embellished with human and animal figures. Many of the vessels' overall shapes are anthropomorphic. This brings to mind both Rawson's and Cardew's comments on pots having human characteristics and because it is such a large collection, once again emphasises the major role that anthropomorphism plays in ceramics from Africa in particular.

Technologies, tools and processes: contesting a narrow view

Where ceramic technologies that involve glazing or kiln technology are used, such as in many urban centres north of the Sahara, they are mentioned but not generally subject to detailed analysis, in the key survey texts. However, Barley (1994) transcends the stereotype, by challenging the presumption that kiln and semi-kiln technologies are not present on the continent, especially South of the Sahara. He draws attention to technological subtleties: from updraught kilns used widely in urban North Africa, to hollowed-out termite hills of the Thonga of Mozambique and South Africa (1994: 41,44). Apart from a kiln-fired stoneware vase probably made by Kwali at the Abuja Pottery Training Centre and juxtaposed with one of her earthenware water pots (1994: 75), electric, oil or gas-fired kiln technology that arrived with European colonial interventions or white settler communities is not considered as 'African' within Barley's text.

Chris Spring (2009) contends that potting wheels are limited to urban North Africa, yet he acknowledges that pots in other regions have been made by processes of circular rotation, which is related to wheel technology. Thus Spring brings some subtlety to the debate but also appears to be avoiding the problematic issue of colonial introduction of the pottery wheel to places including Nigeria and South Africa. This is somewhat in line with his resistance to portraying African history primarily in terms of interventions from 'outside' as he remarked in the introductory chapter in the same text. However, it denies African identity to the work of many Africans who come from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds that are not indigenous black Africans such as

descendants of European and Asian settlers in South Africa who regularly work with wheel technology today.

South Africa: an internal critique

In South Africa there is a well-established studio ceramics scene that is well-promoted and is accompanied by a body of critical writing unparalleled on the continent, even though it is significantly smaller than in England and the US. In reviewing these publications, particular attention is paid to the ways writers, critics and artists frame South African ceramics as 'African' or how they connect works to the location that they were made in. In South Africa, the meaning of an 'African' label attached to a work can form deeply racist connotations in older texts that conflate 'black', 'native' and 'African,' when describing people, or can refer to a more inclusive and generalised geographic description that is now more normally claimed by the broader South African population.

Post Apartheid, the attitude to who is labelled 'African' is much broader and has to some extent lost derogatory, racial meanings. Instead it has become associated with a new, inclusive, democratic state. The diverse population produce ceramics within (and across) different traditions using many different techniques that draw on sources from home and abroad, making it a good example of the diversity of what can be considered African production, and the many points of intersection, mixing and hybridity between Africa and the West.

To make sense of the varied production in South Africa several writers have grouped makers into themes when writing about them. For example, Wendy Gers (2012), in an essay that urges South African ceramic artists (and critics, scholars and writers) to be more critical of the country's ceramics, sets up five categories. Gers' categories are 'Utilitarian Domestic Ware', 'White Light and Music', 'Afro-contemporary', 'Personal mythologies' and 'Open Source Digital Futures'. Of interest to this review are 'Afro-contemporary' and 'Personal mythologies' because they lend themselves to debates about national identities.



*Figure 8: Dyalvane, A (Imiso ceramics).
Date not supplied. Scarified Pod.
Earthenware. Photo: Imiso Ceramics.*

Within the category 'Afro-contemporary' the 'Afro' is a reference to work that evokes or references African indigenous material cultures including vessels by Ian Garrett (figures 9 and 11) and Andile Dyalvane (figure 8). Pieces in this category appear to refer to, resemble or draw inspiration from past and present South African vessel making traditions such as necked *uphiso* forms associated with domestic Zulu beer ceramics. These works tend to be hand built and low-fired. They have an earthy colour palette, geometric decoration and deceptively simple closed pot forms. They are exemplary displays of craftsmanship and simple, elegant design. The *C3°1012: Earth Revelations*²⁵ exhibition at the Amaridian Gallery, New York in 2012 epitomises the work that might be described as 'Afro-contemporary' by Gers. Gers' use of this label is a complex critique in that she looks at layers of meaning rather than simply grouping together works that would not look out of place in an ethnographic museum 40 years ago. Gers uses the term 'creolisation' to refer to Garrett's manner of using so-called 'African' references. Garrett describes his own work as:

²⁵ Ceramists Garrett, Sbonelo Luthuli, Jabu Nala, Thembi Nala, Ntombi Nala, Clive Sithole and Nicolas Sithole and textile artist Aboubakar Fofana feature in this group show.

hand-built burnished ²⁶ vessels that are inspired by ancient ceramic techniques. These works combine archetypal vessel forms from pre-historic Europe and India, which reflect my ancestral background, with elements and ideas influenced by the contemporary African traditions that I have studied and collected. (2010)



*Figure 9: Garrett, I. Date not supplied. Leaf Thread. Pit-fired terracotta. 27x30cm
Photo: Ian Garrett.*

Amongst many influences Garrett is here referring to his own substantial collection of contemporary Zulu beer ceramics and his postgraduate research which focused on the practice of Zulu ceramics master, Nesta Nala. Garrett co-authored an article on Zulu ceramics with Perrill in 2010 ²⁷. This highlights the relevance and profound influence of experiencing objects and techniques first hand for makers. Nesta Nala's influence on Garrett is interesting in that it traverses language, culture and gender differences that are perhaps a sign of the particular political situation at the time of Garrett's university education: the euphoric 1990s. This also indicates that Garrett has engaged seriously with Nesta Nala's practice in terms of material, form and decoration. This Afro-

²⁶ Burnishing in ceramics is a technique where leather-hard or dry unfired pots are polished to a smooth and shiny surface using a hard, smooth object such as a pebble or spoon. If fired to a relatively low temperature they retain their shine.

²⁷ '25 Years of Zulu Ceramic Innovation', *Ceramics Art and Perception*. Issue 85.

contemporary is original work that echoes both ancient and contemporary practices through thorough research and observation.



Figure 10: Nala, Nesta. Acquired in 2002. Figure 11: Garrett, Ian. Acquired in 1999. Hand coiled, burnished ceramic. 27x30cm. Red Jar. Hand coiled, burnished ceramic. Corobrik Collection. Photo: Courtesy of the Corobrik collection. Photo: Courtesy of the Corobrik collection at Pretoria Art Museum. Corobrik collection at Pretoria Art Museum.

Gers interestingly refers to the work of Cathy Glenday as ‘infused with her African experience’ (2012: 56), but then puts the word ‘African’ in inverted commas when referring to the brightly patterned tableware produced in the 1990s by Clementina Van Der Walt. This indicates Gers’s tentative use of the term for work that could be considered as presenting a twee, stereotypical African decoration with potentially derogatory associations.



Figure 12: Van der Walt, Clementina. 1994. Slipcast earthenware with underglaze painting. Private Collection.

In the section entitled 'Personal mythologies' Gers writes about Nel and Wilma Cruise, among others, whose work represents or presents personal narratives and emotions that are grounded in their localised experience of living and working in South Africa. Cruise uses installation, casting and found objects and Nel makes small figurines, moulded plates and dishes with decorative tin glaze. The 'African-ness' of this work is located in the artist's experience of daily life on the continent rather than in a specific material or process.

The 'African-ness' both directly described and subtly inferred in Gers' categories is not clearly defined and is even slightly contradictory, indicating the continued re-negotiation and nuance required when using the term as a stylistic descriptor, material-cultural designation or a geographic point of origin. Like Gers, Cruise (1991), Garth Clark and Lynne Wagner (1974), also used thematic categories to divide up and make sense of the varied practices of ceramists in South Africa in their respective surveys of the South African ceramics scene. These writers incorporate aesthetically and ideologically diverse ceramic practices into single critiques, under a superficial national or regional categorisation.

Wilma Cruise's *Contemporary Ceramics in South Africa* (1991), the last survey text published in the subject area in South Africa, was published more than twenty years ago, which reflects Gers and Frank's concern that there has been a dearth of recent literature. This suggests that an updated survey of the territory may be either timely or perhaps no longer a relevant format for considering the diversity and range of production across the country. Cruise's important text introduces what are essentially profiles of ceramists working in South Africa with a sense of excitement and urgency at the possibilities offered by the new-found popularity, profusion and acceptance of many styles of ceramic production, especially those that deviated from the dominant paradigm of mid-century productions in the Anglo-Oriental style.

As Cruise points out in her introduction, the Anglo-Oriental style tended to dominate the studio ceramics scene until the late 1980s²⁸. According to Cruise this dominance was achieved through the prolific work of popular individual

²⁸ In Europe and the US Anglo-Orientalism had ceased to be the dominant style much earlier.

ceramists, such as Esias Bosch, Hym Rabinowitz, Andrew Walford and Digby Hoets and through local juried exhibitions. These were led by critics who seemed to favour a version of Leach's philosophies and aesthetics above all else. Despite the counter-cultural associations with the Anglo-Oriental style in the UK (see Harrod, 2012: 354), in white South African society the prevalence of this type of ceramic practice is more accurately aligned with the economic and social dominance of white patriarchy. It was an extension of what was being made in England by strong, masculine white males such as Finch and Cardew. The lack of variation in studio ceramics in South Africa until the 1980s also reflected the country's cultural isolation due to international sanctions.

The timing of this book is also significant in the broader South African context because it was published in 1991 at the same time that Apartheid was being dismantled and just before a new democratic nation state formed in 1994. Cruise divides South African production into several categories: 'The Vessel', 'The Anglo-Oriental Tradition', 'The Creative Table', 'Fire as Expression', 'Sculpture', 'The Tradition of the Rural Potter', 'A Painter's Pottery', 'Ceramics in the Environment' and 'Expression in Two Dimensions'. The inclusion of 'The Tradition of Rural Pottery' as a category reflects the changing attitudes towards mostly black ceramists working in the rural areas whose work tended to have previously been ignored or subjected only to ethnographic research. Profiling a number of respected black artists within a book of predominantly white artists reflects an inclusive attitude. Including 'The Anglo-Oriental Tradition' as a category reflects the continuing relevance of this previously dominant style. This book remains the only significant single publication which indicates the breadth and diversity of studio ceramic production in South Africa. The extensive list of potter's biographies at the end of the publication is a significant resource as it includes details about lesser-known artists whose work is held in various public collections; information that is not published elsewhere.

The dominance of the 'Anglo-Oriental' tradition, and a far less inclusive attitude with regard to South African and Basotho ceramics, is clearly illustrated in Garth Clark and Lynne Wagner's *Potters of Southern Africa*, published in 1974 during the height of Apartheid. Clark and Wagner divide the field of ceramics into the 'Traditionalists' and the 'Expressionists'. Their 'Traditionalists' are those who

subscribe to what they describe as an introverted type of ceramics made in the spirit of Leach, Cardew and Ray Finch, where the 'self [is] sublimated in favour of impersonal perfection.' (1974: 9). The 'Expressionists' were interested in using the craft to realise an 'extroverted' self-expression. The authors explain that the "Traditionalists'" dominance was established historically, as they were showing and promoting work in South Africa and abroad during the 1950s and the 'Expressionists' only seemed to gain momentum from the 1960s. They mark Bosch's return to South Africa as the beginning of the 'pottery movement in South Africa' (1974: 9) in 1952. The pottery movement here refers to an increased practice of a form of studio ceramics from Britain and Europe that began to gain momentum in South Africa among white South Africans and European immigrants ²⁹.

With the exception of the ceramists at Rorke's Drift Evangelical Lutheran Crafts Centre and Thaba Bosigo, almost no mention is made of black ceramists. They describe the Rorke's Drift wares as 'the only contemporary African pottery in the Republic.' (1974: 144). By inference, contemporary here meant kiln-fired to a high temperature and African meant made by black artists. Clark and Wagner exclude all ceramics that falls outside the limited scope of production by individual white artists or small studios established and run by white ceramists who were usually trained in Europe. All production beyond the remit and control of white artists is described as 'tribal African pottery'. The following quote is patronising and gives a sense that this type of work is timeless and unvaried:

Tribal African pottery, attractive as it is, has understandably not had much effect or influence on any of the White potters, as the culture is alien and the work aesthetically and technically limited. Only the Rorke's Drift pottery has been able to produce a contemporary African style, using traditional forms and decorations as foundation. (Clark and Wagner, 1974: 11)

Clark and Wagner's text gives the impression that Western trends were more valuable than reflecting on local experience and on other local ceramics traditions.

²⁹ There was enough momentum by 1972 for the formation of a representative body now known as Ceramics Southern Africa.

Clark and Wagner are suggesting here that their definition of ceramics only included imported Western production methods such as stoneware firing and implies that the white ceramists were the only ones that mattered. Clark and Wagner seem to position the style of their ceramists of Southern Africa as not particularly 'African' at all unless reference in being made to the observation of the landscape, plants and animals. 'African' is also used to describe black ceramists. This racial descriptor is derogatory, but 'African' in terms of wildlife imagery and forms is positive. The landscape is less obviously racialised. However, many white South African ceramists working today who do not use landscape tropes, and so would not fit Clark and Wagner's definition of 'African', would reject the idea that their work is not inherently 'African'³⁰.

Felix Nilant's *Contemporary Pottery in South Africa* (1963) precedes Clark and Wagner's text with its even more dismissive attitude to indigenous ceramics traditions. It was written to provide advice on taste and quality in order to improve the small industrial earthenware industry in South Africa. Reading Nilant we are able to discern the way 'African-ness' was defined in ceramics from a white, patriarchal perspective in the 1950s and early 1960s. While Nilant's text focuses on early industrial earthenware³¹, rather than studio ceramics, it includes work by smaller semi-industrial studios that fit both categories. He also includes a lengthy section on stoneware potter, Bosch's studio and a chapter on hand built 'Native Pottery in Africa.'

Nilant is enthusiastic and positive about Bosch's Anglo-Oriental material sensibility, simple shapes and austere decoration. Bosch's stoneware is wood fired and opposed to mass production yet finds a place in a book on industrial ceramics, perhaps in part because he was an anomaly, and epitomised the masculine ideal of the lone rural stoneware potter, using materials around him. Praise is given to Bosch's subtle colour palette and glazing which would have been unusual at the time (1963: 55). Nilant deems Bosch to be making an

³⁰ Armstrong was an example. She stated emphatically that she identified as African and that her work is African because of her particular insider use of certain cultural and aesthetic elements. (Interview with Armstrong, Pietermaritzburg, 2011)

³¹ Further reading includes Gers' MA thesis: (2000). *South African studio ceramics, c.1950s: the Kalahari Studio, Drostdy Ware and Crescent Potteries*.

appropriately South African product: 'No imitation Delft or Stoke-en-Trent for him, or slick Bushman drawings on his pots which can be produced anywhere in the world.' (1963: 55) His 'African-ness' is located in his motifs, his use of local materials and his location.

Bosch is also the subject of an extensive monograph by Andree Bosch and Johann de Waal (1988) which documents Bosch's significant body of work: vessels in the Anglo-Oriental tradition, tile murals and large painted porcelain tiles. His work with Cardew in Nigeria, and Finch in the UK is documented in the monograph, again reminding us of the pivotal role of Cardew in links between South African and British ceramics.



Figure 13: Kalahari ware charger. Earthenware. Circa 1950s. 18.4x4.5 cm. Collection: Wendy Gers. Photo: Damien Artus.



Figure 14: Kalahari ware ovoid charger. Circa 1950s. 16x14.5x3cm. Collection: Wendy Gers. Photo: Damien Artus.

Though Nilant's book is now dated and, by current standards is unacceptably sexist and racist, he directly addresses and promotes the design and production of ceramic objects that look African, or communicate some form identity that aligns them with their place of origin. For example, on Kalahari ware³² Nilant writes that:

Kalahari ceramics is one of the new arts of Africa. They embody typical African tribal decorations, coupled with shapes based on calabash gourds, elongated seed pods and other objects found only

³² Started in 1949 by two Latvian artists: Aleksander and Elma Klopranows. They made crockery, architectural and sculptural ceramics. They represented South Africa at International Exhibition of Ceramics, Washington, 1953 and International Ceramic Exhibition of Modern Ceramics in Cannes, where they won gold diplomas. (Nilant, 1963: 43)

in Africa. The colours and red clay of which Kalahari ceramics are made are characteristically African, so are the methods of support. All Kalahari ceramics have another characteristic - an unobtrusive adaptation of contemporary Western art. It uses this in two ways, in its shapes and its glaze. (1963: 43)

For Nilant, using red clay and forms or decorations that include plants, animals and stylised images of black people looks African (figures 13, 14).

These industries were controlled by white ceramists in a political climate that gave them absolute power and so Nilant's claims of 'authenticity' through using black labour should be contested. The role of black South Africans, as cheap labour and as anonymous designers, in constructing a sense African 'authenticity' in these industries, is highlighted in Nilant's description of Crescent wares:

All the decorating of 'Crescent Ware' is done by African artists. Even suggestions about shape and designs of such novelties as ashtrays and wall plaques are sought from Africans so that the pottery turned out will have a stamp of authenticity about them (1963: 48).

Nilant (1963: 48) describes typical Crescent ware decoration as 'indigenous motifs applied in sgraffito' and that:

[t]his technique is something that comes naturally to African artists. [sic] and is reminiscent of the Bushman paintings of the past. Africans have a keen sense of humour and derive great satisfaction from their work. They never seem to run out of ideas, and the decorating of the ware is left entirely to the individual artist. In this way the artists are able to produce crisply individual pieces as only Africans can.

Despite Nilant's praise, the expertise, creativity and ability of the black worker is not valued any more than as a machine, production technique or tool would be. Black employees are not identified by name and their work is not attributed to the individual maker. They always work under a white, usually male director or designer, which makes this comment derogatory and patronising. The idea of the anonymous maker adds to the exotic premise in this writing, where the subjectivity of the artist is denied.

Nilant's attitude to other kinds of ceramics made by black artists also demonstrates the political balance of power at that time. There are no direct negative suggestions in the chapter 'Native Pottery in Africa', but the general

approach is simplistic and patronising because no ceramists, families or small enterprises are named individually as the white ceramists are in the other chapters. Instead, fixed tribal distinctions are given, in line with now outdated ethnographic practices. From Nilant's writing, it appears that the 'South African Bantu', as he described them, are homogenous, though in reality they consist of several different language-based cultural groups with a variety of ceramic traditions. There is also no sense of any timescale. Non-industrial techniques are only approved by Nilant if performed by professional white males such as Bosch.

This literature reflects a variety of attitudes to South African ceramics — from exclusivity within the white establishment as reflected in Nilant's patronising attitude in 1963, to Gers' positive encouragement for makers working in many different styles and contexts in 2012. The use of categories of production to analyse South African ceramics is becoming broader and more nuanced, reflecting realities of production. Subjects Nilant treats lightly, inaccurately, and in a paternalistic manner, especially the description of 'Native' production, have been significantly revised in subsequent research and publications. Within this new body of work, the most well-documented example is Zulu ceramics.

Zulu Ceramics: a positive shift in documenting practice

Frank (2007: 17) said that despite the lack of critical and scholarly critique of African ceramics, there has been increasing attention paid to previously ignored areas, such as the study of Zulu ceramics. In contrast to Nilant's approach to 'Native Pottery' the 1960s, this growing body of research has resulted in an increased international profile of Zulu ceramics. Through the work of scholars, galleries and artists in South Africa, these pots continue to amass international esteem. In this review, Zulu ceramics is an example of how African ceramics that are low-fired and perceived as authentically indigenous have been subject to greater scholarly and media attention.

As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, Edmund de Waal included an entry called 'Zulu' in *The Pot Book* (2011: 305). The image in the book (figure 15) is of a round pot with an *imbenge* (cover) made from woven telephone wire.

It comes from the British Museum collection and was also illustrated in Barley's *Smashing Pots: Feats of Clay from Africa*, indicating that individual objects from this prominent London collection of ceramics continue to shape the way entire traditions are perceived. The image caption does not indicate the source of the pot, which is problematic in the sense that the specific British Museum pot may continue to be read as an archetype even though de Waal's text is nuanced and explicitly describes the illustrated pot as an 'example' within a historic and continuing tradition (2011: 305). Though not completely comprehensive, de Waal's text touches on issues of gendered production, materials and authenticity, and patronage and value, which are addressed in more detail by a number of scholars in visual art, anthropology and archaeology.



Figure 15: Pot. Early 20th Century. Earthenware with imbenge of woven, plastic-coated electrical wire. 21x25cm. British Museum Collection. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Research by Ian Calder and Juliet Armstrong on Zulu ceramics was underway by the time Cruise published *Contemporary Ceramics* in 1991³³. Throughout the 1990s their research continued and eventually its significance was disseminated through public lectures, academic papers presentations and through the publishing of *Ubumba: Aspects of indigenous ceramics in KwaZulu-*

³³ Correspondence with Calder, August 2012.

Natal (1998), edited by Calder and curator of the Tatham Art Gallery, Brendan Bell ³⁴.

This significant research into Zulu ceramics resulted in a detailed paper by Armstrong, Reusch and Whitelaw (2008: 545) which focused on the 'cosmological, functional and economic context of beer-pot manufacture and use'. The authors stated that aesthetics and the motives of individual ceramists were outside their remit despite the authors' range of professional expertise (artist, anthropologist and archaeologist, respectively). While every paper could not explicate every angle of an area of research, the exclusion of aesthetics and individual is symbolic of the general approach to ceramics in South Africa.

Armstrong's chapter 'Ceremonial beer pots and their usage' in the interdisciplinary compilation *Zulu Identities: Being Zulu, Past and Present* (2008: 414-417) focusses predominantly on the social use and technical production of Zulu ceramics for serving and making sorghum beer (*utswala*). Aesthetic considerations include the importance of black colouring in some types of pots to honour the ancestors. The placement of decoration is described and accounted for as a practical concern with some decorative and social relevance. This short text seems to be intended as a general guide as no specific ceramists are named in the body of the text. The approach is sociological rather than artistic in focus and the pots are considered in the context of their social and ritual use for making, serving and drinking beer.

In contrast to the more anthropological or cultural studies approaches, Elizabeth Perrill (2012) discusses the aesthetic qualities of work by individual makers associated with this category of ceramics in more depth. Her recent publication *Zulu Pottery* is a detailed and concentrates on contemporary Zulu ceramics. She discusses them in historic, social, cultural, and technical contexts respectively. In an accessible academic text Perrill maintains a fine balance between the generalised idea of what Zulu ceramics have popularly come to be

³⁴ This catalogue was put together for the Ubumba exhibition at the Tatham Art Gallery, in association with the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg (now University of KwaZulu-Natal). It contains essays on Zulu beer ceramics, Ardmore ceramics, some figurative work by Hezekile Ntuli and local collections that include ceramics, covering varied production by *isiZulu* speakers in the region where it is the main language spoken.

known as (shiny, low-fired, blacked spherical pots made by women in rural areas) and the variations and nuances in actual practice by individuals. She discusses the work of seminal Zulu ceramics masters Nesta Nala, Azolina MaMncube Ngema, Miriam Mbonambi, Bina Gumede and the Magwaza family. Their ceramics became prized by people seeking pots for ritual and social use as well as by collectors, gallery owners and patrons, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. She also discusses the work of younger ceramists who make work that in some ways continues with, and in other ways deviates from, the work of the older masters.

Perrill's text is relatively inclusive in that artists such as Ian Garrett and Clive Sithole feature prominently. Neither conform to historic norms of Zulu ceramics production in terms of gender (male rather than female) and location (Sithole, urban and Garrett, outside of KwaZulu-Natal) as defined by anthropologists. Perrill demonstrates that Zulu ceramics are currently considered an important genre in international collecting and within African ceramics scholarship. She says that a more sensitive awareness of the subtlety of this practice is required by galleries, collectors, scholars and the general public.

Theses such as John Steele's doctorate (2010) follow on from the example of scholarly writing on Zulu ceramics, exemplified by Perrill's own thesis (2008). Steele undertook significant research into the relatively unknown and undocumented rural ceramics practices in the Eastern Cape, highlighting the work of Alice Gqa Nongebeza and Debora Nomathamsanqa Ntloya. Steele took the lead from research in KwaZulu-Natal on Zulu ceramics to a different geographic area and ceramics tradition.

Precedents for this kind of art history include the works of Sandra Klopper (1992, 2007) and Anitra Nettleton (2008, 2007) who have written extensive texts that offer a non-euro-centric and nuanced approach to Southern African art and material culture. They address spiritual and political aspects of wood carving, beadwork, and other media. Nationalisms, identities and politics are used to give a social context to the work they focus on. Traditions are acknowledged as fluid and constantly evolving, and the notion of authenticity is questioned and constantly redefined.

Zulu ceramics also feature within texts that explore ceramics more broadly. They are included in Vincentelli's *Women Potters: Transforming Traditions* (2003) alongside many other ceramics traditions practiced mainly by women. Like Perrill, Vincentelli's background is in Art History. In *Women Potters*, Vincentelli uses beer ceramics from KwaZulu-Natal as one of several examples of women's ceramics traditions in South Africa. Nesta and Jabu Nala are specifically mentioned, emphasising their success in international markets for exhibition or gallery pieces, rather than as pots to be sold alongside items of domestic or ceremonial use. Other examples of Southern African ceramics that Vincentelli discusses include Ardmore, Rorke's Drift Mission and Arts Centre, and Endlovini Mission. Vincentelli's text emphasises the tendency for women to be involved with low-technology hand-building.

Zulu beer ceramics in particular has given rise to a considerable amount of detailed scholarship to be held as an example of how African ceramics traditions can be studied. The studio ceramics world and British-style art school ceramics education in South Africa has played a significant role in this work, particularly in the research and exhibitions discussed. The gap between the traditions of kiln-fired studio ceramics and rural pit-fired traditions is becoming smaller and even less distinct with the participation of rural beer ceramics makers such as Nesta Nala in the galleries alongside kiln-fired works. Zulu beer ceramics, beyond its value as an interesting art form, has also provided scholars with opportunities and examples to address marginal identities especially those relating to gender. African ceramics can expose and promote previously marginalised narratives, which is very much in sympathy with the restorative humanising intention of this research.

Ceramics and Power: 'African-ness,' race and gender

In *Women and Ceramics: Gendered Vessels* (2000) Vincentelli undertook a detailed study of gender in ceramics. With Vincentelli's feminist perspective, it seems unsurprising that case studies and examples include those drawn from South and Central America and Africa, regions that are often omitted from other survey of ceramics. She perceives both women and ceramics to be

marginalised areas in visual art scholarship. Vincentelli also sees making ceramics as an empowering creative and economic opportunity for women. Examples are drawn from many different locations and traditions, including ancient Nok and Ife terracotta sculptures found in modern Nigeria (2000: 24-27), Berber ceramics in North Africa, various traditions in Gambia, and wheel throwing at Abuja, mentioning Kwali (figure 16) and Cardew (2000: 49). Kwali is compared to Maria Martinez (a comparison also used by Harrod (2012: 265)) in a discussion of the cult of individuality that Vincentelli posits as a Western art world phenomenon that has affected the careers and production of a number of women ceramists through their dealing with other cultures.

The right to publish this image has not been granted.

Figure 16: Kwali, L. 1966. Stoneware, made at the Pottery Training Centre, Abuja. Victoria and Albert Museum Collection.

This feminist approach is also followed by Wilma Cruise and Marion Arnold on late twentieth century ceramics in South Africa. For these writers the material itself and the way it is used by women artists is often subversive. Clay is perceived as marginalised material in contemporary art and women artists have

been able to use in ways that play off or defy its own perceived marginalization. Arnold, in *Women and Art in South Africa* (1996), draws attention to the relationship between ceramists Fée Halsted and Bonnie Ntshalintshali (1967-1999), which is discussed further in chapter 3. Cruise (2005) focusses an essay on a teaching lineage of women ceramists in KwaZulu-Natal: Hilda Ditchburn, Juliet Armstrong, Fée Halsted and Bonnie Ntshalintshali and the continuing legacy of the Ardmore studio. These quietly defiant women all draw on their local environment for source material and make strikingly individual work that draws on European, industrial, and studio ceramics traditions. Candice Vurovecs produced substantial documentation on Hilda Ditchburn in her MAFA thesis (2008), highlighting her research and teaching of stoneware production in South Africa that predates Bosch.

Recent new writing on paperclay (the primary medium I have used in the practical part of this research) can be aligned with gender-specific production within African ceramics. Leanne Frisinger's MAFA dissertation (2012), for example, presents, contextualises and discusses recent paperclay ceramics made in South Africa by female artists. This includes work by Juliet Armstrong, Betsy Nield, Lisa Firer and Frisinger's own work. Frisinger emphasises paperclay's hybrid, synthetic and postmodern properties and how these are relevant to South African ceramists, including those whose work deals with social issues. For example Frisinger often uses family military images printed onto delicate paper porcelain vessels (figure 17). Visually and materially they move between permanence and fragility, clarity and vagueness, expressing discomfort and ambiguity mixed with nostalgia. Frisinger also discusses work by Armstrong which has an anti-apartheid undertone. This political message is expressed through small formalist sculptural works that are contrasting assemblages of dark and light and rough and smooth materials. Frisinger draws attention to moral and political discussions by artists who also use paperclay. Frisinger goes as far as to suggest that paperclay is a useful, popular and appropriate material in the South African socio-political context as an alternative to the materials common to a male-dominated Anglo-Oriental ceramic practice.



Figure 17: Frisinger, L. 2010. Detail of War Poem/Right in two. Paper porcelain, photo lithographic printing. Photo: L Frisinger, 2011.

Frisinger also aligns herself to the studio ceramics movement, which is normally assumed to be based on the philosophy and practice of Leach, Cardew and William Staite Murray, because of her attitude to material preparations. She prides herself in preparing her clays, glazes and printing pigments herself to suit her own purposes instead of relying on ready to use materials from a commercial supplier. Paperclay, Frisinger argues, is impure and synthetic and therefore in opposition to Leach's philosophies that sanctified the material — clay — as a pure substance from the earth. Paperclay offers ceramic artists a degree of 'freedom' (of technical and creative possibilities) which is a significant motivation to use material. Frisinger offers an exploratory materialist approach, emphasising the formal and physical attributes of the material above conceptual meaning. Where concept is discussed it is closely tied up with discussions of material qualities, such as the medium's translucency, dry strength, workability and suitability for printing.

South African artists continue to look towards the UK for working methods in ceramics. Frisinger's research shows that Juliet Armstrong was influenced by London-based ceramicist and paper-maker, Carol Farrow in the 1980s. Armstrong spent time studying ceramics and glass in the UK at Leicester

Polytechnic 1973-1974. This adds a further dimension to British connections in her work.

The role of craft media in illuminating issues surrounding HIV/AIDS awareness is another growing area of research and production. Sharon Lee Weaving focuses on narrative in Ardmore³⁵ ceramics and directly addresses themes relating to HIV/AIDS awareness in her dissertation: *Ceramic Narrative: storytelling and Ardmore Ceramic studio*. She critically reads tableaux, figurines and functional vessels that deal with issues surrounding the pandemic in the context of both Zulu oral traditions, and narrative in European ceramics. The appropriation of elements of European ceramic factory wares in Ardmore wares is combined with social issues of local importance, and relevance to other parts of the continent. This makes Weaving's argument pertinent to this research. Animal forms are common motifs on Ardmore wares used to explore these issues, placing them within a related symbolic language to my own ceramic production expanded upon in chapter 4.

The Siyazama Project and the Hillcrest Aids Centre are organisations that spread HIV/AIDS awareness through craft practices of beadwork and doll-making. There are several examples of collaborative, community-based initiatives in the exhibition *The Global Africa Project* which may show that it has become a strong theme or topic in African production (see chapter 2). These community-empowerment projects are not only intended as ways to help victims of the pandemic. They are combined with awareness messages and seem to be an emergent genre of craft in the KwaZulu-Natal region. They have a potentially significant role to play in utilising craft media to produce work with conceptual depth. The balance of power between project managers or initiators and participants is a point of interest. It may be possible that some of these initiatives involve patronising neo-colonial elements, or do they present new models of practice?

³⁵ Ardmore Ceramic Art is a studio in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands that produces distinctive decorated, decorative earthenware in a collaborative manner. The ceramics made by artists at Ardmore typically include modelled and intricately painted animal, plant and human forms.

A few monographs and extended catalogues on individual South African ceramists have been produced, indicating their prominence and international esteem. Not only does their presence indicate their standing in the community but it also adds to the promotional literature that ensures their continuing dominance within the field.

Two books, *A Curious World*, (2010) and *Hylton Nel*, (2003), have been published on Hylton Nel by contemporary art gallery owner and curator, Michael Stevenson who represents Nel. The earlier monograph takes the form of an extended interview between artist and writer and explores his influences, inspiration, biographic details, technique and outlook on art and life. The more recent publication features excerpts from journals and letters which are juxtaposed with images of his work, studio and home. They give the viewer a sense of the artist as politically aware, and emphasise the autobiographical elements of his work. His plates and bowls feature his friends or political issues with acute personal resonance. The personal nature of both these publications complements the personal dimensions of his work.

Retief Van Wyk produced *The Ceramic Art of Robert Hodgins* with a contribution by prominent art critic Sean O' Toole (2008). O' Toole's writing eloquently describes Hodgins's complex sources of inspiration during early life (growing up in 1930s London, watching theatre and discovering literature) and lends critical weight to his ceramics. Van Wyk's contributions put Hodgins' work in an international context, making comparisons with both Pablo Picasso and Nel. Hodgins, primarily a painter, produced a significant body of ceramics over more than twenty years, facilitated by Van Wyk, a full time ceramist and glass maker. Hodgins' foray into ceramics is comparable with that by Pablo Picasso or Wilfredo Lam who made or decorated some ceramics but are known for art made in other media. Any direct connection to Africa or South Africa is difficult to discern, but can be picked from Hodgins's keen observation of people around him and through clues in some titles such as *Kiki Meisie* and *Suurbek*, which are Afrikaans, or *Girlic*, the colloquial English diminutive that is typically used in South Africa to refer affectionately to a young or small girl.

Although markedly different in material and style, both Nel and Hodgins produced mostly painted plates and pots, many of which include figurative elements which draw on personal experience and anecdotes, satire and humorous social comment. Both also respond to local and international political events; Nel is fairly direct in this, using text and careful line drawings, whilst Hodgins alludes more indirectly by painting a 'cast' of characters ('businessmen, ruffians, hags and generals' (Van Wyk, 2008: 100)) with an efficient use of minimal brushwork. In these publications Nel and Hodgins are both supported by the contemporary Fine Art establishment that they participate in.

As a counterpoint to these beautifully presented and expensively produced books is Garrett's MAFA dissertation: *Nesta Nala: ceramics, 1985-1995* (1997). It is a significant, though unpublished research paper on the potter. It could have been the basis of a monograph if Nesta Nala had worked under different political circumstances and had stronger financial or gallery backing. Nesta Nala's black, rural, informally educated status relegates her story to a university library shelf, for the moment. If the racial power balance had begun to shift at an earlier stage in South African history, perhaps the story of her mastery of technique and form would be recorded in a more exposed public forum. Perrill remarks that, 'as is the case with many foundational artists, Nala's passion for her art did not lead to financial stability.' (2012: 57). The story of a ceramist such as Hilda Ditchburn, primarily a teacher, but a significant technical pioneer in South Africa, tells another marginalised narrative that is only recorded in dissertation form. Ditchburn, a student of Dora Billington, was a promoter of the work of both Cardew and Leach.

It has been important to locate writing on contemporary African ceramics within Africa rather than just relying on Western interpretations. Within Western or international texts in English that explore artistic ceramics broadly, the literature indicates the relative invisibility of contemporary African ceramists and African themes when compared to artists and their work from other geographic categories. Contemporary African ceramics might still be a marginal interest, but its reputation is gaining ground. Fixed definitions of what makes an object African are more and more contested, from Nilant's simple, assured definitions to Gers' tentative and nuanced use of the term. Where imported iterations of

British studio ceramics are produced they are still usually separated from indigenous traditions. Where the two are brought together in the same publication they are considered different categories of production.

The quality and depth of research and publications on ceramics in South Africa is gradually increasing, and slowly being transformed, with great emphasis in research now placed continuing 'indigenous' traditions. But at the top end, publications on ceramics are still dominated by accounts of the work of white males who make kiln-fired ceramics. 'African-ness' or 'South African-ness' seems to be rooted in many different ways from more subtle iterations of personal experience to techniques such as pit-firing that are authentic in their very long historical presence in the region.

From the texts reviewed we can conclude that writers have presented many different positions on, or versions of African-ness. Race, geographic location, history and technique or style are all implicated in this heterogenous picture. Within texts that use Africa or an African region or country as their title (for example *Potters of Southern Africa*) all works discussed are not necessarily considered African. African has been used as an ahistorical, racial term in many of the older texts which perpetuates the myth that black people are the only 'true' Africans. Describing Western techniques such as glazing, electric kiln firing and wheel-thrown work made on the continent as 'African' is relatively recent and tends to be limited to South Africa where there has been a political prerogative to be culturally inclusive for the last 20-30 years. Racial and stylistic or technical versions of Africa rather than geographic are the strongest tendencies in the older literature and still have some bearing on newer literature. On the whole, the newer texts try to acknowledge multiple readings and seem to use the geographic as the all encompassing term for African ceramics. The texts also reveal that ceramics is a good window for observing and understanding sociological relations across cultures and within them. They reflect the experience of the political, social, gendered and economic conditions on the continent, such as Apartheid in South Africa and colonialism and other social structures such as Barley's *Smashing Pots*. In this way, ceramics, in its context, shows the diversity and complexity of the experience of being from Africa, at the intersections of race, history and the hybrid international present. It

shows oppressive and domineering attitudes such as in the earlier South African texts, and shows examples of rectifying historic power imbalances such as the large body of texts about Zulu ceramics.

A recurring thematic element in writing about African ceramics was anthropomorphism. It appears to be widespread across the continent, historically and in the present. And while anthropomorphism is certainly not an exclusively African theme, observing this tendency in the texts has made me see the symbolic potential for the maker constructing African-ness in clay in a way that is not necessarily bound by race, history or material.

Publications on African ceramics often coincide with exhibitions and public display. It is to this presentation of African ceramics, in the context of museums and collections, starting with the important example of the British Museum, to which I will now turn.

Chapter 2: Exhibitions and Museum displays

The Museum and African ceramics today

Museum displays and temporary exhibitions are an important platform for examining intersections between Africa and the West. Jonathan Garratt, a ceramist from Dorset, for example, uses objects from the British museum as sources for his ceramic forms. Western museums such as the British Museum provide an important bridge between the public (including artists) in the West and African objects. Many Western objects including historic European factory porcelains appear in African Museums³⁶. The museum is therefore a site of interaction between objects and artists.

The museum's educational role has expanded in the last 40 years, as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill describes in her work *The Educational Role of the Museum*. Namely, it is necessary for museum staff to 'accept a broader social responsibility' (1999:4). This involves acknowledging the broader cultural and political sphere that museums form part of. Though this may seem obvious in current museum practice, it is worth highlighting because of the dramatic changes to the interpretation and presentation of 'African Art' in museums since the 19th century. This has led to the potential for broader cultural understanding in line with the democratisation that Hooper-Greenhill writes about.

Despite a drive to democratise and open up the museum through self-reflective and transparent practices, 'grey areas' remain. These include the histories of museums, that cannot be erased, which continue to affect the way a collection is seen despite the best intentions of curators to make real changes.

Chris Spring, curator at the British Museum, says that the museum's Sainsbury Africa Galleries³⁷ are 'a physical manifestation' of changing perspectives on African objects in museums (2008: 6). Spring is referring to a move away from pejorative ethnographic associations to a more detailed and varied

³⁶ For example, Juliet Armstrong selected a Sévres bowl from 1910 as an object that inspired her from the Durban Art Gallery collection for the exhibition *All fired up* in 2012.

³⁷ Open to the public since 2001, it incorporates the African collections previously held at the ethnographic museum, the Museum of Mankind, 1970-1997.

understanding of African art in which ceramics plays a key role. Hooper-Greenhill wrote extensively on this transformative potential of museums. Writing in the 1990s, Hooper-Greenhill reflected on important changes to the way museums are organised and the messages they communicate:

Museums have become self-conscious (at last!) about their power to interpret and represent 'reality' in all its rich variations. This self-consciousness can be observed across the world, and has come about in large part because of the responses (and often extreme resentment) of those being interpreted and represented. (1994: 20)

This 'self-consciousness' and accountability underlies changes that better represent various communities in museums. Reinterpreting ceramics, to represent African communities more appropriately is one of these areas. Evidence of transformation in museums with particular reference to representing Africa can be assessed by looking at two major London museums with large collections of ceramics: the Victoria and Albert Museum, historically associated with objects from Asia and Europe, and with an emphasis on design; and the British Museum, with mostly archaeological objects from all over the world. A move towards Hooper-Greenhill's transparency or self-consciousness in smaller museums in the US and South Africa are then discussed to illustrate the application of Hooper-Greenhill's theory regarding the representation of Africa in other contexts.

The Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum: A problem of categorisation

Two major London museums provide contrasting representations of Africa through the collection and display of ceramics. Unlike the British Museum, the extensive and significant collection of decorative arts at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London, is today not particularly known for its African objects. As late as the 1990s museum policy documents stated that officially material from Africa was not collected³⁸. Malcolm Baker (1997: 20) calls attention to the apparent, 'almost complete absence of African artefacts' at the V&A, in stark contrast to the prominent Indian, Chinese and Japanese collections. If the V&A's mandate is to promote good design, by definition, the lack of African

³⁸ Arts of Africa: Design, Culture and History since 1851, Saturday 17 November 2012, V&A, London.

objects, whether intended or not, implies that good design does not come from Africa.

Baker explains that African objects were not significantly collected because they were perceived as examples of ethnography rather than art and design and thus fell outside of the V&A's remit (1997: 20). Ethnographic museum collections have been associated with imperialism, colonialism and the establishment of Anthropology as a profession. This was recently reiterated by Rodney Harrison (2013: 8). This designation as 'ethnographic' in Victorian Britain placed African work in a completely different context that was ancient and primitive, and suggests it could not be compared to (and is lower down in the hierarchy of value than) work from other parts of the British Empire.

Baker also calls it a symptom of British national identity construction during the height of British Imperialism, implying that Britain's view of itself was defined by what it was not, its known 'Others,' which included its colonies. Barbara Black (2000: 11) reflects on the role of museum collections, such as the V&A and the British Museum, in 19th century Britain:

The museum served to legitimate Britain's power at home and across the globe. It grew complicit with British imperialism, housing the spoils of colonization and guarding the growing perimeter of the British empire. One thinks of the enriching of the British Museum's African collections following the Benin Raid, showcased in the museum's 1897 exhibit of ivories and bronze plaques; the 1890 *Stanley and African* exhibition; or the 1899-1900 *British, Boer, and Black in Savage South Africa* exhibition. (Black, 2000: 11)

Like Baker, Black points out the link between the construction of national identities in 19th century Britain, indicating the celebration of power over others.

Recently, with an air of transparency, the V&A has made a more active attempt to exhibit African content that the museum holds despite its historic policy. 4300 objects (within holdings of approximately 2,241,718) that date from the inception of the museum to the present day have now been identified as made in Africa (or strongly connected with Africa) as part of the Heritage Lottery Fund ³⁹

³⁹ A non-departmental public body who distribute National Lottery funds to heritage projects in the UK.

African Diaspora Research Project ⁴⁰. One of the outcomes of another, more recent Heritage Lottery Fund project which further investigates and disseminates the presence of Africa at the V&A was a small temporary display entitled *V&A Africa: Exploring Hidden Histories* ⁴¹. This display was intended to draw attention to some of these often overlooked African objects from the V&A's collection. Most pieces on display have never been shown in the museum before, despite a collecting history that goes back to the 1840s. There has been a conscious attempt to show objects from both North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa in the same space, addressing the continent as a whole, diverse space and presenting an alternative grouping or narrative to that which is presented in the permanent displays.



Figure 18: Morocco. Bottle. Circa 1870. Unglazed earthenware, tar. 50cm. Victoria and Albert Museum collection. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

⁴⁰ This project ran from 2005-2008 and formed part of a wider Capacity Building and Cultural Ownership Project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. V&A Collections Development Policy, April 2010, page 66.

⁴¹ Rooms 17a and 18a, 15 November 2012 to 3 February 2013.

Chris Spring attributes the exclusion of North Africa from discussions of African art by writers and curators as a major factor that prevents African art being perceived as diverse and highly differentiated (2008: 6) by the public in the West. For Spring, this approach 'simply reinforces popular notions of the African continent as a sub-Saharan entity, somehow imploded into a single country, frozen in time and hermetically sealed from the rest of the world.' (2008: 6). The permanent displays, through omission, still largely reflect that (particularly sub-Saharan) African objects were classified as ethnographic rather than art and design-oriented for most of the museum's history, but this small display demonstrated more progressive curatorial practice.



Figures 19 and 20: L: Ceramics from Algeria in display case. R: Detail of case label, Ceramics study gallery, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2011.

Included in the *Hidden Histories* display are two ceramic vessels. They are a water bottle ⁴² from Rabat, Morocco, circa 1870, similar to the one in figure 18 ⁴³, and a water jar ⁴⁴ from Algeria from before 1894. In the Ceramics Study Galleries ⁴⁵, other nineteenth century ceramic works from Algeria are kept in cases labeled 'Middle East', and three other pieces are on permanent display in the World Ceramics Room ⁴⁶. Contemporary ceramists associated with the

⁴² Earthenware, given by George Maw, no 248-1872.

⁴³ No. 249-1872.

⁴⁴ Tekelilt, Earthenware, no. 365-1894.

⁴⁵ Room 137, cases 132 and B1.

⁴⁶ Room 145, case 39, shelf 1.

continent including Magdalene Odundo ⁴⁷ and Lawson Oyekan ⁴⁸ are included in the World Ceramics Gallery and Contemporary Ceramics room respectively. Work by Siddig El Nigoumi (1931-1996) is in storage. In theory, work by all three artists could be sensibly exhibited in British ceramics displays because they all have significant ties to the UK through residence or education. Relative to other geographic areas and to the ceramics collection as a whole, Africa, and especially Africa as a label or category, remains significantly hidden in the museum's displays.



Figure 21: Acquired 1860-1869. Pot. Burnished earthenware with modelled decoration. British Museum Collection. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

There are occasionally examples of pots from other African sources that come to light in the museum's vast holdings. The V&A website includes a page entitled *Four Zulu Pots* (s.d.) which discusses four 19th century pots from what is now KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa ⁴⁹. They are not particularly good examples in terms of build quality and elegance of form. This is possibly because they were not originally owned by a specialist nor destined for a major museum. The

⁴⁷ Room 145, case 53.

⁴⁸ Contemporary ceramics room, Room 141, free standing

⁴⁹ They came to the V&A via the Museum of Practical Geology in 1901

British Museum has much better examples which are thinner and more delicate, likely to be specifically chosen for their high quality, including the *ukhamba* used by de Waal in his *The Pot Book* (figure 15) and figure 21, which is comparable in age to the V&A's pots. The V&A examples are rare because of their age. The delicate, low-fired nature of this way of making means that old examples are seldom whole. They are also of interest for their educational value — they demonstrate specific connections between Britain and its Natal colony. The web page suggests that two of the four pots were likely to have been made for non-Zulu, probably European, users, which throws up questions about traditions, uses and markets that are still relevant to Zulu ceramics making and scholarship today. The V&A examples do not reflect a typical reading of Zulu ceramics today, but they add some breadth and variation to the more orthodox offering at the British Museum, which consists mostly of vessels for making and serving beer.

The V&A has recently added an 'Africa Collecting Strategy' to its collections policies as a result of the Diaspora project. In this document, specific reference is made to the Making Ceramics Gallery which includes stoneware pieces made at the Abuja Pottery Training Centre, ceramics which belongs to the V&A and is displayed with other works from the region that is on loan from the British Museum. This combination is specifically mentioned in the current policy document as an example of how the V&A intends to pay more homage to African art and design without duplicating the role of the British Museum. This seems logical, in line with the institution's history, and is sensitive to current scholarship yet it also indicates that, 'historic or modern traditional African objects'⁵⁰ are still considered a different 'outsider' category of objects. Using the word 'traditional,' as it is used in the policy document is sometimes met with controversy because historically it implied art practices that were static. However, this word is no longer considered to imply an unchanging art form. For Susan Vogel: ' . . .there is simply no better word available for Africa's village arts, especially when they are considered in conjunction with other strains of African arts.' (1991:32). The V&A is not necessarily denigrating 'traditional' work but by placing it in a different (excluded) category it is not demonstrating significant

⁵⁰ V&A Collections Development Policy, April 2010, page 67.

change. In the Abuja case they are regarded appropriately as important context and background to the stoneware pieces but it is unlikely that the museum would buy or borrow such pieces for their own merit.

Regarding African ceramics, categorisation as a strategy in the V&A remains problematic. At present, it is unlikely that Africa will ever be significantly visible in the museum. I think that this is because the changes to policy documents have primarily been guided by the example of pots provided to give context to some hybrid Nigerian-British ceramics. Once again the legacy of Cardew at least brings attention to African ceramics within the museum, but it still feels like a token gesture. The minutiae of defining what is a 'traditional' object is likely to be challenged, perhaps something the V&A did not foresee. Rather it gives the impression that an old-looking pot is not likely to be purchased for the collection.



Figure 22: Display of ceramics from the Abuja area, Nigeria next to pottery made at the Pottery Training Centre, Abuja at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Making Ceramics Gallery, 2011.

The V&A has never really had a department called 'Africa' because the way the museum is organised was mostly formed when the African label was not considered appropriate to its mandate. The V&A, with the *Hidden Histories* project and the formation of an African Curators Group in 2009, has made some recent progress towards reforming the role it has played in perpetuating imperialist attitudes. It has done this by clarifying that a wide range of objects from Africa are part of the institution's history. However, the substantial quantity

of ceramics from North Africa continues to be denied an African identity in the permanent display. The display of traditional African ceramics linked to Cardew presents an unusually clear and direct relationship between Africa and Britain, but, as discussed, the policy document suggests that the inclusion of 'traditional' objects from sub-Saharan Africa in a permanent display is an exception, suggesting that this sort of object from Africa will only be used to contextualise work associated with other places:

For the most part, we will avoid collecting work that is primarily representative of regional traditions and practices. Rather, we will aim to demonstrate Africa's position within - and contribution to - a global culture of art and design. (2010: 67)

Partially to avoid encroaching on the territory of the British Museum, 'traditional' Africa continues to be excluded and thus, by omission, the impression that is given, is that most ceramics from Africa are not considered examples of art or design in this significant National institution.

The British Museum, in contrast, actively collects a wide variety of historic and contemporary African art and design such as work by Sokari Douglas Camp and El Anatsui displayed in the Sainsbury Africa Galleries alongside older objects. The geographic rather than disciplinary (ethnography) department name: *Africa, Oceania and the Americas*, has been in place since 2004. The source of these objects ranges from private collections of ethnographic objects to fieldwork research trips and imperial expeditions. A vessel by Magdalene Odundo is in a central position as visitors to the British Museum come in through the entrance from the *Living and Dying* display, where it sits on a plinth in front of a metal wall-hanging by El Anatsui. Ceramics from North Africa including works by unrecorded ceramists from Algeria and Morocco are displayed alongside ceramics from the rest of the continent. The breadth of technical variation in the collection is illustrated by figure 23 which incorporates three pieces from the collection. They are a glazed pot with calligraphic decoration, a vessel with a complex shape decorated with coloured slip, and a finely burnished and carbonised pot, the *ukhamba* discussed on pages 72-73. It is useful to keep in mind that this department is within an institution that has separate departments and galleries for vast collections of objects from Ancient

⁵¹ Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. African objects are also to be found in the department of Prehistory and Europe. Certain parts of Africa are therefore a major geographic focus of the broader museum. This is in contrast to the V&A which is divided sometimes by material but also by continental categories of Europe and Asia. This reflects the histories of the museums and their collections, namely studying objects as historical ethnographic and archaeological 'artefacts' at the British Museum and as applied arts at the V&A.



Figure 23: A group of ceramic objects from across Africa, all displayed in the Sainsbury Africa Galleries. The three pieces are made from a variety of clays, firing methods, surface treatments and come from a variety of cultural contexts. British Museum collection. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Contemporary ceramics by Odundo, Khaled Ben Slimane, and Rashid Koraïchi, among others, is displayed among older works and works by less well known or even unrecorded contemporary ceramists. Thematic and technical connections between different pieces from different times and places are made through proximity. For example a burnished, carbonised anthropomorphic pot by Odundo is on display very close to a detailed figurative shrine vessel with three main figures, late 19th century, from Igbo, Nigeria ⁵². There is a similarity between the inverted cone-shaped top quarter of Odundo's vessel and the shape of the headdresses worn by the figures in the shrine vessel. In the case beside it are a trio of exquisitely burnished Baganda pots of royal origin on

⁵¹ Objects in the collection date from approximately 10 000_{BCE} to 1200_{CE}.

⁵² Location: G25/dc23, Museum number: Af1951,01.1

woven basket bases. Odundo's pot's shape and technique are echoed in the historic pieces around it showing both similarities and differences.



Figure 24: The ceramics display in the Sainsbury Africa Gallery, The British Museum, 2010.

The ceramics display in the British Museum's Africa galleries when compared to the complete absence at the V&A is relatively inclusive, open and varied. Its objects have a wide range of geographic origins, provenances, ages, functions, and original contexts of use, although gaps and exclusions inevitably exist. Ceramics traditions practiced mostly by white artists from Southern Africa for example, are not represented at all. Without the ethnographic methodological basis, collecting objects as part of the scientific study of the customs and ways of life of cultural groups, that led to the acquisition of many of these objects, this vast and interesting collection would probably not exist. The arrangement of objects on display is very different to the tribal, geographical or typological arrangements still used by some archaeological, anthropological and ethnographic museums whose primary function is academic study, such as the Pitt Rivers and Petrie Museums. It is an elegant display with a definite sense that aesthetics as well as some cultural context are important. The glass cases are not over-crowded. Each object can be appreciated for its form and material as well as its visual relationship to other objects nearby. It is pleasurable as well as informative.

The foundations for this aesthetically motivated display were laid down in earlier publications on the collection by Barley (1994) and Fagg and Picton (1970), as discussed in chapter 1. In these publications the creativity of the makers and the aesthetic value of the works were emphasised, even though the collection was still officially labelled as ethnographic. That they were thought of as notable pieces of art by previous curators appears to have helped to elevate the quality of how they are now presented, in well-lit cases or on a metal tree-like structure with plenty of space around each piece which makes them look dignified and special.



Figure 25: A display of earthenware pots, the Sainsbury Africa Gallery, The British Museum, 2010.

These two major London museums with long and complex histories have both sought to ‘re-present’ and reveal the African objects in their collections within their institutional boundaries, and they continue to reflect their different

institutional histories. The British Museum has worked hard to shake off derogatory ethnographic associations and the V&A has begun to foreground the presence of Africa in its vast collections with displays such as *Hidden Histories*. The V&A has chosen to build on existing collections and so is unlikely to ever have a physical department dedicated to Africa.

The British Museum's much larger and more extensive base has been built on productively by curators by adding contemporary pieces such as those by Slimane and Odundo, narrowing the perceived gap between the archaeological, the historic and the contemporary and suggesting that they exist across one continuum of human history. Interestingly, Odundo's work first became part of the museum in the department of Prehistory and Europe (previously the department of Medieval and Later Antiquities) in 1982. Later, in 1997 and 2000 the two other pieces that are currently in the Africa Galleries, which belong to the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas became part of the collection, one through commission and the other donated. Several other departments at the British Museum collect contemporary work, such as the Middle East, who collect contemporary art from the region. (Other departments such as Ancient Egypt and Sudan, and Greece and Rome only collect historical pieces). This indicates that the Africa department is not exceptional in this regard in the broader museum. The case of Odundo's work being acquired as a contemporary version of a European 'antiquity' or possibly even prehistoric, and as a visual link between historic and contemporary African art is evidence of the blurred distinctions between (and the problematic conception of) prehistoric, ancient, modern, art and artefact that ceramics seems to have the power to unravel.

The V&A has broadened its view and made a gesture towards the significance of the Abuja project to British ceramics (and vice versa) but has not sought dramatically to change its position on collecting ceramics. It is still very much a case of actively searching for glimpses of Africa, often under another name, in the V&A, whilst being spoilt for choice at the British Museum. There seems to be a resistance to make radical physical changes in these well-known and influential London institutions, yet a change which would ultimately make both museums appear more open and democratic to their visitors, many of whom

come from all over the world, including Africa. This is important for understanding representations of African-ness because it highlights that moving from a generally negative and exclusionary image of Africa to a positive image of creative complexity and heterogeneity is a long process that can be held back or stopped by the long established histories, collecting policies and resources of these big museums.

South African museum representations of ‘African-ness’

The drive to democratise museums in the 1990s in South Africa reflected the major political transitions occurring within the country at this time. Steven Dubin (2006) explores a number of South African case studies in *Transforming Museums: Mounting Queen Victoria in a democratic South Africa*. The book’s title refers to the controversial commissioning of a portrait of King Cetshwayo kaMpande to be hung alongside a portrait of Queen Victoria in the Tatham Art Gallery — a municipal art museum in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. The portrait commission is one example among many where a museum has become a site of change and self-reflection. The portrait of an African monarch literally balances out the colonial portrait. The competition to commission the new portrait of Cetshwayo was won by a white artist, judged by a panel who only saw images, not information about the competing artists. Dubin reports that there were accusations of perpetuating exclusivity and imperialism though this was the opposite of the museum’s intention, who saw the blind judging as the ultimate democracy. Unfortunately this turned a gesture of inclusivity into another way to alienate the local public.

Crucially, Dubin points out that while South African museums did require transformation post-apartheid, the:

most professionally active museum personnel throughout the country were in fact debating issues regarding ideology, history, representation, relevance, and audience access well before democracy was officially established. (Dubin, 2006: 3)

An example of this trend in action is Jill Addleson and the ceramics of Nesta Nala at the Durban Art Gallery in the 1980s. Nesta Nala’s legacy is preserved by scholarly writings, particularly those by Ian Garrett and Elizabeth Perrill, and through the work of curators such as Addleson. Addleson, then of the Durban

Art Gallery, managed to acquire Nesta Nala's work for the museum during Apartheid through 'creative collecting' strategies. Nesta Nala's work first entered the Durban Art Gallery ceramics collection via the study collection in 1984. Buying work by black artists for the permanent collection of a municipal art museum was still not allowed, but flexible rules that allowed quick and quiet purchases applied to this purchase intended for the study collection set up in 1982 (Perrill, 2012a: 51). Addleson's actions here highlight that there was support for black artists from some liberal white curators before the radical political changes of the 1990s. The progressive role of the art and museum world in resisting the oppressive regime and agitating for change is also reflected by Addleson's support of Nesta Nala.

A number of Nesta Nala's vessels were selected by participating ceramists for inclusion in *All Fired Up: Conversations between kiln and collection* at the Durban Art Gallery in 2012. Not only is Nesta Nala's work significant for its quality and creativity, but her prominence can be thought of as part of changing institutional attitudes and values in South Africa. During Apartheid these were acts of resistance against the state and during the new political climate this shifted to an open promotion of role models suitable for people who were previously divided and oppressed.

To document ten years of Nesta Nala's ceramics thoroughly, Garrett undertook substantial primary research for *Nesta Nala: ceramics, 1985-1995* (1997). This led him to identify objects in the Durban Art Gallery, previously of unknown provenance, as made by Nesta Nala. Nesta Nala worked during Apartheid until her death in 2005. As a black, rural woman she could have been marginalised and even excluded from the canon of the white South African art scene, yet she is now revered as a master craftsperson in the post-apartheid state, with a historically significant body of work that is represented in a number of art museum collections including the Tatham Art Gallery, William Humphreys Art Gallery and Durban Art Gallery. Nesta Nala is now included in the South African national secondary school curriculum for Visual Arts (2011: 58), a further indication that her work is considered of national significance.

The example of Nesta Nala's work and its presence in art museums before the end of Apartheid and during the 1990s shows that there were positive changes taking place. However, Dubin also cautions that:

South African museums face a delicate balancing act today: how to shed the ideological corsets of the past without replacing them with similarly restrictive fashions. (Dubin, 2006: 255)

The 'restrictive fashions' Dubin describes refer to a tendency to cling to over-simplified and divisive racial categories. In South Africa, many people still see the world through racial categorisation. Colin Richards (1999: 369) suggests that this is because:

the apartheid gaze has placed identity beyond context and history. . . . Every identity . . . is prefixed by a static ethno-nationalist category [which has] maimed and crippled our cultural life. . . . The cruel economies of the apartheid vision have dissected identity, inflating its fragments into a grotesque wholeness.'

Richards's image, still valid today, illustrates the sensitive and problematic notion of identity in South Africa including Museums and galleries. Despite potentially restrictive institutional systems and rules, museum personnel, both in South Africa and abroad, such as Nigel Barley and William Fagg at the British Museum and Jill Addleson at the Durban Art Gallery facilitated opportunities for major institutional changes through their persistent support for ceramics as a sophisticated creative form.

Re-evaluating and redisplaying existing collections has become part of the academic and social project of redefining and making space for African objects in the contemporary, international context. Chris Spring sees that the perceived gap between contemporary production and much older items is narrowing due to scholarship and major curated events and exhibitions. These include *Africa '95* and *Africa '05*, but Spring warns that: 'for the vast majority the definition that immediately comes to mind is still that of masks, woodcarvings, ceramics and metalwork that are the staples of the "ethnographical" display' (2008: 6). Entrenched stereotypes may still exist, but subverting them is clearly a continuing concern in the art and museum world. Curated displays provide a significant narrative as well as a site of making meaning for African ceramics and are arguably of as much value as written texts.

Museums appear to be increasingly self-conscious and transparent. Even some South African museums under Apartheid were following international trends towards being more open and inclusive pre-1994. Museums often have an interest in destabilising their institutional framework and in some cases they have succeeded. As discussed, this is the case for the major art museum in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, the *Durban Art Gallery*. However, institutional histories and the social or political conditions that made them that way are difficult, if not, impossible to erase. Ceramics is a great medium to change perceptions precisely because it has been one of the “ethnographical” staples’ that Spring referred to. Ceramics and especially unglazed, hand-built pots, in earthy colours appear ‘ethnographic’ because people became used to seeing them attributed in this way in the major museums. It is possible to turn that image of Africa around from within the Imperialist institutions that created this stereotype using the museum’s own taxonomical systems, which can re-orient public perception.

Exhibitions about ‘Africa’: narrative to narratives

The museum is a site of relatively slow change. The temporary exhibition is another institutionally based form of display where curators have presented versions of ‘African-ness’ for public consumption that tend to change more quickly and be more daring than the permanent displays I have focussed on so far.

Two exhibitions in particular, *Primitivism* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) (1984) and *Magiciens de la terre* (1989) at the Centre Georges de Pompidou prompted widespread discussion in the West about representing Africa. Both shows have already been subject to scholarly debate and have become iconic moments in the history of showing non-Western objects in the West. They led to an increase in research and publication on African Art in Europe and the USA. The debate that followed these two shows has created an increasing sense of openness to different interpretations and greater transparency has become the norm for showing ‘Africa’ in exhibitions in public institutions.

Both *Primitivism* and *Magiciens de la terre* were controversial in their own way. They both included a significant number of works by African⁵³ artists together with Western works. *Magiciens*, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, can be seen as a reaction to *Primitivism*. Non-Western works including masks and sculptures shown on *Primitivism* were displayed in a static manner with very little information or suggestion of their original context. The dominant narrative given to the non-Western works was their role as source material for the Western artists; showing superficial visual relationship between the non-Western and Western Modernist pieces. 12 ceramic figures including figure 26 by Senegalese artist, Seni Camara were included in *Magiciens* as were installations by Louise Bourgeois and mixed media paintings by Anselm Kiefer. This thematic mix is an approach which attempts to blur the distinction between East and West, North and South, functional and non-functional, repeated and one-off, unifying the works through a spiritual theme. However, particularly in *Primitivism*, the curators were severely criticised for presenting work from non-western cultures in a superficial manner that deprived them of context, including spiritual significance and function, and reduced them to pure form, making them only relevant in the service of Western modernists such as Picasso or Braque. Anthropologist, Fred Myers concludes that:

The debates [on primitivism, as a result of *Primitivism* at the Museum of Modern Art] have demonstrated the extent to which non-Western practices - or more often the extractable products of those practices - have become of theoretical significance for the massive and critical debates within the art world itself concerning aesthetics and cultural politics (Foster 1983; Lippard 1991; and see Michaels 1987). But this is not the only significance of the debates, because - fittingly enough in a world of globalization and boundary breakdown - the exhibition and debates provided occasion for those cast into the 'primitive' category to protest and resist the ideological and practical effects of this representations. (2006: 273)

Myers' perspective picks up on the importance of these shows, however flawed, for initiating debate and contestation, enlivening the discourse and making curators of subsequent shows more accountable.

⁵³ *Primitivism* included works from Africa, Oceania and the Americas alongside Western modernist works.

The right to publish this image has not been granted.

*Figure 26: Camara, Seni. 1989.
Ceramic. One of 12 figures shown at
Magiciens de la Terre, Paris, 1989.
Photo: Centres George Pompidou.*

Susan Vogel's *Africa Explores* (1991)⁵⁴ and *Africa Remix* (2004) curated by Simon Njami were both bold, large scale exhibitions of contemporary African Art. Vogel focused on twentieth century work and incorporated both new and old works. The only ceramics on show were vessels by Magdalene Odundo. Objects from museum collections, usually not attributed to individual artists were exhibited alongside work by contemporary continental African or internationally-based contemporary artists working across a vast array of media. Vogel's intention was to show an African rather than a Western perspective on African art which may or may not include elements, materials or imagery from other parts of the world (Vogel, 1991: 9). Njami's approach was explicitly contemporary and aimed to literally show a new combination of recent, edgy and mostly urban works to alter dramatically the perception of African art. Ceramics were not present, perhaps because they are too easily linked to the past and associated with that taint of the ethnographic or perhaps Njami was just not aware of omitting this medium. An important recent example of this kind

⁵⁴ A touring exhibition to 5 American and European cities

of large scale temporary exhibition with a significant focus on ceramics is *The Global Africa Project*.

Reviewers of *The Global Africa Project*⁵⁵ were divided by the show, with its representation of 'Africa' as a nomadic, migratory, conceptual space, made of many divergent, individual voices. As the title suggests, it went beyond national and continental boundaries. According to curator Lowery Stokes Sims⁵⁶ this inclusive show seemed to have surpassed the expectations of the public and reoriented their thoughts on Africa through the open approach. Evidently categories like 'Africa' and 'the West' and the stereotypes built up around them have shifted, but they have not disappeared completely. While the ambitious scale and breadth of the exhibition forced an association with historical precedents such as *Africa Remix*, *Africa Explores* and even *Magiciens de la terre*, the *Global Africa Project* was different in that the focus was on contemporary work from or about Africa, from many disciplines within the visual arts, including a strong presence of crafts and design. The ceramics were a small part of a larger exhibition of creative work from a number of disciplines including the painting, installation, sculpture, furniture design, Architecture, fashion, photography and video.

Many reviewers found this expanded view of Africa problematic because of its breadth. Descriptors used by reviewers included 'incoherent' (Blackler 2011), a 'profusion' (Adamson 2011, 67), a 'farrago' (Dobrzynski 2010) and a 'mishmash' (Budick 2011) though when one looks specifically at the ceramics included this was not apparent. The ceramists included Odundo (United Kingdom), and South Africans, Sithole, Thembi Nala, Ntombi Nala, Nesta Nala and Ardmore studio. The chosen pieces were linked by technique, concept and to an extent, place of origin. Apart from the Ardmore pieces they were all self-contained vessels with a sense of stillness about them.

Before its relocation to Columbus Circle and renaming in 2002 The Museum of Arts and Design was known as the American Craft Museum (Hotchner 2011).

⁵⁵ The Global Africa Project, Museum of Arts and Design, New York, 17 November 2010-15 May 2011, curated by Sims and Leslie King-Hammond.

⁵⁶ Interview with Sims, New York, May 2011.

Since then it has sought to be a more inclusive 'post-disciplinary' institution (Adamson 2011, 69) with an international collection. Therefore *the Global Africa Project* kept to the objectives of the museum. The show presented multiple narratives of individual creativity and success rather than confining it to a historical or linear model. It did take time and careful observation to understand and read these different stories due to this free approach, requiring the viewer to engage fully in order to work out what the connections were. This open-ended curation incorporated many different narratives instead of privileging a single story or perspective as *Primitivism* did.

Within the art, design and museum industry, or to critics, such a show may seem didactic or obviously problematic because the continent is such a large and diverse space. It is impossible to fit an entire continent into a museum of any size. Where there are gaps or omissions, funding challenges also play a role: it should be noted that the ceramics were mostly sourced from collectors and dealers within the USA due to budgetary and logistical constraints. Sims suggested that the public still has a lot to learn about creative production associated with Africa and that presenting a show like this for the public remains relevant⁵⁷. In the eye of the general public in places like New York or London and perhaps in parts of Africa the image of Africa that dominates is still an aid agency aesthetic used by institutions such as Oxfam. This show did well to dispel that notion by presenting positive and industrious creativity from many individuals such as the selection of ceramics discussed below.

The show included several examples of well-executed and sometimes sobering reminders of the reality and history of social problems for the continent and its peoples. Slavery, Apartheid, civil wars, HIV/AIDS, oil and mining industries were some of the themes artists addressed. The Ardmore ceramic plate in the 'Branding content' section drew attention to the AIDS pandemic with finely executed graphic underglaze painting. These difficult social issues did not mask the sustained, intelligent voice and hand of the artist. This seems to subvert the stereotypes of poverty and helplessness associated with Africa.

⁵⁷ Interview with Sims, New York, May 2011



Figure 27: View of a display case containing an Ardmore plate, Tragedy in Africa, that deals with the HIV/AIDS pandemic in KwaZulu-Natal, alongside jewellery that deals with slavery, Global Africa Project, Museum of Arts and Design, New York, 2011.

The relative prominence that ceramics held within the show indicated that the discipline was considered seriously by the curators and institution. The narrative was focused on South Africa — the only exception in ceramics was work by Odundo (UK). There was a ceramic piece for mass production by Kossi Aguessy (Togo) that complemented his furniture and metalwork, and white, shiny-glazed ceramic flowers formed part of an installation by Tony Whitfield (USA). A MUD Studio chandelier (South Africa) was made up of ceramic beads. Odundo's work works well with the South African work because it lends a sense of her global presence and precedent. This combination of Odundo and the South African burnished works shows that African-ness is not limited to geographic boundaries. The work of Sithole draws on and converses with the austere aesthetic of Odundo's practice. Both stick to pure form and minimal decoration enhanced by the mark of an open flame and both demonstrate excellent craft skill and control of their medium. They also both refer to a wealth of source material from across cultures and time and could be seen as referring to the world's heritage of handbuilt, burnished ceramics that is not necessarily limited to African practices.

Pieces by Nesta Nala, Thembi Nala and Ntombi Nala are evidence of recent developments in Zulu *utshwala* wares and they create a fluid dialogue with the Odundo and Sithole pieces due to their common visual language of globular coiled and burnished forms. The influence of Nesta Nala on Sithole demonstrates the flexibility of traditional gender roles in Zulu culture especially in a contemporary urban context (Perrill 2008: 182-192). This is an example of the subtle and complex individual stories within the exhibition. It is a minor concern within this research because it raises issues of identity and power. Sims suggested that these ceramics formed a specific narrative that she wanted to present ⁵⁸.

There were clear links between the objects through medium and technique: they were predominantly burnished, low-fired, open-fired vessels with strong forms and minimal decoration. These ceramics were primarily presented in the 'Transforming traditions' section of the show, apart from a trio of vessel forms by Odundo which were presented in the 'Competing globally' section. As in at the Art Institute of Chicago, discussed in the next section, Odundo traverses categories with her austere and elegant forms. Many reviewers and critics referred to the sections of the show as too vague and potentially applicable to all objects exhibited (Budick 2011, Blackler 2011). The exhibition was divided into the following sections: Branding content, Intersecting cultures, Sourcing locally, Competing Globally, Building Communities and Transforming Traditions; all of which were taken from an article in South Africa's *Design* magazine ⁵⁹. The fact that both Ardmore ceramics and Odundo's ceramics were included in two different sections indicates the potential for slippage and creates opportunities for further discussion.

Only the Ardmore work deviated from the burnished surface. The pieces, which were made in the characteristic white earthenware clay, painted with bright underglaze colours and glazed with a clear glaze, were placed in both the 'transforming traditions' and 'branding content' sections. The visual and medium-based tradition being referred to here is European in origin, though

⁵⁸ Interview with Sims, New York, May 2011

⁵⁹ Interview with Sims, New York, May 2011

Ardmore has arguably become a tradition and a recognisable brand in itself, one that is constantly changing while remaining distinct.



Figure 28: Work by Magdalene Odundo in the 'Competing Globally' section of the Global Africa Project, Museum of Arts and Design, New York, 2011.

Placing most of the ceramics in the 'transforming traditions' sections seemed fitting given the tendency among many contemporary practitioners in ceramics worldwide to refer to, and borrow from, ceramic histories. All ceramists included in the *Global Africa Project* make some reference to techniques associated with recognisable traditions and classical forms such as Zulu *ukhamba* and *uphiso* shapes in their work. There were clear visual and conceptual relationships between pieces by Odundo, Sithole, Nesta Nala, Ntombi Nala and Thembi Nala. The burnished, hand-built pots were all built using the same technique but in a number of different contexts reflecting on the past whilst creating something new and original. Nesta Nala and Ladi Kwali remain the faces of African ceramics known in the West and this show payed homage to that history in presenting work by Nesta Nala herself and Odundo's work which is related to the British Studio ceramics movement that gave prominence to Kwali's work via Cardew. Odundo's undergraduate summer holiday (1974) spent at the Pottery Training Centre in Abuja is an even more direct link to the legacy of ceramists who worked at the Centre. These objects formed a strong and relevant narrative

about changing traditions and the tendency to tap into ceramic histories in many spheres of contemporary ceramic production.

It must be taken into account that there are limitations to any museum show, and that the *Global Africa Project* was a large scale multidisciplinary show. Despite practical obstacles, perhaps the range of ceramics was too narrow to reflect the practice of an entire continent. This narrow range potentially perpetuated stereotypes. Including examples of work by other African ceramists like Hylton Nel would have provided an interesting contrast, especially with the Ardmore work.

Category subversion as a curatorial strategy in the case of *the Global Africa Project* was an effective way to represent Africa using ceramics. It is an improvement on shows like *Primitivism*. It remains to be seen whether a show like *the Global Africa Project* will stand out in people's minds and generate discussion in the way that its predecessors have.

These large scale exhibitions put on in Western centres are in contrast to smaller, medium specific, exhibitions of locally produced work such as *All Fired Up* at the Durban Art Gallery or *Feats of Ugandan Pottery* at Makerere Art Gallery, Kampala, Uganda which has been held annually since 2011. *Feats* is organised by a group of young graduates from Makerere University and is encouraged by academic Kivubiro Tabawebula. The idea behind these contemporary revivalist exhibitions is to match and exceed the quality of historic objects such as the Baganda royal court pots discussed earlier in this chapter. The exhibition is backed by the Institute of Heritage Conservation and Restoration at Makerere University and artists included Andrew Ssekibaala, Michael Omadi, Henry Bomboka, Tony Bukenya (curator), Edward Balaba, Paul Bukenya and Kibudde Ronald Mpindi.

The exhibitions could be seen as an act of reclaiming skills and cultural pride. This is a way of recouping the 'human-ness' and dignity that colonial subjects felt they had been stripped of. This is because the court ceramics represent a time of cultural and economic success for Ugandans. The curator, Bukenya, intended to use the exhibitions in order to bring together university-educated

studio ceramists and 'artisans' who have learnt their craft in informal settings.

The gallery's website notes that:

This show presents six artists and a traditional potter based in Busega, a historical renowned base for Pre-colonial Buganda Kingdom potters. Pottery is known to be one of the oldest arts of mankind (Smashing pots, Feats of clay from Africa, Barley Nigel). Over the whole African continent indigenous production is enormous. However, in Uganda pottery is seen [as] dramatically endangered by being displaced by modern vessels of aluminum, enamelware, plastic or more informal containers from western-style industrial packaging (Kwesiga, 2005). Feats of Uganda pottery imply beauty, elegance and ingenuity with an aim of gaining wider appreciation from the local population and the world over. The artists have embraced the fact that clay is the one of the most enduring materials and that the contribution of pottery to our general knowledge of the past is second to none. Therefore, the group's glamorous and artistic pottery projects the 3 colours: – black, white and brown, results of their mastery to use local technologies which strongly reinterprets the role of pre-historical inter[la]custrine pottery. (Makerere Art Gallery)

There is a strong compulsion by these ceramists to take inspiration from times perceived as cultural high points to regain a positive cultural identity that is separate from negativity associated with colonialism. This is another strategy to display African ceramics and contribute towards establishing positive and human-centred identities for Africans. With the exception of Mpindi's, the works are unglazed, mostly burnished and decorated with slips or terrasilata. Bukenya's work includes a direct reference to local and national social issues with text inscribed on some surfaces. Bukenya self-consciously rejects high-fired stoneware practices which is a strategy which uses local materials to tell local stories.



Figure 29: Bukenya, T. 2012. Bubbling within (vessels of spirit). Earthenware, hand built, decorated with slips, burnished and carbonised. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Exhibitions based on scholarly research into African ceramics have also been seen in museums in the continent. Perrill's exhibition of *izinkamba* ((Zulu beer vessels) *Ukucwebezela: To Shine / Contemporary Zulu Ceramics*), Armstrong's *African Ceramics Symposium*, (William Humphreys Art Gallery, 2008) and Calder (including *Ubumba*), offered exhibitions of ceramics from a single geographic area and one relatively discreet form of practice. These have been quieter celebrations of creativity in ceramics in Africa that have had less criticism levelled at them than the broader, large-scale art museum shows because of their narrower subject-led scope. They are able to reflect on a specific tradition with deeper understanding and are subject to less criticism. Perhaps this is also because they take place well away from the metropolitan critics.

In contrast, British contemporary artist Grayson Perry, addresses Africa as a fraught conceptual space within his popular exhibition ⁶⁰, *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* at the British Museum (2011), discussed in the introduction. Perry's work, typified by this exhibition, involves autobiography, social commentary and playful wit. He particularly uses imagery and metaphors from an imaginary world he created as a child:

What has made me an artist - and kept me intact as a child - were the channels whereby I turned a feeling into metaphor. I went through

⁶⁰ The exhibition was visited by 117 000 people. Accessed from http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/press_releases/2012/fortune_reigns.aspx on 8 September 2013.

puberty while this mechanism was still operating, so a lot of my erotic imagination was drawn into it too.

I still use those well-worn corridors to this day, in that I experience the world, allow it to stew, then I find a way of putting it out there in the simplistic language of pottery. (Perry/Jones, 2006: 128)

The 'cultural conversations' section of the exhibition sees Perry drawing attention to instances of cross-cultural engagement that results in interesting hybrid objects:

Few civilizations spring up spontaneously or develop in isolation. Cultures borrow and adapt. I enjoy artefacts where this give and take is more obvious and dissonant. New religions try to recruit by using the sites and symbols of the belief system they are trying to replace. Craftsmen make artefacts they think will appeal to visitors from abroad. Sometimes they get it wrong in a charming way. Creativity is often just mistakes. (2011: 57)

Perry provides a fresh and positive perspective, a light touch, on objects that formed part of colonial encounters. In the exhibition publication he says:

I have always loved artefacts where the influence of a foreign or colonial culture is clearly adapted and where beliefs and styles blend, such as Afghan war rugs, Asafo flags or export porcelain. (2011: 19)

Perry's enthusiasm is not without some degree of social critique, as is evident in the layers of imagery that decorates his own pot, *I have never been to Africa*. Despite this element of critique, Perry's engagement is not particularly deep, and serves mostly to point out that the Western public and artists like himself continue to be fascinated by the continent. It is nevertheless a useful, adjunct to understanding the way that Africa is represented in exhibitions containing ceramics.

Updating displays and exhibitions

Public exhibitions and displays continue to shape the way Africa is perceived through ceramics. This ranges from contemporary Western artists such as Perry working with the museum to try and understand the self through how he thinks about the African 'Other', to curators such as Sims, under an institutional mandate to represent an entire continent and its diaspora. Sometimes uncomfortable exhibitions like *the Global Africa Project* are more powerful and useful representations of African Art and crafts because they are ambiguous

and difficult to define. In the show *We Face Forward: Art From West Africa Today*, at Manchester Art Gallery in 2012, Lubaina Himid, Zanzibar-born British artist and academic approved of using broad terms in naming exhibitions:

The best artists make art to forge surprising, yet long lasting, connections with people, both foreign and familiar, to reveal insights and to make juxtapositions, to astonish and to make the space for dreaming possible. They/we don't do it as a geographical group or as a homogenous cluster but because what we make is deeply personal and familiar to us. When work is gathered in a space using an umbrella term to focus the mind of potential audiences, it may seem misguided but the advantage is that many audiences may well be lured into visual dialogue because they think they feel affinity. They may want to feel the desire to walk and talk amongst artworks from 'somewhere else' for many reasons: a) The experience is an opportunity for participants to see themselves not as the 'other' but as they actually are; as themselves; b) The experience feels familiar, there is a sense of being listened to, of being understood; c) The experience feels unfamiliar, overwhelming, disconcerting and encourages questioning, relooking, or revisiting. (2012: 29-30)

She suggests there is still value in categories and setting exhibitions under umbrella titles if only to help audiences along, or in some cases trick them. Though in academic circles such labels may be problematised and criticised, they still provide a way in for audiences, even if their preconceptions are immediately challenged. This sense of the global overarching term provides a foundation for critique, a contemporary strategy that seems to serve current representations of Africa well. Perhaps we can look to these shows for strategies of representation for the immediate future.

Many objects previously designated as 'ethnographic' have now been integrated into the art gallery and museum. An explicit example is nineteenth and twentieth century beadwork at the Tatham Art Gallery's South African rooms. The beadwork is shown together with paintings, ceramics, sculpture and drawings.

Other objects previously displayed in isolation and without context have been redisplayed. The benefits and problems associated with various strategies of display and representation from ethnographic through purely aesthetic remains significant and is also acknowledged by Chris Spring in a British Museum publication on African Art (2009: 7). This is also evidently a concern for Kathleen Bickford Berzock in the recent rehang of the African art collection at the Art

Institute of Chicago. The collections has been re-displayed and expanded in the new African Art Gallery, with a significant number of pots on permanent display (Deborah Stokes, 2012: 85). While a 'formalist minimalist environment to encourage contemplation and reflection' is maintained (Stokes, 2012: 84), Bickford Berzock tries to achieve balance by commissioning a video installation by Vogel for the display that provides context through sound and moving images from Ethiopia, Mali and Ghana (Stokes, 2012: 85). Along with a timeline of African and worldwide events since 100 000_{BCE} matched with objects from the collection, these pieces of contextual information help to prevent objects from being de-historicised and de-contextualised by a stark, Modern-style display. This was also an important concern of curators Zoe Whitley and Nicola Stylianou when putting together *V&A Africa: Exploring Hidden Histories*, at the Victoria and Albert Museum⁶¹.

Bickford Berzock, acknowledges continuing problematic elements in the museum, especially regarding collecting contemporary work. She draws attention to the presence of work by Magdalene Odundo and Yinka Shonibare in the collection ⁶². Both are international artists who live in the UK, but grew up in, and maintain ties with, Africa.

Is Odundo's choice of medium and format, the ceramic vessel, the main reason for her inclusion, or is it more coincidental? Vogel wrote that: 'Odundo's sensuous pots return again and again to the millennial African round-bottomed, swell-bodied form without ever repeating itself' (1991: 19), referring to the notion that African production often takes the form of a 'reprise', where repetition and variations on the same theme or form are an end in themselves rather than a pursuit of more obvious differentiation. The forms and techniques of Odundo's work resonate with other pieces in the collection. On the surface Odundo's work is an appropriate selection by the African and Amerindian Art department that acquired it, but, since it is comparable in date and context, it could equally be

⁶¹ Arts of Africa: Design, Culture and History since 1851, study day, 17 November 2012; information board within the display.

⁶² Odundo's work came to the museum through the department of African and Amerindian Art whilst Shonibare's work was acquired through the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art (2011: 161-162)

displayed alongside Shonibare's work in the Modern and Contemporary department. This exact combination of artists, Shonibare and Odundo, can be found at the Brooklyn Museum, New York in a display called *African Innovations* which also includes historical pieces such as a Nok Terracotta head dated 550_{BCE}, but in a separate section of the same exhibition. There are two possible readings of the Chicago display, neither of which take into account the practicalities and idiosyncrasies of funding structures, timing or other institutional issues. One reading is that this category denigrates Odundo's work, putting ceramics firmly in the category of ancient. Another perspective is that Odundo's work can be used to extend the parameters of the department, highlighting continuities rather than pointing out differences.

This problem of which work fits in which category exposes the ambiguity between the Western and non-Western art-craft divide. The fact that Odundo references an African ceramics tradition whilst being synonymous with contemporary art reflects both the success of the millennial tradition, with sympathy to the desire for distinctive, beautifully crafted individual objects in the studio craft tradition. Odundo's work is covered more extensively in chapter 3 but it merits mention here because it points out the limitations of current museum categories: our inheritance of nineteenth and twentieth century museological history.

One way that museums have created a dialogue about contemporary work and historic collections has been to involve artists; Grayson Perry's show, for example. *All Fired Up* (2012) at the Durban Art Gallery, South Africa is also relevant. Curator Jenny Stretton gave over her curatorial power to artists to select work to be shown with a basic guideline that pieces selected should relate to the artist's work. Artists were linked to two local academic institutions. They selected objects from the museum's collection to be shown with their new work in order to examine the important interconnections between the municipal art museum, ceramists and art education. Perrill (2012a: 50) points out that this democratises the curatorial process, very much in line with Hooper-Greenhill's 'transformation' of museums. This shows the public and artists the relevance of historical collections to current practice and closes a perceived gap between the institution and some of its visiting public, transforming the institution from

appearing more elitist to more accessible by literally opening its store cupboards to people not otherwise involved with the background workings of the museum.

Another example is the *Dinner for 101* at the Castle of Good Hope (National Museum) in Cape Town, held in 2011 and 2012. Ceramists made tableware which was used to set places at the long table in the Lady Anne Barnard banqueting hall. Ester Esmiol, the ceramics curator at the museum invited artists to place their varied contemporary tableware in this historic colonial setting. The works come from a very diverse group of ceramists demonstrating the breadth of production in the Western Cape and around South Africa. The room was converted into a banqueting hall in the 1930s, a time of separation between different cultural groups in South Africa which gives the viewer a sense of the changing social history of the country and allows contemporary work into the social history collection of the museum.

With increased self-reflection and transparency by museum personnel the ideological separation between the historic and the contemporary is breaking down, revealing some strong connections and continuities in the public exhibition of this slow-changing medium. At the same time a perceived homogeneity of what African-ness means is increasingly being challenged through exhibitions like *The Global Africa Project* because they construct a positive and diverse image. In many ways African ceramics plays an ambiguous role in presenting African-ness within exhibitions. The museum is a space where it is possible to witness these changes and ambiguities. Museums are spaces where we can change the way objects may be understood, but also make audiences aware of the history of representing African objects and to show how this affects how we see them today.

The main obstacle to transforming the perception of African-ness in ceramics, both historic and contemporary, is the continued limitations that come from the history of museums. Working from within the museum with artists or with researchers who continue to reveal the detailed stories behind ceramics, more change can take place. As seen in the work by the smaller museums and exhibition organisers in Africa, there is a desire to present a positive

construction of African-ness. There is potential to draw even more attention to the constructed-ness of representation in exhibitions and museums and give voice to individuals to tell their version of events.

Chapter 3 - Ceramists

In the first two chapters I have shown how the documentation and display of African ceramics have generally become more transparent and detailed over time which has led to a better understanding of African-ness. Joseph Conrad's exotic notion of Africa has been challenged and ceramic practice is one area where representations of African are being debated and reorganised. In a positive development, recent ceramic work in Africa by Africans has become more difficult to categorise as a result of publications and exhibitions that have presented a more detailed understanding of ceramic production in the continent. Many works are placed and exhibited in both ex-ethnographic and contemporary art collections, which shows the limitations of the ethnographic model.

For this chapter, I will discuss the personal voices and works of a selection of artists, to whom the notion of 'African-ness' seems to be relevant. Looking at individual practices is a third way to address the question of how Africa is imagined and represented. It is in contrast to the structures, taxonomies and arrangements evident in the body of literature and exhibitions that I have already discussed. This chapter addresses the content of the work of individual artists in more detail and considers each artist's personal contexts and affiliations and how they construct African-ness in their work. It is therefore more relevant to the discussion of identities in relation to my own ceramic practice than the previous chapters.

The makers are grouped according to the kind of work they make, where they make it and by their educational background. Most makers discussed here are independent artists with an African background. Some live (or lived) in Africa including the artists at Ardmore, Juliet Armstrong, Ladi Kwali, Clive Sithole, Khaled Ben Slimane and Nicolene Swanepoel. Within this group of African residents, the particular contexts range from university-educated white settler communities (Armstrong and Swanepoel), to an informally educated rural Nigerian working in a colonial project (Kwali). Some grew up in Africa but now live and work in the West: Lawson Oyekan and Magdalene Odundo. All have international experience. The chosen artists are meant to give a sense that

production in Africa (or drawn from African sources) is diverse. I also discuss two British ceramists, one who worked in Nigeria, Michael O Brien, and Jonathan Garratt who is inspired by African objects and by Cardew's philosophy in his work.

Michael Cardew's legacy and the interaction between some West African traditions and British studio ceramics is an important narrative in the history of African ceramics, but perhaps it is one that still over dominates the discourse. I have therefore included a discussion of Ladi Kwali, as part of the Cardew legacy, and Ardmore in South Africa which is also a co-operative enterprise started by a privileged white person but it is quite different to the Abuja Pottery Training Centre and related stoneware potteries in Nigeria. Discussions of Danlami Aliyu and Michael O Brien are also part of this kind of practice in Africa where Westerners begin or facilitate ceramics projects in African communities.

This selection is meant to give some sense of the breadth of contemporary practice from across the continent, but also to show allegiances, similarities and resonances between makers. However, it is not assumed that links between makers are dependent on shared African origins. Selecting the ceramists for discussion has been narrowed by the nature of the art work produced as part of this research and discussed in more detail in chapter 4. The skin-clay metaphor is the starting point for my work, so many of the ceramists discussed use skin motifs, such as animal pelts, or a less literal skin element. The skin-clay metaphor is a test case for representing issues concerning 'African-ness' and identities using ceramic surfaces. The skin-clay metaphor is an extension of anthropomorphism which was shown in chapter one to be a common theme in African ceramics.

The skin-clay metaphor, used in my own work or observed in others has also provided a way to bring together my interests in cultural and social specificities in South Africa, such as the significance of cattle and cattle hides in the KwaZulu-Natal region. As a symbol it also has a broader reach and resonance with the 'humanising' goal of this research in the sense that we all have skin. It is our own personal, physical margin. It has become a site of contestation between Africa and the West in terms of skin-colour and race but also a

universal feature of the physical experience of being human which has been addressed by several artists working in clay who are included in this chapter. An introduction to cattle imagery is therefore included in the first section of this chapter.

The majority of work discussed in this chapter is in some way relevant to the visual language of skin-clay metaphors, technical aspects of research practice (for example using paperclay), and the subject matter of self and group identity politics. Therefore more sculptural work and work that uses animal forms or metaphors is emphasised. Anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, pieces that are like animals or human forms, are also common in the selections. Most of these artists have studied at a British or British-derived art school or university system or have been taught by someone who has, thereby establishing another link to my outlook and approach that stems from British studio ceramics traditions.

Juliet Armstrong and Nicolene Swanepoel: animal forms, cultural history and national identities

Animal forms, and references to cattle, feature prominently in the body of ceramic work by Nicolene Swanepoel (1962-) and Juliet Armstrong (1950-2012). They are two politically and socially engaged women who have made ceramics within a critical context in South Africa. Both women also fit the relatively privileged demographic I belong to: white, South African and female. Their use of cattle contributes to the debate on cultural identities in South Africa.

Their work has to be seen in the context of how cattle images are used in other media such as in the paintings of Leigh Voigt and Corina Lemmer. Lemmer's *Cattlescape* was part of her exhibition entitled 'Cattle and Cups' at the Tatham Art Gallery, 2006. Lemmer (2006) describes her paintings that include cattle forms in this show as 'Densely massed cattle, as a metaphor for humans being herded helplessly along through circumstances.' The paintings and drawings of Nguni cattle by Leigh Voigt which illustrate *The Abundant Herds* by Marguerite Poland and David Hammond-Tooke serve as a record of the variety and beauty of the animals depicted and have contributed to increased public interest in this

breed, with its attendant cultural and linguistic associations. Poland comments that:

It is a sad indictment of South African society that the deeply rooted racial prejudices that have been the dominant theme in the history of this country should have carried over into attitudes towards the livestock of the indigenous population. The very qualities of hardiness, fertility and adaptability that government and stockmen have tried so hard to introduce through imported breeds, existed - largely unrecognised - in the indigenous herds for hundreds of years, acquired through centuries of adaptation and natural selection. (Poland 2003: 106)

In both these examples, depicting cattle becomes a vehicle for talking about human social and cultural relations, and in the case of Voigt and Poland, an Africanist platform for documenting and paying homage to indigenous cultural practices. Writing on her own ceramic work, Swanepoel describes how she grapples with the notion of shifting constructs of identity in contemporary South Africa using culturally loaded symbols on cattle forms. (Swanepoel, 2009: 55) This is achieved through historic reference, both in a broader social sense, and within the specific history of ceramics by using some of the medium's distinctive visual languages.

Nguni cattle are particularly evocative as a symbol, and have been used by several artists including Armstrong, Swanepoel and Bagley. They are a lens through which to look at the formation of nationalisms and other identities in the post-apartheid state. They are actively bred for variety in coat colour, patterning and horn shape. They are a hardy indigenous breed that is generally 'colourful, robust and stocky.' (Hammond-Tooke, 2003: 15-17)

Nguni cattle have become associated with KwaZulu-Natal. Poland concludes *Abundant Herds*⁶³ with a lament of the decline of traditional cultural identity, including cattle-keeping. She goes on to state that her intent as a researcher is to preserve this practice as part of a national and regional heritage. The Nguni Breeders Society which is an agricultural association also promotes the

⁶³ *Abundant Herds* discusses Nguni cattle imagery in isiZulu oral traditions including poetic cattle naming practices, poetry, prose and proverbs based on the physical attributes of the animals' skins and horns is illustrated by Leigh Voigt. Numerous reprint runs of this book, which has high production values, indicates its popularity. Cruise (2011) cites the book as the main protagonist in the surge in popularity of Nguni cattle in the public sphere post 1994.

breeding of Ngunis as part of a renewed sense of interest and pride in indigenous cultures in the post-apartheid state (Poland, 2003: 108). The Nguni Cattle Breeders Society's logo tag line contains the phrase 'The breed from the past for the future'⁶⁴. This points to both their value in agriculture and to their emotive value as a form of cultural revivalism. In a director's statement for the film *Heaven's Herds: Nguni Cattle, Nguni People* (2005) James Hersov writes:



Figure 30: Sanga-nguni cattle belonging to S. Dwyer, Underberg, South Africa, 2007.

The majority of South Africa's population have a huge affinity with the subject of cattle and especially Nguni cattle. In addition, there is a strong groundswell of new interest in these indigenous cattle that are a proud part of South Africa's heritage - from rural people (including commercial farmers) and urbanites alike, The popularity of Voigt's paintings⁶⁵, Marguerite Poland's book, Nguni hides as furnishings, wire/beaded Nguni cows⁶⁶ and painted ceramic Nguni cows are both a response to and an impetus for a broad interest in these special cattle. This film will both ride and also contribute to the current wave of interest in a subject which is at the heart of South African culture.

⁶⁴ <http://www.ngunicattle.info/Index.htm>

⁶⁵ Leigh Voigt's paintings and drawings served as illustrations for Poland's book. The originals were purchased by the Oppenheimer family who approached Hersov to make the film.

⁶⁶ Figure 31

Nguni cattle are a symbol of national identity that appeals to the many cultural, linguistic and class groups that make up the South African population. For Colin Richards, 'ploughing the waves of the sea is probably easier than finding common ground in conflicting nationalisms within South Africa' (1999: 352). Nine years on, despite Richards' skepticism, Nguni cattle images seem to have come close to providing a national symbol, as they have become naturalised as popular representations of 'African-ness' in post-apartheid South Africa. However, Cruise (2011: 51) notes, in a discussion of Swanepoel's work, that cattle images remain contested, citing the '[r]itual killing of bulls by bare-handed young men. . . often in sophisticated urban areas where the loud bellows of the suffering bulls (a requirement of the practice), disturb finer sensibilities and divide the population along lines of cultural rights versus cruelty to animals'.



Figure 31: Maker unknown, Durban. 2008. Nguni bull. Glass beads and aluminium wire. Private collection. Photo: W. Bagley, 2013.

Their literal revival as a breed and therefore their physical presence in the landscape as well as their prevalence as images in popular culture, interiors, and across the visual arts has perhaps contributed to a loss of their potency as a symbol within the art world — they seem to have been diminished to almost meaningless generic symbols. However, their past points to the potential for them to be considered as politicised symbols of subversion and symbols of urgency for social and political change⁶⁷:

⁶⁷ For further detail see Mackinnon (2009).

The history of the Zulu people during the twentieth century reflects the history of South Africa as a whole, in which the dissolution of communities, the redistribution of land, the demands of the labour market and, most importantly, the political duress under which black people suffered so bitterly until 1994, has profoundly affected the fabric of society. All this has contributed to the decline of traditional cattle culture... It is hoped that the resurgence of interest in the herds of the Zulu people, both by members of that society and by a wider society in general, will result in a regeneration of “the abundant herds” and a re-establishment of their economic, cultural and spiritual value. (Poland, 2003:108)

Swanepoel and Armstrong are examples of artists who have entered into this debate about cattle, nationalisms and identity in South Africa. Their work forms part of this increased awareness of the cultural value of cattle keeping. Juliet Armstrong was an associate professor of visual art, an established ⁶⁸ researcher and ceramic artist, based in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal. She worked predominantly in bone china, porcelain and paper porcelain and her research interests were in Zulu material culture, specifically Zulu beer ceramics, and technical aspects of using bone china as a medium for sculpture. Both research areas contributed significantly to her creative practice. She was an English-speaking South African who was politically active as a member of the Black Sash, a non-violent anti-apartheid organisation of white women, and as a researcher and artist. She addressed pertinent social and political issues through her work. During Apartheid Armstrong focused primarily on social comment in her ceramics, including race relations and urban slums. Post-1994 she focussed on more personal narratives. In this she achieved a sense of local identity for her work that separated her from the British studio ceramists that she admired such as Jacqui Poncelet, Elizabeth Fritsch and Glenys Barton ⁶⁹.

Nicolene Swanepoel is an artist and qualified veterinarian. She has lectured in animal behaviour and human-animal interaction at the University of Pretoria and is a vocal animal rights advocate. Animal forms predominate her work. She uses a variety of ceramic techniques including press-moulding and hand-building and decorates forms with glaze, both by carbonising and by screen-

⁶⁸ By the definition supplied by the National Research Foundation, the principle funding organisation for research in South Africa, and www.julietarmstrong.co.za which indicates Armstrong was a 'C2' rated researcher 2003-2007.

⁶⁹ Interview with Armstrong, Pietermaritzburg, July 2011.

printed enamel transfers. Her MTech research focused on cattle imagery as cultural markers in South African art and especially ceramics. The body of ceramic work created for this degree is a series of cattle head forms.

Swanepoel's cattle-head forms are produced in series and decorated with a variety of specifically chosen forms, images and materials that are culturally and historically loaded. According to Swanepoel, they become 'palimpsests on which several identities have been drawn and "written", superimposing but not obliterating previous histories' (Swanepoel, 2009: 55). For example she uses cobalt blue transfers on tin glaze which reference blue and white trade porcelain and delftware (figure 33). This refers to economic elements of colonial expansion driven by Western desires for Chinese porcelain, in particular the early Dutch settlers and traders that occupied the Cape. Figure 32 shows an example of Chinese export porcelain of the kind that might have passed along trade routes around the Cape that Europeans tried so hard to imitate. Alongside is figure 33, a European solution to failed attempts at producing porcelain, developed from tin glazed earthenware developed in Mesopotamia in the ninth century (de Waal, 2011:315). This blue and white, tin-glazed Dutch delftware, which shared the colour palette but not the material qualities of the coveted Chinese porcelain, was introduced to, and popularised by, Queen Mary II in England in 1689 (De Waal, 2011: 77).



Figure 32: Jingdezhen, China, Qing dynasty, circa 1770. Porcelain dish. Porcelain painted in underglaze blue with a landscape scene. Victoria and Albert Museum collection. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 33: Bristol, UK. Circa 1754. Delftware plate, painted with panels of Chinese figures in landscapes. Victoria and Albert Museum collection. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Describing her ceramic cattle heads, Swanepoel said:

The heads are arranged into three groups. Each group is given a dominant colour/s, namely blue and white for the colonists (*Oude Kolonie*), black for the indigenous herd (*Inkomo*), and red-brown for the *Afrikaner Osse*. Initially this colouration would appear to identify each group. However, through a deliberate displacement of symbols, I intend to challenge a simple racial or historical reading, suggesting that contemporary identity cannot be defined with only these precedents in mind. Instead, identity shifts, is constantly in a process of becoming, and can take on infinite variables. (Swanepoel, 2009: 60)



Figure 34: Swanepoel, N. 2007. Cattle head from *Oude Kolonie* series. Press-moulded and handbuilt, tin-glaze, enamel transfers. Photo: Wayne Oosthuizen.



Figure 35: View of exhibition by N. Swanepoel, Courtyard area at the Faculty of Art, Architecture and Design, University of Johannesburg, 2008. Photo: N Swanepoel.

In the three series, *Oude Kolonie*, *Inkomo* and *Afrikaner Osse*, for a single exhibition (figure 35), Swanepoel uses the idea and language of grouped and arranged forms. Swanepoel's approach to arrangement of animal forms is similar to the approach I have adopted for my own work, *Object/ify* (2010-2011). *Object/ify* (figures 62, 67, 69) is an installation of individually hand-modelled, undecorated cattle arranged in a group that implies that they are a moving, interacting herd. They are based on Nguni cattle from KwaZulu-Natal and they are similar in size, but each one is slightly different in its form or position. They also vary in colour, tone and texture. Swanepoel decorates her cattle heads with symbols (as images, motifs or by using symbolically loaded materials such as tin glaze, cobalt blue and gold) which she describes as 'creolisation' throughout. She layers specific symbols onto her cattle head forms, clearly articulating her intentions in the works themselves and in the accompanying writing. She uses these symbols to subvert simplified, racially polarised readings of culture. In this way she intends to address issues of cultural complexity and ambiguity which are similar to my research interests and to elements of *Object/ify*.



Figure 36: Swanepoel, N. 2007. Cattle head from Inkomo series. Press-moulded and handbuilt, gold lustre. Photo: Wayne Oosthuizen.

In *Object/ify* I explored related themes around the issue of identities. I also attempted to create a sense of formal ambivalence and a tension between similarity and difference in the work and its arrangement. This was achieved through the use of multiples (approximately 350 cattle in the original installation) and through the imitative interaction of the different coloured animals, which suggests life and movement. *Object/ify* is visually simpler and more open-ended than Swanepoel's literally layered symbols. Swanepoel's cattle are static, trophy-style heads used as a base form for exploring complex hybrid identities through embellishment and surface decoration. The trophy-head format turns the cattle to wildlife hunting trophies which contrasts with the small hand-modelled cattle in *Object/ify* that are more closely related to children's toy-modelling and therefore have a quieter presence. In Swanepoel's work the

domestic and farm animal becomes a prize to put on the wall which supplants the kudu or lion head of the now less fashionable 'great white hunter' which is at odds with trends towards nature conservation and protection in liberal Western and South African circles. Perhaps in its humble association, the potency of this domestic symbol has often been overlooked. By placing the disembodied head on the wall, its value is elevated, it can be seen in a new light as a trophy, a new site conquered and owned. Making an ordinary domestic animal into a ceramic trophy is a clever subversion of the hunting trophy cliché that concerns cultural affinities rather than issues such as death or power.

Juliet Armstrong's life-size bone china Nguni skin made in 2006, *Izimhukane obisini (Flies in the milk)* presents another example of how cattle forms have been used in contemporary sculptural ceramics. The piece consists of thin bone china slabs joined with plastic-coated fishing wire to form a cow skin shape. Bone china is an industrial material, English in origin, that was developed to imitate the qualities of porcelain. It is now fairly widely used for non-industrial sculptural purposes, after being popularised by ceramists including Poncelet in the UK. It is still fairly unusual in South Africa but Armstrong, and John Shirley, have both stretched the technical and expressive limits of material in the non-industrial studio context. Always one to push boundaries, Armstrong was spurred on by the technical difficulty of working on the large scale that a life-sized Nguni skin demanded. Both the challenge of creating a metaphoric protection apron for her mother, and technical elements were important to Armstrong in realising this piece ⁷⁰.

In its current installation at the Tatham Art Gallery *Flies in the milk* is backlit using electric light which draws attention to the translucence and whiteness of the bone china in sharp contrast to the spots of dark, matt glaze which are the 'flies' that spoil the milk. About a third of the way from the top of the piece a fairly long central panel, about four times the length of the other panels, features raised conical nodules that resemble *amasumpa* forms found on some ceremonial Zulu beer ceramics. Calder (1996) described *amasumpa* as archetypal embellishments in Zulu ceramics. Armstrong, Reusch and Whitelaw

⁷⁰ Interview with Armstrong, Pietermaritzburg, July 2011.

(2008: 533) suggest, 'the strong association of *amasumpa* with Zulu identity is probably a recent phenomenon. Other research indicates that several variations exist and that they have regional significance'⁷¹. Considering Armstrong's academic background as a specialist in this ceramic form, understanding the history of this cultural reference helps us make sense of her work and her possible intentions. I sense that Armstrong wants to pay tribute to the works that her research focuses on and create a cultural connection that emphasises how she was brought up in a predominantly Zulu-speaking area even if that is not her first language or own culture by birth.



Figure 37: Armstrong, J. 2006. Izimhukane obisini (Flies in the milk). Bone china, stainless steel wire and crimps. Tatham Art Gallery collection. Photo: L. Frisinger, 2012.



Figure 38: Detail of Figure 37. Photo: L. Frisinger, 2012.

Some scholars⁷² associate *amasumpa* with cattle, inferring the connection between wealth and the animals. In a condensed description of Zulu pots, de Waal draws attention to the economic interest in *amasumpa* wares. He asserts that historic associations between *amasumpa* and royal patronage have garnered interest from scholars and collectors who are assumed to be the only

⁷¹ The source is a multi disciplinary paper on twentieth century Zulu beer ceramics which uses archaeological and social-anthropological research methods.

⁷² Armstrong and Calder refer to the work of Klopper (1992) in an unpublished transcript of a public lecture given at DAG, 12 November 1994.

patrons who can afford this expensive type of decorated ware (de Waal, 2011: 305). Despite varying opinions on the significance and importance of the nodules on *utswala* ware, the *amasumpa* on Armstrong's piece are iconic, and are likely to attract the attention of a viewer even if they are only marginally familiar with Zulu material culture.

Making them in hard white bone china rather than the comparatively softer earthenware presented Armstrong with the opportunity to address hybridity. This is a simple and visually striking strategy. It is shared by other artists who also want their work to cross over multiple and contrasting cultural histories. Some of Swanepoel's cattle heads and vessels by Michelle Legg also feature similar nodules as a reference to the Zulu context. Within South African ceramics, Armstrong's work provided a precedent for subsequent work, like Leora Farber's grafted imaginary plants made from indigenous South African and foreign (British-colonial) plant species in *Dis-location / Re-Location*.

This association between Armstrong's work and Zulu identity — as shown by the artist's appropriation of *amasumpa* in combination with using bone china — is very unusual. Other artists have followed Armstrong by using *amasumpa* forms to signify 'Zulu-ness' or 'African-ness,' which suggests how artists have been willing to recognise and affirm the Zulu sources of their work. Since Armstrong began using *amasumpa*, they have featured prominently in debates on hybrid cultural and regional identities.

Armstrong's work with porcelain and bone china animal skins, particularly cattle and goat skins in the forms derived from *izibodiyi*⁷³ (figure 39), is an example of an artist using skin as a motif in ceramics. Armstrong appropriates iconography that signifies her regional identity. Her affinity with and understanding of Zulu culture is then used to express her feelings about a very personal experience, her desire to protect and save her ill mother. This personal narrative, of becoming a parent to her own parent, adds a deeper dimension to Armstrong's cultural appropriation. Juliette Leeb-du Toit acknowledges the negative critique that white South African artists would have experienced when

⁷³ Embellished goatskin aprons worn by traditionalist isiZulu-speaking married women during their first pregnancy in some rural parts of KwaZulu-Natal.

appropriating imagery from other cultures, but contends that they still have a positive contribution to the debate about South African identity:

[h]owever flawed such appropriations and 'othering', these overtures are a testimony to an emergent visual vernacular that conveys the extent to which intercultural acknowledgement and appreciation occurs. Reflecting a sense of belonging and affinity to place, cross-cultural expression is in part attached to an emergent consciousness as South Africans, long since separated both psychologically and geographically from one another, engender new idioms that reflect their South Africanness. (2012: 67)

Leeb-du Toit's comment draws attention to the strategies artists use when constructing their identity, while immersed in a culture that is not their own. These strategies are about finding similarities and recognising shared experiences, rather than focusing on differences. One could argue that Armstrong's appropriation is flawed, but I think that it demonstrates her support for, and understanding of, an 'Other' culture by recognising the power of one of its metaphors, the protection apron, as an apt way to express her own experience of taking on a parent-like role with her mother. It is not simply a case of a privileged white South African showing her power over other cultural groups.



Figure 39: Armstrong, J. 2004. Protection Apron. Bone China and black clay. Hart family collection. Photographed 2008.

All of Armstrong's animal skin forms have an attendant personal narrative ⁷⁴ and connect to her academic research into historic and contemporary Zulu visual

⁷⁴ Interview with Armstrong, Pietermaritzburg, July 2011

culture. *Flies in the milk* was made for her mother. In an interview Armstrong described how she came to make the forms she called protection aprons:

I reached a point where I got a bit depressed and I didn't know what to make and the depression had a lot to do with my mother being clinically and pathologically bipolar. . . there's a little skin here [gestured towards *isibodiya* in her collection] that I had bought in the 1970s. I was just fascinated by it. And then I went out to Msinga and enquired about what these *izibodiya* were about. I researched it and it became that only for your first born child you would wear this. It had a sort of ghoulish aspect to it because the little hooves of the *mpunsi* [goat] are included. I suddenly thought that my mother had become my child. And so I was protecting her.⁷⁵

Armstrong made her skins out of hard bone china but they appear soft and remarkably skin-like. Armstrong captured the movement and texture of animal skin without resorting to a literal, super-real appearance using the fluidity and texture of her chosen ceramic materials. She used fairly unconventional moulding techniques that involved coaxing the bone china slip over cling film, cardboard, textiles and other improvised materials⁷⁶.

Armstrong's hybrid ceramics involve working with forms and materials in unusual ways that appeal to my own practice. Armstrong has been able to create a very distinctive aesthetic that has a readable regional association. This could be how Armstrong can be said to construct an 'African-ness' in her work. The work is motivated by personal circumstances but it has many levels of appeal: from its Zulu-cultural associations, the broader rural 'African' associations of animal skins, to its engagement with more universal themes of protecting others from ageing and illness.

In my own work with the *Extermination Tents* I have also made use of a metaphor. The tents in my work are not literal. It is a protective covering but is not sourced from a real or literal skin like Armstrong's pelts. It is derived from the idea of a tarpaulin 'skin' that is draped over houses before fumigation takes place. Once the house is covered, poison can be safely released inside, and contained within it, during the fumigation process. I am also suggesting a more

⁷⁵ Interview with Armstrong, Pietermaritzburg, July 2011

⁷⁶ Informal observation of studio practice, Pietermaritzburg, 2007-2009.

ambiguous narrative than Armstrong is because the other side of fumigation is the death and destruction of the wood boring insects.

Like Armstrong, in the *Extermination Tents* series, I have tried to simulate other non-clay materials while simultaneously retaining and exploiting the physical characteristics of clay. Armstrong's pieces emphasise the qualities of porcelain or bone china, yet suggest the softness of skin. The *Extermination Tents* should allude to their material, paperclay, and simultaneously suggest skin, paper and leather. Armstrong's abstraction and adaptation from natural and cultural forms to create original work is another aspect of her practice that has been a key to the development of the ceramics created for this research. Armstrong worked from real animal skins, observing them, touching them and drawing them in planning her pieces. She also had a thorough knowledge and experience of the culturally significant objects from Zulu culture that she references in her pieces, such as *izinkamba* and *isibodiya* through research led by the close observation of objects and undertaking extensive field trips.

In contrast to Armstrong's strongly personal and specific regional motifs, Swanepoel uses a broader palette of historic and contemporary motifs which she intends to be read as symbols drawn from various cultures associated with South Africa. Her forms refer to different breeds of cattle associated with South African cultural and linguistic groups made complex by decorative elements that suggest cultural shifts and hybrid identities. Her approach involves complex socio-political commentary but it gives the impression of being more objective and less emotional than Armstrong's. This is because the work lacks the deeply personal narrative of Armstrong's work. Swanepoel uses a broader range of motifs to decorate her objects and refers to different cattle breeds traditionally kept by specific linguistic groups in South Africa. Armstrong invoked the personal through her symbolic use of animal skins as protective objects for individuals with an intimate knowledge and involvement with Zulu material culture. The titling of *Flies in the milk* draws attention to the specificity and complexity of cattle naming practices in isiZulu oral culture and the touching, poetic resonance of metaphor.

Both Armstrong and Swanepoel have used the visual language of contemporary sculpture and aspects of installation practice such as suspension and grouped arrangements which make their work visually spectacular. They have also both referred to quite specific ceramic histories, such as *amasumpa* and delft, through specific styles, images, forms or materials and traditions in their work. The resulting works are hybrids of material, process and form. Hybridity seems to be their main strategy for negotiating contemporary South African experience and to present their version of African-ness. Both artists have made these works with an intimate understanding of the combinations of materials, forms and motifs they use and they arrived at this level of understanding through formal research into historic and contemporary practices. Their use of cattle imagery forms part of an expanding body of ceramics that references these animals to make positive allusions to national and regional affiliations.

Inscribing clay surfaces: Lawson Oyekan and Khaled Ben Slimane

The largely abstract, rather than directly figurative visual languages of Lawson Oyekan and Khaled Ben Slimane broadens the scope of this research to include abstraction and non-figurative surface embellishment. The calligraphic marks and written texts on their ceramic surfaces can be seen as scars or other indelible marks on the skin when one is thinking of ceramics from an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic perspective. The marks made on their ceramic surfaces by Oyekan and Slimane are not always intelligible and so sometimes become gestural marks which give a sense of being vigorously written, scribbled or drawn on. Those that are readable as text hint at contrasting linguistic cultures in Africa, from Slimane's Arabic to Oyekan's combination of English and Yoruba which reflect their own cultural identities and histories through language, another area where the representation of Africa can be explored. The use of Latin and Arabic scripts opens the discussion to colonialism and trade. The geographic and ethnic backgrounds of these two artists provide a contrast to Armstrong and Swanepoel, opening the discussion to broader range of production associated with Africa.

There are a number of parallels to draw between Oyekan and Slimane, in particular the extensive use of calligraphic marks and written text on their work. Oyekan works with clay and stone to create sculptural works in a variety of scales and for many contexts, from smaller scale gallery and museum work, to large scale public sculpture. Oyekan, who was born in the UK but grew up in Nigeria, has a substantial international reputation, especially in Europe and the USA. He identifies emphatically as an African but also acknowledges his long term residency and education in Britain⁷⁷.

Slimane is a Tunisian artist who works predominantly in clay. He studied in Tunis and Barcelona, as well as on the island of Kyushu, Japan. Several pieces of Slimane's work are on display in the British Museum Africa Galleries.

The right to publish this image has not been granted.

Figure 40: Slimane, Khaled Ben. 1992. Gravestone. Ceramic, decorated with slip, manganese oxide, text scratched through slip and illegible text drawn with brown pastel. British Museum collection. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Oyekan's inscriptions in English and Yoruba on the surfaces of his works in the *Life is Precious* (1992-2000) series were described by the artist as his version of poetry ⁷⁸. The series includes the *Trail with light* series installed at 1 Canada

⁷⁷ Interview with Oyekan, London, 7 March 2013.

⁷⁸ Interview with Oyekan, London, 7 March 2013.

Square, Canary Wharf (figures 41 and 42). They echo the aesthetic qualities of inscriptions made on tree trunks by passers by, over time, and the movement of swirling oak tree leaves that Oyekan once noticed in Knole Park, Sevenoaks, during a break from time spent drawing there. Chris Spring, quoting Slimane, points to some old property deeds the artist found in his grandfather's house as sources of inspiration, ' "These deeds contained the history of the small seaside village, my birthplace, but the script particularly intrigued me, an enigmatic, undecipherable writing." ' (2008: 306). Spring also picks up on a spiritual aspect of the artist's persona that comes through in his work (2008: 306). Both his use of text and religious spirituality come through in *Gravestone* (figure 40). Where legible, the Arabic inscription refers to 'He' - which means 'God', according to the museum record for the work.



Figure 41: Oyekan, L. 1998 Trail with Light (LIP - Life is Precious) Series. Unglazed ceramic. Canada Square 1, Canary Wharf, London. Photographed 2011.

Both artists have significant international experience in education, work and travel which they both see as important to producing their work ⁷⁹. Both use the visual language of abstraction, calligraphy or inscription and the hollow form. Healing, spirituality and the metaphysical are easily read into their work.

Both are also aware of sophisticated ceramic histories from their place of origin, yet both resist merely bemoaning the apparent demise of traditions, or imitating older works. Instead they see themselves as continuing and enlivening past work. Slimane, 'passionately believes that it is his role to inject new life into these traditions, and that to do so a cultural dialogue and interaction with other countries, peoples and traditions is essential' (Spring, 2008: 306).

Oyekan's inspiration is drawn from the 'circumstances of his existence as a human being' ⁸⁰. His abstract forms are open to interpretation and his monumental work is surprisingly subtle and difficult to categorise. He completed his postgraduate studies at the Royal College of Art, turning down the offer of a place at Goldsmiths primarily so that he could work with clay. This perhaps reflects his desire to look beyond the British system at the time with its (now frequently contested) art/craft divide and embrace alternative ways of assessing material cultural productions where domestic utility, conceptual and spiritual function and aesthetics are not as separated. He used clay as a sculptural medium despite what he perceived as a Western perception that clay is strictly a 'craft' medium.

Oyekan considers himself an important figure within ceramic art in the UK. He was included in the seminal group exhibition funded by the Crafts Council, *The Raw and the Cooked*, which sought to move beyond existing distinctions between art and craft by showing work by people from both the art and craft world, unified by clay, and who 'give emphasis to subject matter, imagery and form - all these challenge conventional categories and expectations.' (Elliott, 1993: 7) The exhibition also included figures by Anthony Gormley and pots by Perry who both are firmly embedded in the contemporary fine art scene.

⁷⁹ Spring (2008: 306) and Interview with Oyekan, London, 7 March 2013.

⁸⁰ Interview with Oyekan, London, 7 March 2013.

Contextualising and accounting for the show, *The Raw and the Cooked*, Martina Margetts described a shift in British sculpture which Oyekan was a part of:

Sculptors aim not to represent the world, but to explore its meaning through materials, processes and the nature and function of objects in a metaphysical way. (1993: 13)

Margetts describes the exhibition as a coming of age exhibition for British art. Work in the exhibition was riskier and less conventional than popular, dominant conceptions of ceramics. Britton describes Oyekan's work as follows:

Movement, endurance and risk are engaged with as subject matter and as physical realities. These pots are stretching both material and process to the limit, and in their thin-skinned delicate making predict the forthcoming ordeal of firing. The links between spiritual and mineral properties, and Yoruba roots and London life, are the source of energy in this work. Personification in the pot forms is clearly evident - this family of red pots are observers. (Britton, 1993: 62)



Figure 42: Detail of figure 41. Photographed 2011.

The work that Britton is describing is part of Oyekan's *Life is Precious* (1992-2000) series. These pieces are made from many palm-sized tiles of clay that have impressions, textures and inscriptions on them, joined together to make larger hollow forms. The tactility of clay as a medium comes through in his work. Thin slabs of clay are impressed with finger marks, hand prints, perforations and other marks from the body of the artist or his collaborators.

They appear as scars, ruptures and rhythmic impressions on the unglazed surface. Plastic clay itself becomes the subject, the thin-walled construction is technically impressive, and the work is robust-looking and simultaneously delicate.

Oyekan is a strong supporter of African art, whether historic or contemporary. He sells most of his work to museums and private collectors in the US and Europe. In his opinion, working in Europe or taking inspiration and education from various sources does not take anything away from the 'African-ness' of the individual artist or their work.

What we are now going to do, I don't think it is European art. It is African art. Whether I journey through Europe or America or Asia or anywhere. If I am a Yoruba Ifa priest I can only describe what I know. I'm not a Zulu or any thing else from Africa. I am Yoruba. I can only make references to what I know. That is Ifa. That is what I understand. It is wisdom in Yoruba. That's what I am. If an Ifa priest has come to England or Germany or wherever it is. The kind of wisdom that they deal with there. The influences that he may use or compose later on in Africa or wherever. That does not make him German or Russian unless his brain is that weak. So he still is African from his broad experience.⁸¹

Lawson's British art school education, his family, and broad, informal, pro-African artistic education influenced the artist's attitude to art. In my interview with Oyekan he recalled being exposed to a range of music, performance and visual art media growing up in Nigeria in a family and community that valued art⁸². He thinks it is important for his work to one day be in an African museum collection, though at present his work is only to be found in American, Asian and European collections. He thinks it is important for African artists to go beyond the famous examples from history such as the Nok terracottas (500_{BCE}-500_{CE}) excavated from the Jos Plateau in Nigeria which are some of the largest and most sophisticated pieces of figurative sculpture discovered from ancient Africa outside of Egypt and Sudan:

From what we call Nigeria has come Nok, has come Ife sculptures, there is nothing else in the world...there are great things from all sorts

⁸¹ Interview with Oyekan, London, 7 March 2013

⁸² Interview with Oyekan, London, 7 March 2013

of other places but this is as great as anything else if not greater. So why should we just abandon all of that as if it did not happen? ⁸³

Oyekan wants African artists to look back at these objects, and see themselves as part of a long history of sophisticated ceramic production whilst avoiding imitation:

From there all the way to North Africa and to South Africa there is an enormous amount of incredible ceramic art to be found historically. Why on earth I am hinting at that, is that what is happening in this age, is the legacy to what is happening afterwards. We cannot see these as just ancient artefacts which just dropped out of the sky with no describable circumstances that is relevant to us. We are its image. ⁸⁴

Oyekan seems to be suggesting that healing negative self-worth in the continent's culture should come from responding to the present with an awareness and respect for the past.

Oyekan is a pivotal figure in both British and African ceramics history. His presence in the *Raw and the Cooked* placed him within the British ceramics avant-garde. He has an interest in the materiality of clay, that could also be aligned with a European avant-garde, whilst maintaining a distinctly African perspective. Oyekan makes less obvious material references to his African origin when compared to the figurative motifs chosen by Swanepoel and Armstrong. The tactility and physical presence of Oyekan's body in the work relates to the skin-clay metaphor throughout this research. The scar-like marks on the skin-like surfaces have a resonance with spiritually significant vessels from the Benue river valley (though these are much more obviously figurative).

Pots on the margins: Clive Sithole, Jonathan Garratt, Michael O'Brien and Danlami Aliyu

The four artists in this section all traverse both African and Western styles, materials, influences and places of work. They are all outsiders in their own ways because of their engagements with hybrid ways of making. The hybridity

⁸³ Interview with Oyekan, London, 7 March 2013

⁸⁴ Interview with Oyekan, London, 7 March 2013

in their work has elements of subversion in it. They are also united by their passion for Africa's arts.

Jonathan Garratt is a British ceramist who makes earthenware in the Dorset countryside. Garratt is on one extreme end of the continuum of examples in this chapter, an outsider with comparatively little experience of the continent itself, but with a curiosity and admiration for its forms. Sithole is on the opposite end, having lived his whole life in Southern Africa. Both draw enthusiastically from global sources including classical European forms such as Minoan bulls and Greek Amphorae, which interest Sithole, and Medieval European and Ancient Chinese drinking vessels that appeal to Garratt. In choosing to be ceramists, both are outsiders within their own communities.



Figure 43: Plant pots displayed at Jonathan Garratt's Hare Lane Pottery, Cranborne, Dorset. Photo: L. Cacciotti, 2013.

Garratt uses the potter's wheel and some hand-building methods to create his fluid and lively work. He makes a variety of different work from plant pots for the

garden to tableware and outdoor installations (see figures 43, 44). His principle concern is form. He observes the use of form around him from a wide variety of sources ranging from modern car wing mirrors to ancient objects in the British Museum ⁸⁵. He is essentially self-taught; while he did not go to art school or a formal ceramics class, he worked as an assistant to Michael O'Brien early in his career, and was taught ceramics by Gordon Baldwin as a child at Eton College. Garratt claims that he does not draw, but 'makes marks'. He aspires to make good, timeless work that will continue to give pleasure in the way that ancient museum objects continue to do today. He draws from some African material cultures and styles, particularly West African textiles, though this is one influence among many in Garratt's work.



Figure 44: Jonathan Garratt's pottery, Hare Lane, in Cranborne, Dorset. The large pot in the foreground is decorated with rouletting described by Garratt as Nigerian. Photo: L Cacciotti, 2013.

⁸⁵ Studio visit, 5 March 2013, Cranborne Dorset.

Sithole, by contrast, is an urban *isiZulu* speaker living in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. He initially learnt ceramic skills at the Bartel Arts Trust, in Durban South Africa, taught by Cara Walters, a graduate of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (then University of Natal). Perrill (2008, 2012) considers Sithole to be part of the continuum of Zulu ceramics (see chapter 1) alongside Ian Garrett. Pan-African artwork, which he keeps around his home and studio are source materials for his work.



Figure 45: Sithole, C. Acquired 2006. Burnished and smoke-fired vessel. Corobrik Collection, Pretoria Art Museum. Photo: Courtesy Corobrik collection and CSA.

Sithole's burnished vessels and other more experimental hand-built or thrown sculptural objects appear in several museum collections of ceramics in South Africa, demonstrating his prominence. As discussed in chapter 2, Sithole was featured in the *Global Africa Project* and has exhibited in Europe and in commercial galleries such as the Amardian in the USA. Visually and technically his best known work resonates with the exact, taut burnished surfaces of Magdalene Odundo, Ian Garrett, Gabriella Koch and Duncan Ross's work. His pots have a different energy to Odundo's. They are less restrained and austere with more marks of the hand and tool. He also tends to add more decorative

elements to his surfaces, applying sections of geometric patterns and often stylised cattle forms as raised decorations in the plastic state or scratched onto the surface of the burnished and fired piece. Saggard and smoke-firing methods are used to carbonise his pieces for an even or more varied finish.

Sithole and Garratt are both 'outsider' examples in their own way. Garratt, because he is Western and British, by birth, education and self-identity, but he draws on techniques, forms and decorations from African objects seen in museums and private collections. His educational background is Archaeology at Cambridge, but he chose to pursue a career that would put him on the margins of the society he was born into. His education proved pivotal in an unexpected way. Harrod points out with the phrase 'things are emissaries' that it was at Clare College, Cambridge that Garratt saw Cardew's work which inspired him to take up ceramics (2012: 361). During our discussion at his pottery it became apparent that he is a serious follower of many of Cardew's ideas. Garratt, like Cardew, can be seen as an anarchic figure, having rejected his private school, Oxbridge education for the unusual life of a country potter. In the short film, *Fired Fruits* (Hobson, 2011), Garratt says he has always had a problem with authority and thinks that is why chose an unexpected career path.

Sithole, who took up ceramics in a style more usually associated with women and rural living within his cultural and linguistic group, also sits on the margins. He lived in rural Lesotho as a child and as an adult has stayed on the farm belonging to art collector Paul Mikula who was the husband of the ceramist Maggie Mikula. His work draws from Zulu beer ceramics but also from other African and international sources.

Material objects, in museums or in their personal collections, seem to trump other sources for both artists. Sithole collects objects from many cultures, as Elizabeth Perrill has documented in her PhD thesis, (which she continues to draw attention to in more recent publications (2012: 72)).

West African textiles have been an important source for Garratt in his work. Though it appears that most of Garratt's experience of Africa is through African objects and culture experienced in the UK, Garratt did spend some time as a

small child living in Lagos. His father collected textiles while working in both Nigeria and Sierra Leone, some of which are in Garratt's personal collection at his pottery. Textiles form an important part of his source material for decoration. Of a v-shaped stamped in-glaze decoration he often uses on tableware (figure 48), Garratt said that the pattern is like something you would typically find on textiles in a market in Mali, today. Indeed v-shaped marks are often found on bogolan textiles, either the hand-dyed 'mud-cloths' or factory made cloths with similar motifs. The popularity and prevalence of this distinctive, graphic style of cloth in fashion and interiors in Mali and abroad is discussed by Pauline Duponchel (1995: 36-37). Duponchel explains that from the 1980s onwards artists and designers brought the technique and decorative style of Bogolan into popular urban fashion. This included fashion designer Chris Seydou who began incorporating bogolan and bogolan-derived designs, starting with his 1979 winter collection shown in Paris. The striking geometric motifs and contrast between dark and light can be seen in both the historic cloth in figures 46 and 47 and in some of Garratt's tableware, though Garratt tends to use a dark motif on a light ground rather light on dark.



Figure 46: Bamana peoples, Mali. Mid 20th Century. Bogolan textile 'mud-cloth' 137x84cm. British Museum collection © The Trustees of the British Museum.

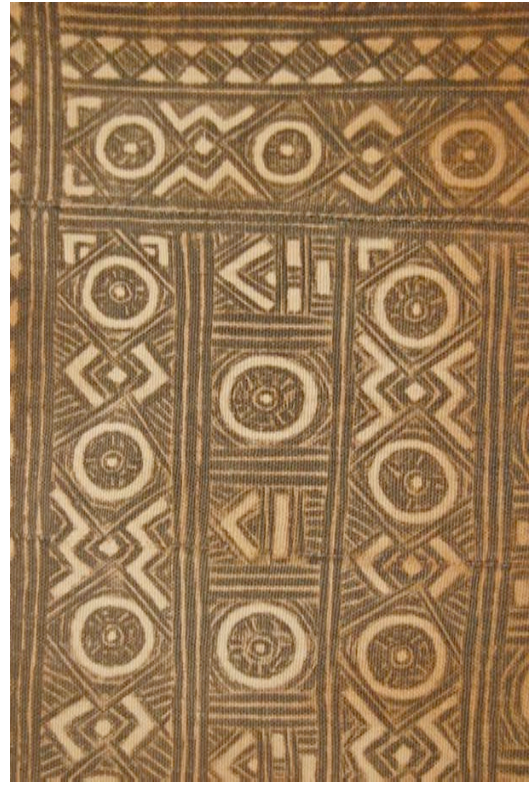


Figure 47: Detail of figure 46. © The Trustees of the British Museum



Figure 48: Garratt, J. Bowl. Wheel-thrown and glazed earthenware with stamped and painted oxides. Private collection. Photo: Crafts Study Centre.

Garratt resists some of the spiritual and philosophical aspects of the Leach school of ceramics. For Garratt, digging his own clay is not about romance or a philosophy of truth to materials, it is practical. The local clay he digs near to his pottery in Dorset is excellent for his chosen methods of making and firing. Many scholars familiar with the Leach school might think that this use of local materials is key, but Garratt plays this down. The clay is plastic, has a beautiful red colour, and once fired is resistant to frost, an important aspect of making pots for outdoor use in the UK.

Garratt, like many ceramists, is a keen observer of objects. As a potter, he considers himself self-taught, having never been to art school. His main source of learning about ceramics has been looking at objects. On makers looking at objects, Britton wrote:

What I know about other cultures I have taken in as much from looking at objects as from reading. 'Reading' an object, its use and its beauty, guessing at its significance or symbolic meaning, how it fits with life, its ingenuity, with material and making, its economy or extravagance, has been a consistent part of art education in my experience. (1993: 9)



Figure 49: Uganda. Pot. Burnished, hand built. Collection of Michael O Brien. Photographed 2013.

This statement rings true for Garratt (and Sithole too) who observes society and culture acutely through objects, old and new. An important person in Garratt's ceramics career and in fostering an interest in African objects is Michael O Brien. O Brien took over the Abuja Pottery Training Centre from Michael Cardew in 1965. Garratt worked for and learnt from O Brien and they have enjoyed a long friendship. This indirectly links Garratt to ceramics and other art forms from Africa. Garratt is therefore part of the small circle of ceramists for whom the idea of historic British country ceramics, and Africa were of absolute importance: both areas offer an opportunity to escape expectations and reject some aspects of society.



Figure 50: Nigeria. Hand built pot with incised and burnished decoration. Collection of Jonathan Garratt, gift from Michael O Brien. Photographed 2013.

Garratt sees O Brien as an incredibly observant ceramist with an excellent knowledge of form. Garratt's forms are influenced by pots seen at the British Museum, and he has a passion for West African music which has influenced his practice indirectly as it is often playing in the background as he makes. The music that he listens to includes music played on the iconic string instrument, the kora.

Garratt's enthusiasm for African imagery is revealed in a direct manner. For example, he uses roulettes for decoration, which he describes as a Nigerian technique. While I was on a research visit to Garratt's pottery, he noticed an image of a Kenyan woman wearing bold patterns in an old newspaper, and took the opportunity to cut out the image for his own research purposes. Garratt commented on the boldness of the woman's sense of style which attracted him and embodied what he was trying to express to me about why African art and cultures are appealing.

Sithole and Garratt have both adapted elements from the local vernacular: Zulu beer ceramics and English slipware. Garratt is rooted in English traditions, but English studio ceramics traditions that are important to him are linked to Africa through colonialism, and the desire among some studio ceramists to seek a literal or ideological escape from postwar Britain. Garratt has been influenced

by this legacy, at one remove from the likes of Cardew and O'Brien (below). He can be usefully viewed as the next 'distillation' of African ceramics that have influenced British ceramists since the end of British colonial occupation. Both Sithole and Garratt are self-taught magpies, always alert to forms and patterns from a variety of sources.



*Figure 51: Garratt, J. Earthenware pot.
Photographed 2013.*

Michael O'Brien, a British ceramist and teacher, straddles the British and Nigerian ceramics scene having spent a large part of his long career (and his early childhood) in Nigeria. His thrown domestic stoneware is in the Cardew-Leach tradition and takes its lead from their revival of the English vernacular and adoption of some Chinese, Korean and Japanese methods. O'Brien attended a course by Cardew that was eventually turned into his book *Pioneer Pottery*, at Wenford Bridge in 1959. He later joined Cardew in Abuja as a volunteer at the Pottery Training Centre, very much a disciple of Cardew's approach to making pots, although his work has not received extensive critical attention.

O'Brien has been a friend and mentor to both Jonathan Garratt and Magdalene Odundo. O'Brien took over from Cardew at the Abuja training centre in 1965,

worked at the university in Abuja and ran or supported various potteries and ceramics collectives over the years, including a pottery with Danlami Aliyu who is regarded as O Brien's protege. He continues to be involved with ceramics in Nigeria, spending about three months per year there where he continues to help with Stephen Mhya with his kiln. During a visit to his home and pottery in Headley, Surrey O Brien spoke enthusiastically about potteries beginning to gather momentum in Maraba, indicating that he maintains an interest in contemporary Nigerian ceramics and he is linked to development programmes similar to the one Cardew set up in the mid twentieth century. He also has a large collection of ceramics and textiles from West Africa which may have served as inspiration to many artists who have spent time at Addlestead Farm, his home and pottery. He sometimes acted as a middleman of sorts in the buying and selling of artwork between Nigerians and foreigners ⁸⁶. He recounted to me that when he was at the Abuja Pottery Training Centre he would go to villages to get carved doors and stools to sell to the expatriate market in the city. There were carvers at Lapai and Agai. According to O Brien, the Lapai carvers sold their work for reasonable prices and the Agai carvers were always trying to cheat someone and pushed the prices up. Once O Brien left Abuja they stopped carving because the prices had become too high to maintain a market.

O Brien used this example to show me how conscious he has been of his role as a middleman, between two different communities. He did not want the influence of European buyers to have a detrimental impact on the quality or continued existence of people's work. There is always the risk that this sort of gatekeeper position can become paternalistic and even patronising, like the well meaning colonial employee, who has insider information from both side and hopes to protect the artists but might end up exerting power over them in some way.

Aliyu (1952-2012) is considered O Brien's protege. He was an excellent decorator and thrower who produced beautiful stoneware in the style and tradition of Cardew's particular brand of studio ceramics. To O Brien, Aliyu's

⁸⁶ Studio visit and interview with O Brien, Headley, 14 June 2012.

intelligence and ability has been underrated, largely due to personal humility. He learnt ceramics initially at the Abuja Pottery Training Centre and later, at Wenford Bridge, then run by Finch, and on to the Farnham School of Art (Harrod, 2012a). Harrod also reported that Aliyu's more austere and restrained work in a style comparable to Cardew's was more easily sold in the UK than in Nigeria, and even then to a limited market, explaining his marginal status. He eventually turned to making lower temperature wares and began decorating with coloured oil paints in response to the conditions and market in Minna where he lived and worked under difficult economic circumstances.

These four talented figures all in some sense sit on the margins of a particular tradition or community, pushing the boundaries open just a bit more and challenging our thoughts about traditions and innovation. O'Brien and Aliyu are different kinds of outsiders to Garratt, though all three practice(d) a form of thrown ceramics that can be linked to Cardew in technique and spirit. O'Brien in a sense rejected his own community and continued to bring UK studio ceramics techniques and technical support to Nigeria as a colonial and an outsider. O'Brien's efforts allowed Aliyu to develop his talents in this craft that was somewhat awkwardly transplanted from the UK, making himself an outsider within his own community. They all occupy positions that slip between African and Western associated techniques, forms, and sources of inspiration, and they create work that is exciting and refined; referential, yet powerfully individual. In their hybridity, multiple cultural references, and experiences of objects are where a quality of 'African-ness' lies in their work.

Ladi Kwali & Ardmere: African artists whose work is facilitated by Western intervention

Interventions, collaborations, internships, apprenticeships and teaching between Western, or Western-trained, artists and Africans without formal education provides another significant overlap between Africa and the West in ceramics. I will discuss two examples of studio or workshop setups which have resulted in ceramic work that can be describe as hybrids of African and Western traditions. Ardmere Ceramics are decorative works that draw heavily on European industrial ceramics languages. They are characteristically bright with

detailed underglaze painting on a white ground which is much like Staffordshire figurines. Since the 1980s Ardmore has developed its own palette of colours, patterns, animal, human and mythological forms. Ladi Kwali (c. 1925 -1984) was a ceramist who worked with Michael Cardew at the Pottery Training Centre, a colonial project in Abuja, Northern Nigeria established in 1951. Her work at the Centre included stoneware 'translations' of waterpot shapes and decorations that she usually made in earthenware. In museums these stoneware pots seem to be relatively commonly used symbols of hybridity between British ceramics and African ceramics. Though Ladi Kwali gained international recognition for her work and Ardmore is an economically successful enterprise, the location of power in these collaborative relationships is difficult to accurately discern. However, it seems that the teacher often maintains the real power. This example of power relations re-iterates a colonial and neocolonial representation of African experience.

Fée Halsted, a white Zimbabwean descendant of a British settler, educated at the ceramics department at the University of Natal (now University of KwaZulu-Natal) started Ardmore Ceramic Art. It has essentially become a project of teaching artists to work within the Ardmore aesthetic. Ardmore was initially established when Halsted began working with and teaching the disabled daughter of someone who worked on her farm, Bonnie Ntshalintshali. Halsted and Ntshalintshali won the Standard Bank Young Artist Award jointly in 1990, a major gesture from the art establishment that indicated support for informally trained black artists and artists working across racial boundaries. It was also a progressive victory for the acceptance of decorative, feminine ceramics within the broader art establishment. The establishment is now a thriving commercial enterprise under Halsted's leadership with many artists involved in creating the distinctive decorative earthenware. Despite positive steps to provide artists with health care and a sustainable income, at the helm of the organisation is a formally educated and privileged white woman demonstrating that questions of neo-colonial power relations will always remain.

Juxtapositions of stoneware vases and waterpots by Kwali or ceramists associated with the Abuja training centre can be found in displays at the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, directly illustrating a fairly

superficial aspect of cross-cultural intervention and hybridity that has become a symbolic meeting point of British and Nigerian ceramics. Hybridity here is a simple and sometimes awkward mix of form and decoration from one culture (water pots from the Kwali region) and the medium of another (British stoneware) that does not necessarily improve the quality of the object, but rather results in something quite different in function, aesthetic quality and meaning. Harrod (2012: 265-266) indicates the shortcomings of these 'translations' which are not as elegant as the water pots they are based on. Harrod also says that they appear authentically African to people unfamiliar with West African ceramics but to the learned eye are something very different to the forms they are based on. The awkwardness of these pieces perhaps reflects the awkwardness of such interactions.



Figure 52: Room 143, case 32, shelf 3, showing the juxtaposition of two flat-bottomed stoneware vases with an earthenware, round bottomed water pot, Making Ceramics Gallery, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2011.

Kwali's significance to British studio ceramics goes beyond the strange hybrid waterpot-vases. Cardew took Kwali to show off her hand-building prowess all over the US and UK. This excerpt from a press release announcing 'African Craftsmen in Nashville' during a lecture and demonstration tour in the US by Cardew, Clement Kofi Athey and Kwali is an example of Cardew acting as an advocate for Nigeria ceramics and ceramists, helping to popularise their pots and their working techniques amongst Western ceramists:

The whole idea of bringing Ladi Kwali to the United States to share her abilities with the American people began in June, 1971 when Michael Cardew was a guest speaker for the Southeast Region of American Crafts Council. Cardew aroused so much interest from

fellow potters that an organization was begun to accomplish the task of bringing Ladi Kwali here.⁸⁷

A pair of earthenware pots by Kwali are still contained in the teaching collection in the ceramics department at UCA Farnham, a physical example of Kwali's work becoming known in the UK through Cardew's promotional efforts. Cardew is of central importance to gathering an interest in African ceramics and especially Kwali's work to studio ceramists in the UK and USA.



Figure 53: Kwali, L. 1963. Earthenware. One of two pieces made at Farnham. UCA Farnham Ceramics teaching collection. Photo: David Westwood.

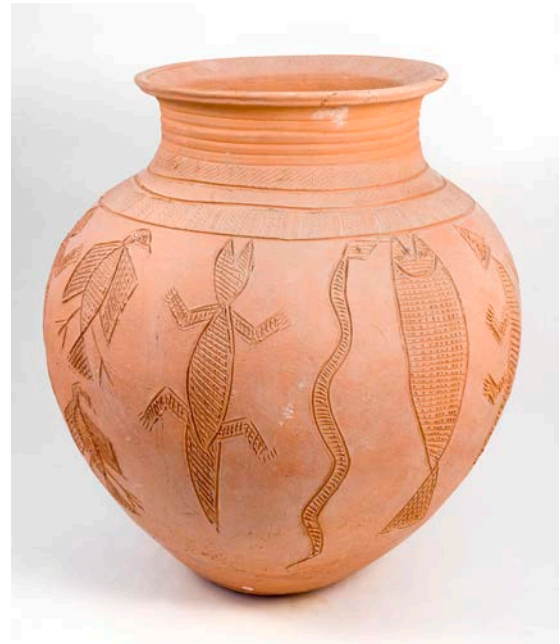


Figure 54: Kwali, L. 1963. Earthenware. One of two pieces made at Farnham. UCA Farnham Ceramics teaching collection. Photo: David Westwood.

Kwali is perhaps the most visible of the Nigerian ceramists that Cardew advocated for through exhibitions, lecture tours and demonstrations. The Abuja Pottery Training Centre was eventually named after her. She can be compared to Maria Martinez and Pueblo ceramics and Nesta Nala and Zulu ceramics for the work to take her tradition of ceramics to Western studio ceramics audiences.

Kwali and Ardmore are examples of female empowerment and marginal African voices working their way towards an international stage. They represent social

⁸⁷ General Press Release: AFRICAN CRAFTSMEN IN NASHVILLE, Tennessee State University, Michael Cardew Archive, Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts, Farnham.

mobility and enterprise as a possibility for African ceramists. This adds a further layer for understanding what it is to be African through ceramics.

Siddig El Nigoumi (1931-1996) and Magdalene Odundo (1950-): Burnishing in Britain

The burnished surface and the British art school link Magdalene Odundo and Siddig El Nigoumi. Low-fired, unglazed and burnished surfaces have been used in many different historic and continuing ceramic traditions in Africa, including Baganda court ceramics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and Zulu beer ceramics. Using these techniques in the UK which demand high levels of skill and patience, suggests a direct reference to an African visual language. Making method becomes a way of asserting an African identity. They are examples of understanding 'African-ness' through techniques and materials.

Nigoumi first worked as a calligrapher. He then attended art school in Khartoum (1952-55) and in London at the Central School of Arts and Crafts (1957-60). He also taught in both Khartoum and Farnham (late 1960s and 1970s). It appears that he was a keen observer of life in the UK and Sudan which is noted by Jane Perryman in her book on contemporary approaches to smoke firing. Perryman credits Nigoumi with introducing the technique of smoke-firing using newspaper to the UK (2008: 36). The V&A website also reports that Nigoumi was an important advocate for African techniques within studio ceramics circles in the UK. Perryman's section on Nigoumi in her book opens with the sentence 'Siddig El' Nigoumi was the most successful of his generation of ex-patriot Africans at synthesising British and African cultures' (2008: 32). Perryman's quote comes from Sebastian Blackie who was recalling comments made by Odundo. Both Blackie and Odundo also taught at Farnham Art School.

There is a plate by Nigoumi with a Guardian crossword puzzle design listed for sale on the Leigh Gallery's website. It is an example of Nigoumi seeking out design ideas from seemingly mundane sources, perhaps because he observed the crossword, as an outsider and observer of British culture or perhaps his background in calligraphy lent itself to an interest in graphic and typographical forms for their aesthetic qualities.

Arabic calligraphy, hand-building, burnishing and low-firing were combined with throwing in his work. He also made thrown stoneware and he made some low-

fired burnished earthenware with neat calligraphic scraffito designs drawing from Sudanese and British sources. This happened through the 1970s and 1980s, as Odundo was beginning to make her mark in the British scene. Incidentally, Nigoumi taught Odundo press moulding and burnishing, while Helen Pincombe taught coiling. A jug, by Nigoumi, *Ibreeq*, from 1980 (C.56-1980) and a plate, *The Great Royal Wedding*, from 1981 (C.77-1984) are in the V&A collection (Watson, 1990: 180).

Outside the V&A collection, Nigoumi's work is to be found in the Aberystwyth University ceramics collection and the University for the Creative Arts Ceramics Teaching Collection. Nigoumi can be seen as a precursor to Odundo, in that he made low-fired and burnished ceramics within British studio ceramic circles.

Odundo, like Oyekan, is a distinctive voice in British ceramics, part of a generation of bold new makers from the RCA that began with Elizabeth Fritsch (1971), Jacqueline Poncelet (1972), Alison Britton (1973), and Carol McNicoll (1973) who graduated a decade before Odundo did in 1982. However, Odundo's strong personal links to Cardew and her restrained aesthetic sets her apart from the overtly decorative work of Britton and RCA graduates of the 1970s. Odundo had wanted to make English slipware in the style of Thomas Toft⁸⁸. This was something that Leach and Cardew did together during their early years at St Ives, although they are both more well-known for their stoneware. Like Garratt, African forms and techniques are part of a broad palette of influence and inspiration. Simon Olding (2004) highlights her Arts and Crafts heritage, for example, aptly marked by her solo exhibition at Blackwell, the Arts and Crafts House in the Lake District and he picks up on her as a product of Leach's philosophy of crafts. Odundo's initial influences were ceramics from Mesopotamia, Cypress and Greece, and then Egypt⁸⁹. These classical sources preceded her interest in Nigerian and Kenyan ceramics.

Odundo is an artist associated with both the UK, where she lives and teaches, and Kenya where she grew up. Nigerian ceramics, including stoneware, were a

⁸⁸ Written correspondence with Odundo, January 2014.

⁸⁹ Written correspondence with Odundo, January 2014.

formative influence during her British art school education. She exhibits, teaches and works regularly in the US, where her agent, Anthony Slayter-Ralph is based. While she has worked in many different media including bronze, glass and industrial ceramics, she is best known for exquisite, thin-walled, hand-built vessel forms that have been burnished and sometimes carbonised. They sometimes have sparse additions of ridges, nipple-like nodules or ring-shaped 'handles' which Emmanuel Cooper picks up as bodily associations. Drawing is a central to her creative practice as is close observation of ancient museum objects. She uses these two elements — observation and drawing — to create her abstract forms. She worked with Egyptian ear plugs from Petrie Museum in the conception of *Metamorphosis and transformation* (2011), an installation of collaboratively produced blown glass with organic, cocoon-like characteristics. The title highlights the close connections between source, material, form and process, which are analogous and ambiguous. This poetic connectedness is a sense I hoped to achieve with the *Extermination Tents* installation.



Figure 55: Odundo, M. 2013. Burnished ceramic. Photo: David Westwood, 2013.



Figure 56: Odundo, M. 2013. Burnished ceramic. Photo: David Westwood, 2013.

Change in her hand built work appears to be gradual and slow. She continues to work with a related group of vessel shapes, with qualities of stillness and anthropomorphism. On Odundo's anthropomorphic forms, Cooper wrote:

With quiet humour, these pot-figures, minimal and abstract, but with allusions to the body, are Odundo at her most ambiguous and enigmatic, as much concerned with external appearance as interior space, about the surface we show to the world rather than inner thoughts or feelings with seemingly little to disturb the calm. They appear, and are, self-contained and assured. (Cooper, 2004: 40-41)

They are repetitions on a theme. Similarly, Vogel (1991: 20) in *Africa Explores* talks about repetition in African art:

Traditional African sculptors often say they are freeing a form they see in uncarved wood; it may be justifiable to postulate that in the visual arts as in the verbal, creativity consists in materializing something that already exists. Originality, then, would lie in the ability to improvise, to create interesting variations, rather than in claiming to invent something completely new. As in music, the artist can cut away from an ongoing rhythm or melody - or form - to improvise against it, then can cut back to the waiting or ongoing form.

This sense Vogel mentions appears closely related to Odundo's work and is perhaps why they appear to sit so well in historical, geographically based museums, like in the British Museum. This type of 'African-ness' gives an impression of elegant timelessness and of incremental change over time. This resonance across time is something that Jonathan Garratt aspires towards.

Educating others has been a significant part of Odundo's career from early days teaching at the Commonwealth Institute (1976-9) as a new graduate of the West Surrey College of Art and Design (now the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham) to being made a professor at the same institution in 2001. Like Oyekan, Odundo's postgraduate education at the Royal College of Art (1979-1982) was where she was encouraged to develop the visual language she still uses today. The 'African-ness' in Odundo and Oyekan's work comes from their background and from studying other African objects within a framework that was specific and fiercely self-reflexive. This particularly British model demanded thorough research, experimentation and technical excellence, which facilitated their development of visual languages, contributing to their hybrid forms.

As discussed in chapter 2, Odundo has been included in several major exhibitions with 'Africa' in the title, including *Africa Explores* and *The Global*

Africa Project as well as *Black Womanhood*, curated by Barbara Thomson placing Odundo's work within the African art, women's art and black art scenes. Her work is also to be found in exhibitions of British ceramics such as *British Ceramics 2000* at the Keramikmuseet Grimmerhus, Denmark alongside Nicholas Rena, Ken Eastman, Jennifer Lee, Richard Slee and Britton. In 2003 Odundo's work was included in two group shows, one was *Material Differences: Artists and Identity in Africa* at the Museum for African Art, New York (8 April - 15 August) which also travelled to several other venues. This overlapped with *British Ceramics: Five Artists* at the Frank Lloyd Gallery: Los Angeles International Biennale Art Invitational 9 July-16 August.

Cooper (2004: 48) tentatively described Odundo's work as 'hybridised', calling the term a 'useful jargon word' to indicate the art/craft, European/African, archaic/modern and vessel/sculpture combinations in her practice. This seems to fit for many of the artists discussed in this chapter including Armstrong, Kwali, Swanepoel and Cardew. Hybridity seems encompass much what is interesting about the representation of 'African-ness' in recent ceramics.

On the gendered aspects of Odundo's work, often manifest as womanly anthropomorphic forms, Cooper (2004: 49) picks up that:

[w]hile the vessels Odundo makes can be seen as emblematic of the female form - as a metaphor for the female - containers to be filled and used, it is an analogy that is both timeless and relevant, whether from a social, economic, aesthetic or religious point of view.

This refers to Vincentelli's feminist reading of Odundo's forms and making techniques. Cooper (2004: 52) reports that Odundo resists being tied down to the feminist or African label. Rather she remains 'enigmatic', though curators such as Vogel have helped make those labels stick through exhibitions such as *Africa Explores*.

There is a sense of ripeness in her forms and they are excellently executed with technical control. There is a sense of working at the limits and with an element of quiet and slow risk. Her pieces have a sense of movement and vitality, but this is a slow movement which implies spirituality, contemplation and quietness: a sway or a stretch.

Cooper, in an essay called *the Clay of Life* in Odundo's monograph, picks up on her varied and international palette of forms, techniques as well as less tangible influences from her life. Odundo began to appreciate African Art while on her foundation course in Cambridge (Cooper, 2004: 11). She found Leach's philosophy relevant as a student at Farnham (Cooper, 2004: 15) and met Cardew and O'Brien at Wenford Bridge on a field trip. Cooper discusses the formative summer holiday in Nigeria in 1974 where she worked at the Abuja training centre after Cardew encouraged her to visit the centre, learning to produce thrown tableware and hand-built pots by observation and imitation. O'Brien gave her a space to work after graduating which facilitated her early career and gave her access to his collection. She also travelled to North America after graduating from Surrey Institute of Art and Design and observed Pueblo ceramics traditions. She continues to travel widely, taking in many different cultures and astutely observes connections between objects.

Cooper discusses Odundo's African identity and her student research into rites of passage in African cultures, including her own. Cooper refers to objects, and particularly ceramics, used in these ceremonies which Odundo found to be significant. He suggests that they have had an effect on her asymmetrical anthropomorphic forms, because they also often take a human-like form.

Cooper (2004: 41) wrote that:

Through such precedents, Odundo, like many artists today, has found a way of investigating concepts of identity and notions of self, not by recreating traditional forms but by adapting them to give them meaning and significance in the modern world.

These pieces are particularly significant in regards to their anthropomorphism. According to Cooper (2004: 41), the asymmetrical pots are particularly special because they appear to move. The moving and even dancing human figure is present in many of Odundo's pots. (Cooper, 2004: 41,44). She is captivated by watching dance, acrobatics.

This suggestion of movement, while introducing a sense of tension, paradoxically gives these pots a greater impression of serenity. (Cooper, 2004: 44)

Cooper (2004: 45) describes the appearance of interaction between her pieces at her exhibition *Ceramic Gestures* at the Museum of African Art in Washington DC. For this show her pots were, unusually, all grouped together which apparently emphasised their alive, body-like characteristics, which also is relevant to my *Extermination Tents* installation. In it I seek to highlight this physical impression of a kind of kinship through the way I arrange some of the tents on the ground. Odundo's sources for forms extend from figures and historical ceramic objects. Cooper (2004: 45) also mentions forms that suggest plants and Elizabethan costumes, adding both depth and ambiguity.



Figure 57: Odundo, M. 2013. Two burnished and carbonised ceramics. Photo: David Westwood.

Cooper (2004: 52-53) remarks that Odundo has been collected by US museums for their African collections, but that her more 'fine craft' and 'Contemporary art' context is different from the objects in those collections. I argue that the presence of her objects is good for African collections, because they contribute to further removing traces of negative ethnographic associations because they give the impression of being at once ancient and modern. Their

slippage between the historic and the contemporary problematises the separateness of these two categories.

Cooper (2004: 53) finishes his essay by quoting Louisa Buck (1992: 20) with:

With their range of references, their sense of the numinous and their multi-cultural concerns, there is no denying the power of Odundo's art, which is its very stillness generates a 'presence so strong that you can almost hear it, or even feel it.' The deafening silence that surrounds Odundo's vessels does indeed make them special. These pots about life tell their own stories.

This autonomous and open-ended quality, which comes from skilful abstraction, which comes from keen observation, is also something I tried to emulate in the *Extermination Tents*, though the pace, degree of movement and stillness is different. The method is mostly the same. Olding (2004: 88) offers a simpler, personal sentence to explain the many influences and sources that Odundo combines:

Odundo borrows from the cultures she likes. She amalgamates these ideas, sources and memories of ceramics, metalwork and costume into a coherent, distilled vocabulary.

Aside from her burnished works, Odundo has dealt with issues of identity, and particularly colonial and postcolonial identity in an exhibition which covered several rooms at the Russell-Cotes Museum. Olding discusses her work here for, the *Acknowledged Sources* project where she presented new work in the unusual form of a Staffordshire dinner service decorated with her own family history in magenta transfers. She also arranged other objects, including her own work, goblets by Cardew, enamels from the collection, and then draped some Kente cloth over the grand piano. Olding (2004: 84) explains that in this exhibition she confronted the colonial past with a directness, which not immediately apparent in her coiled forms:

Odundo confronted the misgivings of a colonial past with the ceremonial impact of her own personal history, printed onto a dinner service with all the attention to detail of the Victorian dining service.

Olding (2004: 88) describes Odundo's 'cause' - 'the ceaseless inquiry after the truth of form, managed through slow and methodical repetition, and the concentrated delivery of a small number of related shapes, all conceived on a grand scale.'

Olding points out the subtle depth and variety of Odundo's practice as an artist, within her individual pieces and the more overt variety of her artistic career. He also positively assesses her impact as an artist who has tried many different mediums and approaches and has worked as a curator and artist and sometimes both.

She is at once claimed by contemporary African Art, British studio ceramics, African ceramics, even ethnography, and world ceramics, yet remains in Cooper's words, 'enigmatic'.

In relation to this research, Odundo's work is so powerful and relevant because it simultaneously fits and resists so many categories, and thus becomes an excellent example of the restrictive nature of those categories. Her work draws attention to their own artificiality and their limits, and how they can become small and quiet starting points for societal self-reflexion, showing interconnections rather than differences.

The different artists that were discussed in this chapter presented many different grounds for understanding African-ness. This included materials and processes, styles and decorations, geographic origin or birthplace, temporary experiences of living in Africa, subject matter and borrowing from historical African forms. Through all these different makers, the characteristic that came up most frequently was hybridity. They all exhibited some form of hybridity in their work whether this was a mixing of styles, materials, forms, histories or personal experiences. This hybridity usually included elements that can be classed as African and Western, or British. From this limited sample of makers, hybridity is the most common characteristic for describing expressions of African-ness in the present and recent past which is postcolonial, and in the case of the South Africans, post-apartheid.

Chapter 4 - Creative Practice

In chapter 3 I situated a range of artists in their own geographical, political and artistic contexts in order to understand their relationship with Africa and its representation. The following passage is presented before introducing my practice to give a sense of my geographic, political and educational context so that the analysis of my work can be enriched in the way that I have done for the artists in chapter 3. Cooper introduced Odundo particularly effectively in the book on her work, *Magdalene Odundo* (2004). He included many biographical details and allowed the reader to see the limitations of obvious connections between the artist's life and work, such as relying too heavily on her Kenyan upbringing. He revealed that connections between art and life can be more subtly complicated, recounting her time as a student visiting Wenford Bridge, using museum objects as source material or developing her political awareness while studying in Cambridge. I begin this chapter on my own work with a brief statement of my social and educational background to prompt readers to engage with the complexity of my relationship to both Africa and the West. When taken together with the analysis of my work in this chapter, the intention is to provide a comparable level of sensitivity for viewers to bring to my work.

The following passage is an autobiographical statement which provides context for my practice:

I am a white English-speaking woman, born and raised in a middle-class South African family in what was the Natal colony, now part of the province of KwaZulu-Natal. My journey as an artist began at school in a multiracial environment, edging out of the shadow of Apartheid in the 1990s. At first this seemed ideal and euphoric; the collective unease during my infancy appeared to have hardly made an impression on my memory, but as I entered adulthood and university, I became more aware of the complexity of the political and social reality. I began to feel ambivalent about the complicated, sometimes contradictory experiences that were part of my experience of growing up in South Africa. My attention was drawn to extreme economic inequality, fear of crime and HIV/AIDS, hostility to pan-African immigration, and the deeply engrained scars of racism and elitism that form an ever-present background to an otherwise diverse and free life in cosmopolitan Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Marks made by Apartheid and colonialism remain evident in everyday life and in the collective memory in South Africa and abroad. In KwaZulu-Natal, there is constant evidence in architecture,

town planning, cultural events and language use of how intertwined the UK and South Africa are because of their colonial past.

My ceramics training at the University of KwaZulu-Natal drew strongly from the British studio ceramics movement. The curriculum included slip-trailed earthenware, Maiolica and Anglo-Oriental traditions such as making thrown stoneware. Many of the teaching studio glaze recipes were developed by Dora Billington, adapted, where necessary, to local ingredients. This in itself is evidence of the continued connectedness of the UK and the territories that were once its colonies. Alongside, the study of other South African traditions including Zulu beer ceramics was encouraged, an example of a broad interest in other South African traditions across the arts. Leach standard wares, European industrial bone china tea cups, historic and contemporary *izinkamba*, sculptures by Josephine Gesa and Peter Voukos' gestural clay forms all featured in the teaching I received, and in turn, elements of these seeped into my practice.

The complementary Art History programme gave roughly equal weight to Western and African traditions. Staff research and teaching reflected an emphatic support for work by black artists and an inclusive, non-hierarchical attitude to materials, techniques, and knowledge systems. Postcolonial, postmodern and feminist theories, and an emphasis on issues of representation and identities formed the theoretical background. Questioning and deconstructing assumed power relations, authenticity and authorship were key parts of the course. The skeleton of a historically Eurocentric approach still coloured my educational experience, but hybridity, acknowledging multiple perspectives and telling local stories was encouraged. (Kim Bagley, 2013)

I broadly identify with the sentiment expressed by Verster, concerned by the uneasy relationship with an African identity:

Through all our art has been a thread that has troubled people to a greater and lesser extent, one of belonging. Where do we as artists fit into Africa? How to prove our credentials? How do we resolve the dilemma of being Western and African at the same time? . . . The Afrocentric/Eurocentric debate was then aesthetic, not political, alluded to rather than debated, low-keyed.

Since democracy, there has been a stampede to invent symbols for our new country. . . Authenticity is everything. But identity has been illusive, IS illusive, and cannot be invented. (Verster, 2004: 10)

Verster highlights the compulsion among artists to create a sense of belonging in democratic South Africa through the invention of new symbols. He also alludes to a carelessness that should be avoided. In this research I have taken one such symbol, cattle and cattle skin, as a starting point, which I then further developed in *Ear Tags*, a more literal symbol for exploring identity. I then moved

on to develop a more unusual symbol, the extermination tent, as a way of alluding to this elusive identity.

I have created three main types of work; all have been made by hand and then kiln-fired. All three trajectories of practice began with a skin-clay metaphor and make use of animal related forms. Several pieces in the *Extermination Tents* series in particular have anthropomorphic qualities. These various body and skin-like forms allude to, and question, the complex dynamics of identity construction and representation. I did this using a skin-clay-animal metaphor, together with the language of grouped multiples and elements of installation practice. I tend to work with very soft clay, and use my hands as my main tools. This is so I can make sure the work maintains a sense of the softness and pliability, allowing the clay to reveal itself in its plastic and pyro-plastic⁹⁰ states, in its final, hard, fired form. The work is accompanied by ceramic materials tests and other supporting material from the making process, including drawings and photographs which make the making and thinking processes more transparent.

Cattle herds and contemporary art

The first types of form I used were cattle forms, which I have used extensively in the past. I used them specifically as markers of identities in the KwaZulu-Natal regional context in South Africa. Swanepoel, Sithole, Armstrong and my own previous practice are relevant precedents for this approach. The other two major forms I have used in this research interrogate 'identities' using animal related images and forms more obliquely. In South Africa there are issues around representing identities that require careful negotiation at the intersections of race, culture, place and entitlement, as a result of the political and social history of the region. Appearing to speak for another cultural, racial, linguistic or gendered group is fraught with risk. As a South African from the KwaZulu-Natal region, my perspective is that of an insider who can talk about personal and observed experiences from my own environment.

⁹⁰ The softness of the material at high temperatures in the kiln, which is evident as warping and sagging in the cooled form.

Looking at contemporary art from the region, in ceramics and other media, is necessary to understanding the broader social and representational context of my work. Complex ‘identities’, whether personal, cultural, regional or national, are common tropes and themes grappled with by artists and scholars working across the visual arts in South Africa. Nicolas Hlobo, Michael MacGarry, Nandipha Mntambo and Michael Subotzky all deal with postcolonial identities and the discrepancies or slippages between actual and authorised identities. The Standard Bank Young Artist Award, a prestigious national accolade, was given to these four artists in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012, respectively. While their ‘authorisation’ through the award perhaps requires a degree of caution, their work arguably represents what is considered to be resonant content and appropriate form by the art establishment. Award winners are chosen for their potential to contribute to the landscape of South African art by specialist committees who set the parameters of the National Arts Festival (Van der Spuy, 2011). This suggests that dealing with the experience of negotiating identities whilst growing up in Southern Africa is a common concern. Juxtaposition of seemingly disparate elements as a mode of critique seems to be a common thread running through some of their work. Hlobo (2008) has said, reflecting on his experience at art school:

. . .through your work you need to start telling a story. That’s when I started thinking about what I could talk about and the identity became my choice. My colonial heritage, views around sexuality, my nationality as a South African and being Xhosa, and also I looked at circumcision. I had to find ways of tackling the very soft sensitive and at times very controversial issues using soft methods and soft materials. . . ⁹¹

Hlobo has found an appropriate visual, material language — ribbons and other textiles — to make complex soft sculptures which explore and question issues around self and group identities that often remain ambiguous and difficult to articulate.

⁹¹ Promotional video of Hlobo talking about his work. Other videos available through the same URL include Mntambo, MacGarry and Subotzky talking about their work and the Standard Bank award.

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Figure 58: Praça de Touros III.

Figure 59: Praça de Touros II.

Figure 60: Praça de Touros I.

Mntambo, N. 2008. Archival pigment ink on cotton rag paper. Images: 101x152cm. Paper: 111x166cm each. Edition of 5, 2 Artist's Proofs. Photos: Stevenson.

Mntambo performs an imaginary bull fight, wearing a sculptural cow hide garment, in a derelict Mozambican colonial era bull fighting arena ⁹² in the video, *Ukungenisa*, and prints *Praça de Touros I, II, III* (2008). She disrupts conventional notions of gender, power, fear and human and animal bodies by placing her body in seemingly incongruous contexts. She also constructs sculptural forms using cow hide and describes the cow as a 'universal symbol' through which she shows that human beings are connected (Mntambo, 2011). This is related to what Swanepoel has tried to achieve with her cattle head forms, though on a more national than truly universal level.

The right to publish this image has not been granted.

Figure 61: MacGarry, M. 2009. Karl Marx in Angola, 1974. Inkjet print on cotton paper. 90x60cm. Edition of 10. Photo: Stevenson.

⁹² *Artist Talk: Nandipha Mntambo, in conversation with Lawrence Weschler. November 9, 2010.*

MacGarry's work is concerned with the imperial and the post colonial in Africa through the creation of objects and images that resemble nail fetishes or masquerade costumes. Such props are read as African objects in the sense engendered by exhibitions such as *Primitivism* and museums displays such as the Africa gallery at the Louvre. MacGarry then juxtaposes these African objects with 'Western' imperial objects, outfits and settings.

Subotzky's *Security* series draws attention to the strange particularities and contradictions of middle-class, usually white, suburban life in the 'new', 'free' South Africa in a series of photographs of black security guards and the structures that serve as shelters or offices during their working hours. In *Wendy House II* (2009) we see a uniformed guard framed by the entrance to his wooden hut or Wendy house⁹³ and several white rose bushes. This image invites contemplation of the current state of racial integration, the prevalence of colonial symbolism and the ambiguous location of colonial power since Apartheid. The roses can be read as parochial icons of colonial heritage, and they perhaps symbolise a false sense of propriety that obscures the underlying fear⁹⁴. The overall effect verges on the absurd. Subotzky, born 1981, writes:

When I was a child, Wendy Houses lived in the suburban backyards for children to play in and imagine themselves in a castle or a mansion. By 2007, they had found their way past the houses and out through the front walls onto the suburban pavements. Stationed there like little models of the real houses behind them, they are a constant shelter to a succession of guards who travel from far off places to inhabit them. . . They are also one of the few direct visual manifestations of the fear that is implicit in the surroundings. The very same fear that Mr Tshabangu⁹⁵ so eloquently brought to life in his story of the '70s has found form in these small wooden sketches of the quintessential home. (Subotzky, 2011: 293)

⁹³ A small wooden shed for children to play in with a similar meaning in the UK and South Africa. Subotzky calls the sheds erected for use by security guards 'Wendy Houses' because they are the same type of shed, in size, design and material, as those erected in backyards of suburban houses for (usually) middle-class children to play in.

⁹⁴ In *Dis-Location/Re-Location*, artist-researcher Leora Farber makes extensive use of the rose as a symbol of Europe and colonialism, juxtaposed or grafted together with the indigenous aloe. On *A Room of her Own* (2006): 'The stitching together of white flesh and indigenous South African plant, rose and aloe, pearl and white African bead suggests the creation of new subjectivities that are the product of grafting European and African.' (Jacobsen, 2007: 5)

⁹⁵ *Thoughts on a Train* by Mango Tshabangu, reprinted in *Figures and Fictions*.

The movement of the Wendy House from the back yards of white suburban homes to the pavements of expensive neighbourhoods and the swapping of little girls and their tea sets for security guards and clipboards, reflects Subotzky's experience as part of the generation who grew up during the transition from Apartheid to democracy. The suburban house is also an important point of reference in my own *Extermination Tents* series, reflecting its significant power as a symbol in this society.

All these artists show that understanding the transitional socio-political period they grew up in and observing how it continues to play out, seems to be a common preoccupation among contemporary artists making work about Africa. It is a theme which is addressed through juxtaposing images and objects, often using culturally loaded imagery and materials in a provocative, unexpected manner. However, it seems that clay or ceramics are seldom used to similar ends in contemporary practice in Africa and when they are, it tends to occur on the margins of the art scene.

In my work, typically composed of connected groups of objects, the medium of ceramics is used as a visual and tactile language to explore themes and issues around constructed cultural and location-based identities. Unlike the work by Mntambo, Subotzky and MacGarry discussed above, the *Ear Tags* and *Extermination Tents* use a more minimal abstract visual language. The individual objects and their position within my multipart installations can represent or symbolise people, animals or objects and their (potentially hierarchical) position within larger groups based on the arrangement of the forms and the spatial relationships between them.

Stage 1: Object/ify

Object/ify was shown at the James Hockey Gallery ⁹⁶, March 2011.

My impetus for my PhD research initially came from reflecting how I appropriated the Nguni cattle form in my ceramics since 2007, as an assertion of regional identity and affinity. The small hand modelled forms in *Object/ify* are

⁹⁶ The art gallery of the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham for *Concept and Context in Practice*, 2011, a research students exhibition.

the most popular 'stock' form I make from the point of view of sales, broad patronage, and demand⁹⁷. They are arranged in pairs or larger groups and children often feel compelled to touch them or rearrange them inside museums and galleries⁹⁸.



Figure 62: Bagley, K. 2010-2011. Object/ify. Dimensions variable. Unglazed stoneware, earthenware and porcelain, slips. Photographed 2011.



Figure 63: Bagley, K. 2009. Pelt. Hand-modelled stoneware. Private collection. Dimensions variable. Photo: S. Dwyer, 2009.



Figure 64: Bagley, K. 2008. Rumination IV. Thrown and altered stoneware, red local slip. Private Collection. 45cm. Photographed 2008.



Figure 65: Bagley, K. 2008. Rumination. Thrown and altered stoneware, black iron and manganese oxide wash. Nairobi National Museum Collection. 50cm. Photographed 2008.

⁹⁷ I have been selling hand-modelled cattle forms through Sue Greenberg and her successor, Ingrid Lotter, at Artisan gallery, Durban South Africa since 2008 though critically they have received less attention when compared to other work.

⁹⁸ Particularly, when *Pelt* (2009) was shown at the Tatham Art Gallery I was notified by the museum staff that several primary school groups had passed through the museum and rearranged my installation of their own accord.

Pelt (2009) (figure 63) was the first grouped cattle piece exhibited publicly. It was part of a group show at the Tatham Art Gallery (a municipal art museum), Pietermaritzburg in 2009. For another show, *Miniatures*, held concurrently at the Jack Heath Gallery, a pair of small, hand-built cattle was produced. The simple pleasure of modelling and finishing the pair (in contrast to the physical demands of the larger-scale wheel-thrown work that I was otherwise focused on) provided the incentive to begin producing larger groups of the small hand-modelled cattle in parallel. Each cattle form was modelled fairly rapidly and evidence of their construction method, finger marks, was apparent in the finished work. After firing they were arranged in the shape that a tanned cattle hide conventionally takes when laid flat. Each animal became a unit in the design of the flat skin shape, which was roughly symmetrical and varied in the way that is typical of Nguni cattle. It was installed on a flat horizontal surface (conventional sculpture plinth without a vitrine) just below waist height so the overall shape and the individual cattle forms could be appreciated fairly intimately.

At the time *Pelt* was an adjunct to my 'serious' practice of large, technically challenging, sculptural forms and installations such as the life-size cattle form, *RumiNATION Resting* (2009) (figure 66). However, the response to *Pelt*, which led to a substantial commission and the establishment of a professional relationship with curator and dealer Sue Greenberg, led me to rethink the significance of the hand-modelled work in framing this research. It prompted a new way of thinking in terms of scale, proximity, touch and familiarity. There was resonance in the more intimate, smaller installation that I did not anticipate. It is partly for this reason that I prefer displaying my work outside of cabinets or vitrines within physical reach of the public to invite or at least tempt a physical engagement⁹⁹. In this way the work shares something in common with Clare Twomey's *Trophy*, though she went a step further, leaving the public to decide, if they wish, to remove her birds from the V&A.

⁹⁹ On the (re)emergence of 'installation' in late 20th century ceramics de Waal writes: 'The desire for ceramics to achieve parity with sculpture in 'the white cube' of the modern gallery and museum, the placing of objects on plinths, had led to a less interrogative sense of what was possible - only to find that these sites were being regarded as conventional and outmoded by sculptors and painters' (2003: 184).



Figure 66: Bagley, K. 2009. RumiNATION Resting. Assembled from thrown and altered stoneware with local red slip and ash glaze. Porcelain and polished earthenware details. Perspex and mosquito screen netting support structure. Dimensions variable - approximately 180cm long. Installed at KZNSA (KwaZulu-Natal Society of the Arts) Gallery. Collection of the artist. Photographed 2009.

My focus has shifted from the cattle and their attendant meaning or symbolism, as discussed by Poland (1996, 2003), Swanepoel (2009), Hammond-Tooke (2003, 2009) amongst others, to the combined formal and thematic attributes which have presumably made them popular and compelling. I am interested in how they can be subject to analysis by looking at their physical qualities and how they can be thought of in terms of postcolonial relations. Their scale, simplicity and finish seems to invoke familiarity and their tactile qualities invite a physical engagement with the surface that echoes the way they were made. Where does the source of the intimacy and pleasure that the work invokes, reside? How can the formal qualities of the herds be used to address complex issues around identity construction and the dynamic of power, authority and group dynamics?

Object/ify was a response to these questions. I have explored the idea further, prompted by reactions to *Pelt*. I considered the formal qualities of the work, which evoke affinity and comfort, in conjunction with cultural and symbolic implications of the cattle form. *Object/ify* therefore functions as an introduction to the research, an assertion of my established identity as an artist, and a reference to the origin of the research questions. Making *Object/ify* drew on

known production methods (hand-modelling) and the familiarity of the cattle form. These known elements provided a base from which the materials and firing facilities available in the new, unknown environment (University for the Creative Arts, Farnham, ceramics workshops) could be tested.



Figure 67: Detail of Object/ify. K. Bagley. 2010-2011. Dimensions variable. Unglazed stoneware, earthenware and porcelain, slips. Photographed 2011.

Object/ify comprises approximately 350 cattle forms arranged on a 3-inch high flat, matt white plinth. The cattle forms were each hand-modelled individually, in batches, using a repeated set of hand gestures which resulted in a degree of uniformity and consistency in size and form. When compared to the tags in *Ear Tags*, which are all cut from the same template, the cattle forms are less uniform. They were made from a variety of commercially prepared pottery clays including a red terracotta, two porcelain bodies, a coarse black sculpture clay and a variety of stoneware clays (ranging in colour from buff to yellows, greys and browns, and ranging in texture from very fine to coarse and grogged). Most of the cattle forms were fired to a stoneware temperature of between 1220 and 1280 degrees Celsius, rendering them vitreous. Some terracotta (red-firing clay) forms were fired to a lower temperature (980 to 1080 degrees) to introduce further variations in colour, tone and texture. Electric firing in an oxygen rich

environment supplied most of the even warm tones and a dense black while gas firing with a reduction (oxygen starved) atmosphere supplied most of the subtly varied cool tones, bright whites and grey-blacks. Associations of firing temperature and clay body with hierarchies of value (that may posit porcelain and stoneware above earthenware or terracotta) were not a significant concern. Rather, firing temperatures and clay bodies were chosen to create a variety of colours and tones. It is acknowledged that a possible reading of the piece could infer that the similar treatment of materials regardless of their implicit value could indicate of sense of democratisation of material. Glenn Adamson (2007: 168) suggests that the spaces, both physical and ideological, that craft practices can work within provide opportunities for 'displacing value structures' in this way.

This grouped installation uses the visual language of tableaux, implying a narrative and a relationship between the component parts. The variation in the standing positions, that is, the curvature of the neck and spine of the animals suggest movement and interaction (figures 67, 69). Figurative cattle forms reference African children's modelling and the work of Hezekile Ntuli and Ntshalintshali (see figure 68). Calder indicates that Ntuli's cattle, people and other animal sculptures can be read as 'potent emblems of a Zulu traditionalist rural order' (1996: 3).

As a way of supplying a historical context, the label of 'Figurative sculpture' is attached to the Natal Museum's accession of 'Zulu ceramics' in the late 1800s. Calder designates it as a solely male activity associated with herders (1996: 18). He goes on to indicate that the history of similar figurative sculpture then becomes tourist, curio or souvenir oriented. Figures in this collection are human figures (usually 'indigenes') or African animals. 'Animal imagery is also used emblematically and ceramists have used representations of African game ... and domestic Nguni cattle as implicitly stereotypical markers of "Africa"' (1996, 18-19). Calder notes that the work of artists such as Ntshalintshali represent 'an historical continuum rather than a mediated innovation' if one considers the work of Ntuli contained in the Natal Museum (1996: 19). This appears due to Ntuli's use of paint and carefully detailed figurative pieces.



Figure 68: *Ntshalintshali, B. 1988. Lobola. Painted Earthenware. Tatham Art Gallery collection. Photographed 2008.*

The cattle forms here are used because they are a regionally and culturally specific form but they can also be read more generally as units of a group due to the visual ambivalence of their abstracted bovine forms. In a similar vein, Mntambo has referred to cattle in a number of different cultural contexts including veneration of cattle in India and bull fighting practices in Spain.

When showing *Object/ify* specific attention was drawn to this culturally and regionally specific narrative in the exhibition labelling to steer UK viewers in my direction. Daniel Herwitz (2008) argues that viewing visual art in a gallery requires context. Appropriately he makes this point through a discussion of South African art exhibited at the Everard Read Gallery, September 1992. At this intense political and social time the statements made by the artists, particularly the sculptor Joachim Schönfeldt, (*Pioneers*, carved wood and white paint, figure of a cow with multiple heads) are particularly potent but without knowledge of the political history of South Africa, viewers would not be able to 'instinctively' understand the work (2008: 86). Schönfeldt's cattle forms, discussed at length by Swanepoel (2009), whose own work was discussed in

chapter 3, were made in a different socio-political context and therefore function differently to the cattle forms in *Object/ify*.

The clay colours are a palette of browns, oranges, yellows, blacks and whites. There are subtle differences in form, and in the position each cattle form appears to contort itself into. Rhythm, repetition and the suggestion of movement play an important role in making meaning in the work. The cattle forms do function on a symbolic level related to Swanepoel's trophy-like heads in that the original reference is specifically to Nguni cattle and implicitly their evolving cultural associations.

My cattle are neither anatomically accurate nor strictly Nguni in their appearance. The colour palette and my own regional background tends to lead viewers of my work to assume they are Ngunis but people with other familial associations with cattle forms in other contexts, geographic and cultural, have described my cattle in terms of their own experience as Highland cattle or Texas Longhorns. They have become generalised bovine forms that through their scale and sense of being familiar forms seem to invite engagement and intimacy with the viewer.

They are further generalised as representations of cattle in that they are gender neutral. Hammond-Tooke (2003: 23-25) describes how bulls, cows and oxen have different relationships and associations with people and human characteristics and are perceived in very specific ways with regard to their usage in isiZulu idioms, proverbs, analogies and the Zulu traditional cosmology and social system. The bull is to be feared for its unpredictability and temper but also admired as a symbol of masculine sexual potency, the cow is valuable and docile and the Ox to be emulated for its temperament, social responsibility, usefulness and beauty. I choose to use the cattle form with an awareness of the attendant cultural and regional associations that Swanepoel and Armstrong have engaged with.

However, the cattle in *Object/ify*, and especially in their arrangement in an interactive herd, are intended to move beyond concrete references to cultural specificity and therefore suggest more general ideas about the nature of

identification, movement and interaction. They become a vehicle with the potential to talk about group dynamics, aspirations, wealth and value in a variety of contexts. The formal attributes of the piece - rhythm, colour and tonal variations - and the implied interactive movement between the individual cattle function symbolically. Therefore, *Object/ify* presents a tentative, ambivalent narrative different from previous examples of African art that use cattle forms.



Figure 69: K. Bagley. 2010-2011. Detail of Object/ify. Dimensions variable. Unglazed stoneware, earthenware and porcelain, slips. Photographed 2011.

Stage 2: Material and metaphor - Ear Tags

Moving from the direct representation of cattle forms using plastic clay and simple hand-modelling techniques, I chose to start using the hybrid material paperclay. It is a hybrid material because it is a mixture of two different materials, clay and cellulose fibre. Using this material I developed two types of objects: cattle ear tags and extermination tents (discussed in the next section). As with the hand modelled cattle forms I continued to use multiples and animal-based metaphors. The base for the thin sheets of paperclay was made from a red clay and from porcelain, glazed and unglazed, and with screen-printed enamel transfers. I once again draw upon both formal and thematic aspects of

my relationship to the African continent, specifically KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Animals provide the starting point and I use them as a way to tackle regionally and culturally specific identities, more generalised issues of identity delineation, and construction.

The repetition of a single motif (cattle forms, ear tags, extermination tents) and the collation of those multiple elements to form larger pieces or installations is the predominant strategy for making. Forming these items by hand is important to the enquiry as the hand is the primary means of presenting identities in this work. I start with my own identity as an artist, and specifically as an artist working in clay, and for me that begins with my hands. Notions of sameness, repetition and difference, and the dynamic between the general and the specific are central to this way of working.



Figure 70: Cow with ear tag, near Howick, KwaZulu-Natal, 2008.

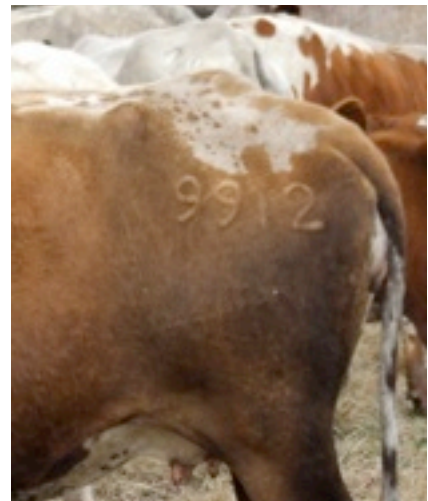


Figure 71: Cow with number cold branded into the skin, Underberg, KwaZulu-Natal, 2008.

Marked ear tags, when used on cattle in agriculture, are physical markers of identity, ownership and value. They are attached to the animal through a hole made through the skin and cartilage of the ear using a gun-like device.



Figure 72: Found plastic ear tag, Hampshire, UK, 2011.



Figure 73: Work in Progress: Terracotta paperclay sheet with tags traced, ready to be cut.

The template for my ceramic ear tags is a real, found, functional object: the tag pictured in figure 72. Using the plastic object as a template, ear tag shapes are cut from thin sheets of paperclay. The thin sheets are made by pouring, and then smoothing by hand, a mixture of slip (liquid clay) and paper fibres on plaster bats in a thin, even layer. Two different clay bodies are used to make sheets: one is a porcelain and the other is a red-firing terracotta, both produced by the specialist firm Valentines¹⁰⁰. Both are characteristically fine, smooth clays which makes them ideal for this method of making¹⁰¹. After releasing (peeling off) the sheets from the flat plaster bats, tag shapes are traced onto the sheets of clay and cut out with scissors which makes each tag subtly different from the others. The tags are fired to a stoneware temperature to render them permanent. The paperclay mixture makes it possible to make very thin tags in imitation of the real thing. The thinness and fibrous consistency visually allies

¹⁰⁰ A developer and supplier of clay bodies to studio potters based in Stoke-on-Trent.

¹⁰¹ Comparative tests conducted using a more granular clay body with more variation in clay particle size and large grog particles (called oxidising St Thomas) did not release from the plaster bat as quickly or easily as the two finer clay bodies. Presumably this is due to a lower wet to leather-hard shrinkage. Only comparatively smaller clay sheets could be made with the St Thomas clay when it did release from the bat.

the material with wet paper or skin. During the making process the clay sheets can be treated as one would treat paper (cutting, folding, tearing).

This is not a new or original technology. It is documented by a number of writers on technical aspects of ceramics. Anton Reijnders indicates that the addition of cellulose (vegetable) fibres to a clay body improves the 'working strength, cohesion, drying crack resistance' and 'dry strength' (2005: 38). Frank and Janet Hamer note paperclay's 'surprising green and dry strength.' (2004: 251). Hamer and Hamer also draw attention to the potential for traditional printmaking processes, on thin sheets of paperclay, afforded by its strength and flexibility (2004: 251). These hybrid technical characteristics make fibre-composite clays particularly relevant to making the *Ear Tags*, and to extending the notion of hybridity in the work.

Firing then gives the tags durability, translucency ¹⁰² (in the case of porcelain paperclay), permanence and rigidity. During firing the paper fibres combust, leaving traces of anorthite which makes the tags lighter when compared to a volume of the same clay body that does not contain cellulose fibre. This is also a practical consideration related to the potential weight of the entire installed piece once many tags have been joined. Again, the technical aspect of these 'traces' have resonance with the subject matter which reflects on the 'traces' of human touch on documents of identification.

I chose toilet paper as the source of fibres for the paperclay. Reijnders (2005: 39) cites its characteristic lack of glue and the fact that it is easily processed during the clay-making process. Annie Lightwood suggests it has no physical or chemical advantage over other fibre sources but is easy to obtain and use (Lightwood, 2000: 43). Reijnders also advocates for adding flax fibre to clay bodies for added strength, especially when working on a large scale (2005: 38-39). I have added flax, by hand, to a thick paperclay or plain porcelain slip and used it with good structural and aesthetic results in the *Extermination Tents*. Flax does make the slip a bit more difficult to smooth into very even, thin sheets

¹⁰² 'The property of porcelain and china which allows light to be seen through the material. It is an attractive effect which is achieved in a white body packed with slow-maturing pure particles of the same or very similar size, usually china clay and feldspar.' (Hamer and Hamer, 2004: 69)

as individual fibres do not break up without being cut with a sharp tool. While this was not suitable for the *Ear Tags*, it was used to advantage in the *Extermination Tents* where unevenness adds interest and variation in the larger pieces.

The percentage of cellulose fibre (toilet paper and dew-retted flax) (which typically varies between 2.5% and 8.5% of the total dry weight) in my clay was continually adjusted through the duration of the *Ear Tags* series with two aims in mind. One was to introduce subtle variation to the texture, translucency and minimum workable thickness which is in line with my aesthetic interest in simultaneous repetition combined with subtle difference. This is achieved within a set of self-imposed, predetermined rules: the two clay bodies and the tag template remain constant but the paper percentage and thickness change. All clay preparation and tag cutting and finishing is done by hand which adds further variation.



Figure 74: Materials test: A stack of tags in the kiln after firing to just below the point of vitrification. The image shows the fired tags warping under their own weight, against a kiln prop.

The other reason to experiment with different paper to clay ratios was to develop simultaneously the required consistency of clay sheets for the *Extermination Tents*. At maturing temperature this type of clay body is susceptible to warping and instability associated with normal clay bodies, though Jeoung-Ah Kim (2006: 25) identifies that the addition of paper in high percentages (20%+) does significantly decrease warping. However, the particular clay-paper ratio in use in this particular case is easier to work with in

its raw state ¹⁰³ but is still unstable (and requires physical support) in the pyroplastic state (during firing). This presents the opportunity for further experimentation using formers (figure 74) in the kiln to imitate the shapes and forms the 'real' ear tags take after prolonged use for their intended purpose.

For the sake of continuity, and to continue to develop the work within the thematic framework of the research, using a cattle related form, the tag seemed like the logical next step. An important aim in conceiving the *Ear Tags* project was to allude to the presence of skin and bodies without simulating literal skin.



Figure 75, 76: Schmahmann, K. 2005-2010. *Apart-hate: A People divider*. Various hardwoods, veneers, newspapers, documents, steel, aluminium. *Global Africa Project*. Collection of the Artist. Photographed 2011.

The *Ear Tags* provided a way to shift the focus of the research from a cultural symbol associated with regional identity and nationalisms, to the systems used to enforce official forms of identification such as paper documents, a different aspect of identity formation. Another aim was then to draw attention to the notion that people are often bound by formal, institutionalised aspects of identity including place of birth, age, sex or nationality, often embodied (or denied) by paper markers of identity. Artists such as Kim Schmahmann (*Apart-hate: a people divider* (2005-2010)) and Sue Williamson (*For Thirty Years Next to His*

¹⁰³ Lightwood contends that when made into thin sheets, the unfired form of paperclay is stronger and more resilient before firing than after.

Heart, (1990) ¹⁰⁴ have drawn on the emotive symbol of the Apartheid-era passbook (*dompas*) which was used as an instrument of control, particularly racial segregation, by the government. Schamahmann includes actual *dompasse* as part of the screen, *Apart-hate: A people divider* (2005-2010). Williamson includes 49 views, individually framed, of one man's *dompas*.

The right to publish this image has not been granted.

Figure 77: Williamson, Sue. 1990. For Thirty Years Next to his Heart. Colour laser prints in hand-made frames, 49 in total. 196x262cm. Museum of Modern Art collection, New York.

Herwitz discusses the potential power of art to explore utopian social ideas (that will not necessarily be realised), but which indicate the hopes of the present. Herwitz talks about the 'utopian' South African art scene in the early 1990s (2008: 84), characterised by the idealistic view that art allowed one to imagine new possibilities in the country as Apartheid was being dismantled. Artists were in a position to fabricate their harmonious new nation state and condemned Apartheid through work which might have been subject to censorship during Apartheid. A problematic question remains for artists working fifteen to twenty years after Apartheid: what is the shifting significance and meaning of paper forms of identification, now that the context has changed, making *dompasse* obsolete? What are the challenges and opportunities that identifying documents embody in the post-apartheid nation state? Williamson, though emphasising the

¹⁰⁴ Shown in *Impressions from South Africa 1965-Now* (2011) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

power of the passbook, suggests the potentially fleeting power of her images.

She is quoted by Richards (1999:359) saying:

Future generations may find it difficult to comprehend the power the passbook had over the lives of black South Africans, but that power was complete. No passbook, no rights. . . [This work presents] the record of one man's life, as prescribed by the state.

How can the kind of timely resonance Williamson was able to achieve with *Thirty Years*, be created in clay to make a comment on grappling with identities twenty years on, where paper markers of identity play a seemingly more subtle role? The *Ear Tags* series represents my response to these questions.

The barcoded ID book ¹⁰⁵, a feature of post-apartheid life, has a different purpose to the *dompas* but nevertheless is an instrument of state control usually carried close to the body. The formal, visual characteristics of travel and citizenship documents became a visual preoccupation during this part of the research. They are combinations of standardised codes, shapes, text, images and photographs. These kinds of objects are often continually touched and over years shaped and marked by the body of their owner and with stamps and other marks applied by both machine and hand. If they are analysed in the way Walter Benjamin (1936) considered art objects, with this accumulation of marks, the 'aura' can be said to reside once more in the standardised, mechanically produced object. The competing voices of the individual and the standardised elements of these documents symbolically materialise the tension between imposed institutionalised identities and the real, material, everyday lives of individuals. Losing, damaging or not having such a document can have a very real impact on peoples lives.

Preparation for the *Ear Tags* project included making a series of drawings and collages using my own set of authorising documents, books and cards with their language of barcodes, numbers and complex anti-forgery patterns. However, the resulting shapes were not resonant enough to posit a link between authorised identities and the human body. It failed to demonstrate that these

¹⁰⁵ It is essential for voting, collecting social grants or doing any civil business in South Africa today by citizens over 16. Many living South Africans, especially pensioners in rural areas do not have ID books in part because they were never issued with birth certificates. This presents problems when claiming state pensions or disability grants, registering to write state school exams or entering universities.

official identities have a real and visceral effect on peoples lives, including their physical wellbeing. Further preparation included materials experiments in paperclay as it seemed a logical material to use to allude to both ‘paper identity’ and skins. The original objective of this materials research was to produce flat skin-like sheets of clay to simulate skin-like forms.

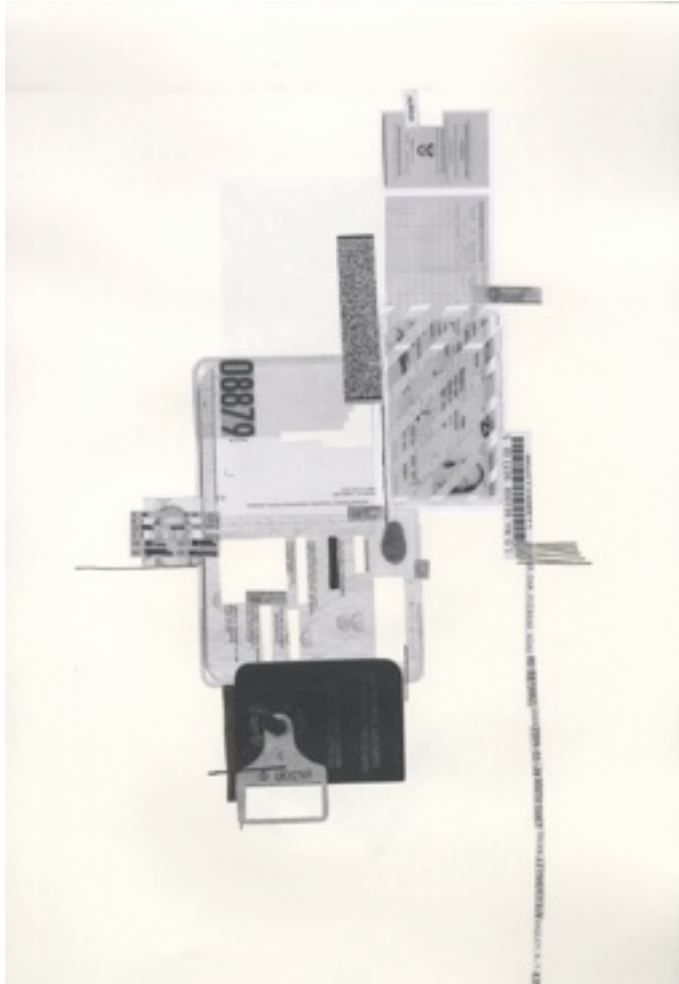


Figure 78: Bagley, K. 2011. ID Drawing. Collage, pen.

Following a research interview with Armstrong (Pietermaritzburg, July 2011), during which she talked about her flat bone china and porcelain skins and her collection of *izibodiya*, I was compelled to make animal-skin like clay forms of my own. When not working in bone china, Armstrong tended to work in paperclay. Tag shaped test tiles were produced in preparation for making larger sheets. Following the success of the tests I chose to continue making tags alongside the larger sheets of clay, such as figure 79. Because the animal skin forms did not seem to advance the research aims — they became simple, imitative exercises — making the large, flat sheets was eventually set aside.



Figure 79: Materials Test: Large sheet of texture terracotta with contrasting slip decoration, fired to 1000 degrees Celsius.

However, because the tags seemed to resonate with the research aims, I continued to produce them. The tags seemed a particularly apt format to challenge the limits of the kind of identity constructed through paper documents which often has a real, physical effect on everyday life, particularly for migrants or refugees.

They seemed an appropriate vehicle to explore the abstract concept of authorised, controlled 'identity' and 'identifying' rather than continuing to engage exclusively with the culturally specific symbol of the Nguni bull, cow or ox skin. I wanted to do more than merely repeat the visual shorthand that equates skins with readings of 'African-ness,' as seen in work by artists such as Armstrong, Nandipha Mtambo (as shown above) and Moshekwa Langa. These artists have used the skin and particularly the animal hides or the practice of taxidermy with success to engage with ideas around cultural, gendered and geographic identities. Mary Corrigan (2011: 69), in an essay which explores the relationship between Langa's 'Skins' (actually *Untitled* (1995), Mixed media, dimensions variable), contemporary installation practice and cultural reference, makes the point that animal hides have a 'generalised' association with traditional culture in South Africa and 'serve as a shorthand for 'African-ness' with particular reference to the popularity of animal hides in interior decoration.

The right to publish this image has not been granted.

Figure 80: Langa, M. 1995. Untitled. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Photo: Iziko Museums.

For the *Ear Tags* piece the literal and the representational skin and animal are removed. However they still allude to both skin and identity and suggest animals as metaphors for people. The tags allow an engagement with the potential symbolic function of cattle in society as units (or embodiments) of value, symbols of regionalism or nationalism, and potentially their power, as animals, to stand in for humans. Baker (2001: xxxv) suggests that animal imagery is usually used to make statements about 'human identity' rather than about animal identity. From this perspective, the work becomes less illustrative and more allegorical or speculative. In language, animals stand in for humans when talking about notions of control and freedom, movement, similarity and difference, or for the mistreatment of people (as in 'treated like animals' or 'acting like animals').

Metaphors and allegories that compare humans to animals are common and prevalent in the English language and literature and in many belief or world-view systems. Characters in Achebe's famous novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) tell allegorical animal stories which add depth and resonance. Cattle allegories and metaphors are particularly common in isiZulu language and in Zulu traditional culture which is strongly associated with keeping cattle and using

cattle imagery to express ideas in traditional cosmology ¹⁰⁶. The ceramic tags then stand in for the animals they usually mark, and moreover draw attention to superimposed classifications which control movement.

My own experience of living in KwaZulu-Natal gives me an awareness of Zulu culture as the closest 'Other' culture to my own. In contemporary Nguni cattle keeping, herds of Ngunis are owned or bred across racial, cultural and economic lines, whereas in the 19th century they were associated particularly with *isiZulu*-speaking people (Hammond-Tooke, 2003: 12-13). Presently, an educated white middle-class family or a traditionalist rural *isiZulu* speaking family are typical owners of these animals. These cattle have come to mean more than the romantic notion of pre-colonial times, becoming popular images associated with nation building.

Despite being comfortable with using the Nguni image, ultimately other motifs were chosen to shift the focus. I feel affinity and allegiance with Zulu culture and with Nguni cattle but I am aware that using Nguni cattle-related imagery could be read as an appropriation of an 'Other' culture, with negative connotations associated with 19th century ethnography or anthropology. Using the tag form allows me to circumvent this potential reading to an extent. The tag comes to stand in for the ideas that cattle can represent culturally and regionally but are also a way of thinking about or looking at the problematic idea of imposed cultural, national, and political identities.

The *Ear Tags* are installed as many similar, but not identical objects in groups. Through introducing visual and material variation, attention is drawn to the tension between the general and the specific; the meta-narratives and the particular narratives. Said, in a 1995 afterword to *Orientalism*, (1978: 337) stresses the importance of nuanced, specific examples and particularities to overcome pitfalls presented by meta-narratives, generalisations and simplifications that reinforce colonial stereotypes and are in part responsible for maintaining the power relations associated with systems such as imperialism or Apartheid. The tags stand in for authority, control and regulation, even

¹⁰⁶ See the linguistics thesis, Poland Oosthuizen (1996) and Axel-Ivar Berglund (1976).

standardisation. However, because each one is made by hand and fired in an unevenly reduced ¹⁰⁷ gas kiln, subtle differences in tone, texture and colour give the tags a literal individuality.

The material the tags are made from is strong and durable though it appears fragile due to its thinness and its associations with breakable ceramics. The paper fibres they contain in their green state give them durability but also stand in for ideas around literal paper and authority and conversely the paper appears in the final work as voids, spaces, lattices, and traces. Whilst the paper is physically and symbolically absent or completely changed in the final work, minerals from it have altered the structure of the porcelain and formed a mineral called anorthite. Jeoung-Ah Kim, in a technically based doctoral research project concludes that, 'residual mineral calcite and paper fibre which are transformed into anorthite during firing form a complex supporting structure of interlocking fibres and fibrous bridging, changing the body composition in the process' (2006: 36). The mineral, anorthite, in its feldspathic form as part of the earth's crust, is one of the parent materials of some clays. Anorthite breaks down to form limestone and clay through weathering (Cardew, 2002: 28-29). The paper leaves traces and alters the material.

The cattle and their ears, like the paper, are also absent, yet bring their own traces, in the form of meaning, to the work. However, in removing the tags from their context, perhaps attention is pointed to their inadequacy, as physical labels which hold identity. The identification numbers that are usually printed or written onto the plastic tags are absent or replaced with a screen-printed enamel transfer that indicates an authorised, rubber-stamped construction of identity that is at odds with the humanist notion of the free, autonomous individual. The transfers are images and text taken from museum labels, stamps and other text-based forms that signify authorisation in some sense. These labels can be potentially read as subversive and anti-authoritarian in the context of the work, but are intended to be ambiguous.

¹⁰⁷ An atmosphere inside a kiln at maturing temperature which results in the formation of specific colours by chemical reactions that take place under conditions where there is insufficient oxygen available for the fuel to be burnt cleanly.



Figure 81: Work in Progress: Glazed porcelain paperclay ear tag shapes with screen-printed enamel transfers, unglazed paper terracotta.

Some transfers are of potter's marks associated with the history of studio ceramics and especially British studio ceramics in Southern Africa. Whilst I acknowledge my debt to ceramists associated with the British studio ceramics movement and with parts of Africa, such as Bosch, Finch and Cardew, the transfers are in part a comment on my own ambivalence to this authority and lineage. This lineage invokes a wariness concerning my preference for working in high-fired stoneware and porcelain which is tainted by associations with masculine hegemonic power.

Potter's marks on pots also talk about authority and ownership of visual styles and of markets. They add value for the collector or owner in that they attribute the pot undoubtedly to a specific maker. For the ceramic ear tags the appropriated potter's marks are redrawn, screen printed and transferred onto the high-fired (1260-1300 degrees Celsius) tags. They are fired onto the tags at a lower temperature (about 800 degrees Celsius), remaining on the surface, and are vulnerable to damage, in contrast to actual potter's marks, usually impressed into the wet clay becoming integral, indelible marks once fired.



Figure 82: Detail of small bowl by Jonathan Garratt, showing his mark. Photographed 2013.



Figure 83: Porcelain cattle forms by Kim Bagley 'tagged' by gallery staff at Artisan Contemporary Gallery. Photo: Artisan Gallery.





Figures 84-92: Work in Progress: Photographic sketches of potential installation strategies for the ear tag project, illustrating properties of translucency and thinness.

Display options that were considered included stacking the tags to allude to barcode patterns and weaving or tying them together to emulate basketry, weaving or other textile forms. Precedents for weaving small rigid elements together include the ceramics of Bea Jaffray, Armstrong's *Flies in the Milk*,

discussed in chapter 3, woven clay and paper works by Nnenna Okore and the textile-like constructions of El Anatsui. Algernon Miller's collaborative piece with Sanaa Gateja and KAWAA, *Change* (2010) (figure 93), which was shown on the *Global Africa Project* is another current example of the use of the language of beading, weaving and textiles in the art museum or gallery context.



Figure 93: Algernon Miller in collaboration with Sanaa Gateja and the Kwetu Afrika Womens Association Angels (KAWAA). Change, 2010. Beads fabricated from recycled Barack Obama campaign literature. Global Africa Project. Photographed 2011.

For *Tag* approximately 750 tags were connected together. The overall rectangular structure (165x72cm) consists of 60 vertical strings of 13 tags each, hanging side by side. The tags are connected vertically using a fine, red silk thread. The silk was lightly waxed to counteract abrasion from rough or unglazed surfaces of the tags. The vertical strings of tags were hung from a single horizontal axis forming an overlapping chequerboard pattern, with the hole in the top of each tag visible on one side of the work and the bottom edges of the tags visible on the other side. The thread runs along the front of the tags forming legible red pin stripes on one side of the work. The silk thread was chosen on a technical level due to its physical strength which supports the weight of the ceramic. On a formal level, the red colour stands out against the different clay colours in the piece, but in its thinness does not visually distract.

The notion of labelling is what drew me to appropriate like this, to demonstrate that the contemporary significance of an older object is very much defined by the current cultural milieu. The significance of red as blood or HIV/AIDS awareness ribbons could also be inferred if a reference to KwaZulu-Natal is mentioned in the labelling.

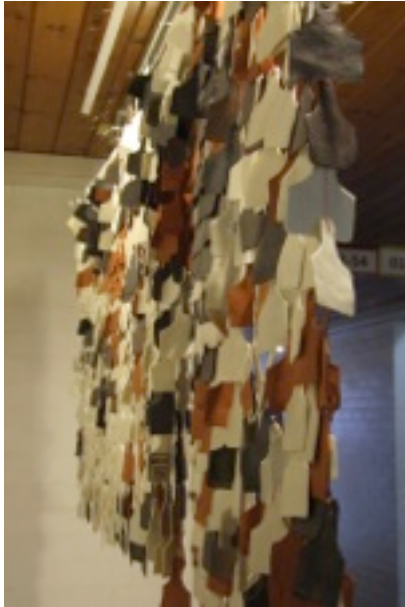


Figure 94: Detail of Tag trial installation, Farnham, February 2012.

The offset chequerboard pattern, which is also reminiscent of overlapping roof tiles, in *Tag* can either be maintained in a roughly regular, flat form through friction and gravity. Alternatively this regularity can be upset by moving the tags around so they no longer neatly overlap and can twist on their vertical axes, implying a mixture of order and disorder or movement and stillness (figure 94). During a trial installation the work was installed with the relative regularity maintained in some areas and upset in others. Over the course of display the regularity was further undone, through the movement of air and by viewers interacting with it. The individual tags make clinking sounds as they touch each other which adds to the awareness for the viewer that they are real, tangible, material objects which are joined to each other physically, yet remain separate, individual objects. The sound they make is reminiscent of cow bells. The tag forms, especially when collated and presented in this way, become

anthropomorphic and collectively give the impression of a crowd of people shifting slightly but maintaining their position.

For *Legacy*, a travelling exhibition in South Africa in 2013-2014, the installation of a piece in the *Ear Tag* series (*Tag II (For Juliet)*) had to be left up to the exhibition organisers. A slightly different version of my overlapping chequerboard pattern can be seen in figure 95, the installation at the Hilton Arts Festival, September 2013.



Figure 95: Bagley, K. 2013. Detail of Tag II (For Juliet). Installation at the Hilton Arts Festival, Raymond Slater Library, Hilton College. Photo: L Frisinger, 2013.

In all installations of the *Tag* series so far, people were compelled to touch them ¹⁰⁸ to elicit this sound and movement reaction without the presence of any labelling prompting them to do so. The site of the first, trial installation was a relatively dark section of a corridor. Here the work was lit with bright spots which highlighted surface variations. The work was only properly accessible from two sides. When a new arrangement of the same piece was installed at the Herbert

¹⁰⁸ Personal observation and correspondence with David Walters, September 2013.

Read Gallery ¹⁰⁹ it was fully accessible in the round, and subject to movement through human touch and any movement of air in the space. It was lit with natural light from skylights directly above the piece which did not have the same dramatic effect of the initial installation. The bright conditions did allow detailed, intimate scrutiny of the subtle variations of tone and texture within the work. The work could also be properly viewed in the round.

With knowledge of my South African background, a potential reading of the piece could generate associations with the optical colour of the tags, combined with their anthropomorphic appearance which may lead to associations with race. Another potential and perhaps more specialised reading of the piece could equate the material, rather than just its colour, with aspects of present day international trade, colonial collecting and stereotyping of ceramic objects based on clay choices. The porcelain and silk could be associated with China and Europe or with internationalism, and the terracotta with Africa, part of the United Kingdom or anywhere that red clay is used. While a racial reading was not originally intended, I would accept these critiques as valid and contributing to the debate that I am encouraging about ceramics and identities.

The rectangular format in *Tag* (figure 96) invokes the trope of landscape painting. For *Tag door*, tags are arranged in vertically oriented rectangle. This shape suggests a flexible, permeable barrier, a pore in the skin. This title is also a subtle critique of historic readings of African art where objects have had the labels of art, architecture or functional object imposed on them from the outside especially where an object has been removed from its original context.

By using the fairly universal ear tag form in the *Ear Tags* series, the intention was to transcend the specific cultural reference implied by using the Nguni breed. In this series formal qualities of repetition, nuance and difference were explored to prompt a reconsideration of authority, values and identities.

¹⁰⁹ UCA Research student exhibition, Canterbury Campus, March 2012.



Figure 96: Tag trial installation, UCA Farnham, February 2012.

Up to this point, the thematic focus of the work has been almost exclusively on cattle and related signifiers. The Nguni cattle and related forms remain resonant and readable because they are 'known' but their association with the rural is potentially restrictive, and at odds with my own urban background. It is restrictive, to an extent, in that the rural is susceptible to being represented in a romantic fashion, most typically as landscape. Representing the rural is still contentious in South Africa because of the strong associations between a genre like early 'pioneer' landscape painting, a very specific way of picturing the rural, with land ownership and colonialism. For Arnold (1996: 40):

South African landscape paintings . . . have also been co-opted by ideologues to prove that the land was empty, uninhabited and available for settlement, or that Africa was primitive or exotic.

To avoid being too closely associated with images of the rural landscape that have been manipulated for oppressive political outcomes, I looked for an alternative strategy, even closer to my own experience, moving from the regional signifier of cattle for KwaZulu-Natal to a more specific animal symbol based on the experience of life in the city of Durban. This involved a change of species and a different way of looking at the land for the next part of the research.

Stage 3: Extermination Tents

Testing for the *Extermination Tents* began in parallel with the *Ear Tags* project. Important themes and narratives in this work are notions of building and construction, homes, and exploring the blurred lines between permanence and impermanence, fragility and strength, concealing and revealing, softness and hardness, angles and curves. Anthropomorphism, zoomorphism and the central clay as skin metaphor continue to play a central role. The resulting body of work is a large installation of ceramic tent-like forms.



Figure 97: Tented House, Durban, South Africa, 2011. Photo: L. Bagley 2011.

For this part of the research cattle were set aside and a different creature was chosen as a catalyst to ceramic production: wood borer¹¹⁰. They are the starting point for further visual and material responses to issues of contemporary African identities and self-identity associated with a sense of place. While the tags and cattle can be associated with the larger geographic space of rural KwaZulu-Natal, with the wood borer and tents, the association with space is domestic and urban. Wood borer were chosen specifically because they are not stereotypically associated with Africa. They are pervasive

¹¹⁰ A blanket term for a number of insect species which cause damage to wood and are prevalent in the province of KwaZulu-Natal and other coastal areas of South Africa.

urban pests in the port city of Durban. Over time these insects cause structural damage to houses by boring through timber. By-laws (appendix 2) require regular checks, and fumigation if necessary, especially when there is a change of ownership. The distinctive tarpaulin tents (such as figure 89) that are used in the extermination of the insects were the visual starting point for this main body of work. They are features I associate with the suburban landscape of my hometown. They cover up the house, concealing the detail but revealing the form of the architecture beneath. The real tents can be read as conspicuous, monumental, accidental sculptures. They call to mind the work of the Christo and Jean-Claude, see Jacob Baal-Teshuva (2001), who wrapped entire buildings and smaller domestic objects in textiles.



Figure 98: Borer dust on a shelf, Durban, South Africa. Photo: C. Bagley 2011.

The presence of wood-eating insects is known and familiar to people living in Durban and other places with similar insect activity yet they still hold a degree of mystery because they are seldom seen. There is something appealing in this ambiguity because of the potential for unexpected or subversive readings. Visual evidence of the destructive work of the beetles is to be found in discreet holes in wood or as deposits of distinctive dust on floors and furniture. The conspicuous erection of 'extermination tents' in a neighbourhood is often the only visual evidence of the infestation. This sense of mystery and the unknown, yet familiar, seems an appropriate metaphor for the ambivalence of constructions of identities in South Africa.

The metaphors and analogies that can be drawn from borer and related extermination paraphernalia presented an opportunity to penetrate deeper into the contentious, awkward reality of what it means and feels like to be an African and a South African. Bearing these analogies and metaphors in mind, I created clay tents to translate and explore these ideas.

The extermination tents are an opaque, protective skin whose function is to keep the poison within the house, to kill the beetles, and prevent harm to humans or other animals. They allow contained destruction to take place to prevent further destruction. The idea of extermination of foreign or undesirable elements (many borer species are alien invaders) in agriculture and nature conservation could be metaphors for white guilt, fear of violent crime, and Xenophobia. Other narratives that could be implied by the tents concern ownership, permission, migration, colonial expansion, international trade and their implications on how people construct their identities.

There is a precedent for referring to insect metaphors in art practice that is focussed on negotiating identities in South Africa. Steven Cohen, in the performance *Chandelier* (2001-2002), interacted with people living in an informal settlement in Johannesburg. He also interacted with men dressed in red overalls, employed by the city council and known as 'red ants,' who were in the process of dismantling and clearing the informal settlement. In photographs of the performance ¹¹¹ Cohen, a white man wearing only a chandelier, silver makeup, high heels and white stockings, and the 'red ants,' are clearly visible against the darker, more dull background of buildings, belongings and people dressed in casual clothing.

The reference to 'red ants' by colour and presumably because they are annoying pests who are usually seen moving food or other objects around is a significant one, in light of the insect-as-pest metaphor I am employing. As an aside, 'white ants' or termites are the other major destroyer of wood in houses, adding another potential metaphoric reading in my work that may imply a racial

¹¹¹ Steven Cohen (2003) photo essay edited Robert Hodgekiss, pp 70-73.

reading. In the artist's statement Cohen talks about nakedness and vulnerability, for himself and for the shack dwellers whose homes are being destroyed, and presumably for the 'red ants' who may be subject to abuse from the shack dwellers. Depending on whose perspective is adopted, legal city dwellers, the city council, the shack dwellers or Cohen's, just who the pest is in the scene shifts and is quite ambiguous. Cohen's practice is often about exposure and personal vulnerability on a literal and ideological level, and while the dismal social issues highlighted in *Chandelier* (inadequate housing, urban sprawl, illegal informal settlements) are frequently ignored within middle-class, mostly white urban life, they are a stark reality for many.

Like many of the *Ear Tags*, most of the ceramic tent forms are made from reduction-fired porcelain paperclay and oxidised red paperclay. The high-fired porcelain is translucent allowing light and shadow to play a central role in the work. This allows me to explore themes around concealing and revealing, hiding, illumination, and the space between the public and the private. The material also continues my use of the skin metaphor, as a way of representing Africa. The papery qualities also suggest a slippage between skin and paper (and paper identity documents) that hints at the correlation between racial skin colour and racial classifications on official documents, another continuation from the *Ear Tags* project.

I am unaware of another tradition of using tents as a metaphor in ceramics. Though these are embellishments on literal tents, the related example in Africa that I am aware of is the work of the *khiyamiya*, the tent-makers of Cairo. Chris Spring (2008: 8) reports that they continue to produce decorative appliquéd panels to adorn marquees at special events, a celebratory rather than critical function.

Figures 99 and 100 show initial tests demonstrating translucency of the paper porcelain. The text piece has a black enamel transfer on the outside surface which is legible from the inside under direct sunlight.



Figure 99: Materials Test: from the outside: screen-printed enamel transfer applied to glazed porcelain paperclay test tent form for Ear Tag and Extermination Tent projects.



Figure 100: Materials Test: from the inside: screen-printed enamel transfer applied to glazed porcelain paperclay test tent form for Ear Tag and Extermination Tent projects. Photographed to demonstrate qualities of translucency.

For the first, trial, batch of tents, the scale of the houses is reminiscent of the architectural forms made by Meschac Gaba using artificial hair usually used by hairdressers for braiding. Gaba also engages with urban African experience and references masquerades, urban creativity and globalisation. In *Tresses*, Gaba toys with iconic building forms and the iconic, famously misunderstood masquerades. I chose an easily recognisable suburban detached house shape as the base for my tent shapes. It is based on the proportions and shape of bungalows typical on the Berea in Durban. These are houses that are likely to need fumigation and they also bear resemblance to how a child might draw a typical modern house.

The right to publish this image has not been granted.

Figure 101: Gaba, M. 2007. From the Tresses series. L: Disa Park, Cape Town, C: Sentech Tower, Johannesburg, R: Voortrekker Monument, Pretoria. Artificial hair and mixed media. Photo: Stevenson.



Figure 102: Materials test: Unglazed porcelain with enamel transfers. 10cm.



Figure 103: Materials test: Bisque-fired porcelain, glazed to test absorbency relative to application method. 10-20cm.

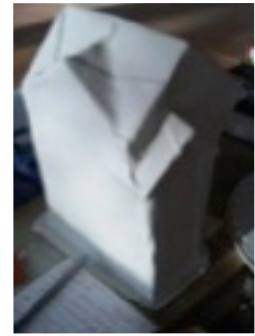


Figure 104: Materials test: Unfired porcelain paperclay. 25x40cm.



Figure 105: Small scale test tents: Reduction-fired porcelain paperclay. 25x30cm.



Figure 106: Small scale test tents: Cardboard armature/mould. 25x25cm.



Figure 107: Small scale test tents: Reduction fired porcelain paperclay. 25x40cm.

The house in South Africa: a potent symbol

On an emotive and ideological level, what a house or home means in South Africa, as in other countries, is complex. The notion of occupying and owning a home has political as well as personal implications and so provides another way to look at how contrast and difference seems to define what it means to be a South African.

Apartheid history and its legacy means that owning property in a particular area is an aspiration fraught with emotion and continued inequality, a situation exacerbated by global economic conditions. With increasing urbanisation and the legislated free movement of people to the cities, housing, especially in cities, is inadequate. Government low-cost housing programmes are perceived as slow, inefficient and bureaucratic and the resulting houses are often

inadequate for human habitation. Sprawling informal settlements ¹¹² persist with makeshift building methods and frequent fire damage. Nigel Gibson's account of the recent emergence of the shack dweller's movement, *Abahlali base Mjondolo*, and its relationship with Franz Fanon's politics and writings in South Africa indicates that issues manifest in the inadequacy of physical dwellings have absolute currency in the post or neocolonial state. He remarks that 'contemporary South African politics continues to be refracted through articulations of national liberation, and the sense of betrayal and broken promises of the emancipatory project is clearly expressed by emergent grassroots social movements' (2011: 3).

On the other end on the economic scale, as a reaction to high levels of crime, newly built gated housing estates have become a popular option for those who can afford them. This search for control is in reaction to the feelings of powerlessness caused by the perception of rising rates of house breaking and violent crime (Landman, 2004: 19). The gating off of existing affluent, and often previously whites-only neighbourhoods under the premise of preventing crime remains controversial. Private security guards, such as the one photographed in Subotzky's *Wendy House II*, are hired as a deterrent to criminals and to monitor or restrict the movement of people in and out of some neighbourhoods. Restricting the movement of people immediately recalls Apartheid practices and is contrasted with the freedom of movement in the South African constitution. Willem Landman (2004: 40) reported that gated communities contribute to maintaining old patterns of separate development. There is tension between the human-rights culture that emerged during the 1990s, as a reaction to human rights abuses during Apartheid, and the desire for control and self-defence that stems from fear of violent crime.

Actions, post-apartheid, that appear to upset the fragile (im)balance of South African society are emotionally charged both in public and in private. Recent and ongoing controversy over the so-called 'secrecy bill' (see appendix 2 for commentary by Kgoroadira (2011)) is a recent example. This bill is perceived to protect corrupt politicians from the media. Issues around censorship in the

¹¹² Slums, shanty towns, squatter camps.

visual arts are also significant. A public forum ¹¹³ explored recent occurrences in the South African art world which alarmingly seemed more appropriate to Apartheid era censorship than to a democratic state. Public sculpture commissioned from Andries Botha by the Durban metropolitan municipality was forcibly stopped before completion by local authorities, apparently due to visual similarity between Botha's sculpture and the Inkatha Freedom Party's ¹¹⁴ logo, both of which depict three elephants.

Alongside Botha, Zanele Muholi spoke about controversy surrounding comments and actions by a government minister, Lulu Xingwana, over the exhibition *Innovative Women* (2009). This show was funded by Xingwana's department and held at the historic Constitution Hill. However, because it included Muholi's photographs depicting nude lesbian couples embracing, Xingwana refused to give the opening address and made several inflammatory remarks encouraging censorship to the press. Though the post-apartheid state allows debate in public spaces, issues of censorship seem to subvert the spirit in which the democratic state was founded and suggest a state of unease where issues are covered over and deals are done behind closed doors. It is in this sense that I find the tented house metaphor especially appropriate. Issues in the present, stemming from African and South African history, including crime, retribution, legislation, concealment, corruption, protection and land restitution can be alluded to with a thin porcelain skin, as can international issues around censorship, protests, refugee camps and migration.

Following initial tests, a series of larger tents were made in porcelain and terracotta. The initial tents were designed to hang from above, appearing to float, giving a sense of ephemerality and instability that is at odds with the idea of a house as a stable, finite object. The tents are not houses, but they do take the shape of houses and so refer to housing, the notion of home and broader questions around place and identities. The tents themselves are made from a material which is both fragile and permanent, adding further contradictory

¹¹³ *Sit Down and Shut up* was held in July 2011, co-hosted by Durban University of Technology Fine Art department and the KwaZulu-Natal Society of the Arts Gallery.

¹¹⁴ Known by the acronym, IFP, this party was historically dominant in KwaZulu-Natal, but now far less dominant than the ruling African National Congress.

elements. From the beginning they were envisioned to be exhibited as a group, a continuation of my method of using multiples and groupings and making methods that involve repetition and difference. The hanging tents were each made on the same cardboard armature-template. The heights of the pieces varies but the roof shape, size and pitch is the same.



Figure 108: Work in Progress: Raw clay tent - red clay. 50cm.



Figure 109: Work in Progress: Raw clay tent - porcelain. 50cm.

For the porcelain hanging tents, I built improvised structures using kiln furniture and refractory materials. These supported the shape of the tent but allowed the firing heat action in the kiln, on the thin porcelain, to give a sense of movement and gravity to the work. This fluidity gives a textile-like impression to the tents.



Figure 110: Work in Progress: support structure made from kiln bricks positioned inside the gas kiln.



Figure 111: Work in Progress: Support structure made from kiln bricks and kiln shelves.



Figure 112: Work in Progress: Fired tent on brick support structure.



Figure 113: Work in Progress: Fired tent on brick support structure.

For the terracotta tents kiln furniture was used to support the tents which were fired upside down. This method worked particularly well as the terracotta is fired to a much lower temperature and remains more stable than the porcelain despite being very thin.



Figure 114: Work in Progress: Kiln furniture for support



Figure 115 Work in Progress: Kiln furniture (white/yellow) supporting raw clay tent (brown).

Further support structures made from clay were then developed for the porcelain tents. This was in response to problems with my improvised refractory structures and in response to observing covered scaffolding around buildings. Hiding and protecting construction or renovation work is relevant to the project on several levels. The covered scaffolding resembles the tents I am making. It also brings to mind further ideas and versions of temporary skins and implies a connection to construction and infrastructure development. This is a positive

thing, but can also be perceived as purely cosmetic, covering over deeper social issues whilst showing the world a well-dressed and clean outer skin.



Figure 116: Work in Progress: Red clay tent with text hand-painted in black slip and gilded panel.

Negative criticism of stadium building for international sporting events comes to mind. The Fifa 2010 World Cup in South Africa and the 2012 Summer Olympics in London are examples. On a simpler level, construction, maintenance and renovation implies change, transition, improvement, pride and value. In the case of activities such as repainting masonry and woodwork, it also calls to mind the need to consistently keep nature just under control.



Figure 117: Covered scaffolding, Lewes, UK, 2013.



Figure 118: Covered scaffolding near Victoria Station, London, 2013.



Figure 119: Materials Test: Miniature test for clay structure with raw porcelain.



Figure 120: Work in Progress: support structure made from kiln bricks, kiln shelves and bisque-fired clay structure.

In response to developments in the studio that arose while improving my improvised support structures I made a series of porcelain tents that sit on top of stoneware scaffolding-like structures to complement the hanging tents. The structures are hand-built using extruded and hand-cut narrow strips of clay. They are biscuit-fired to 1000 degrees Celsius so that the thin strips can take the weight and wetness of raw porcelain paperclay. The biscuit-firing and the added fibre in the clay allows me to built a relatively large structure very thinly to emulate the tents and scaffolding covering. The tent form is then built over the bisque-fired structure, taking shrinkage into account. Spacers made from soft and semi-rigid kiln-building materials helped release tension between the two different materials which melt, fuse, shrink, expand, collapse and cool at different rates and temperatures.



Figure 121: Work in Progress: Raw clay structure.



Figure 122: Work in Progress: Raw clay structure under polythene.



Figure 123: Work in Progress: Bisque-fired clay structure.



Figure 124: Work in Progress: Bisque-fired clay structure with fibre-board spacers.



Figure 125: Work in Progress: Bisque-fired clay structure with fibre-board, covered with raw porcelain.



Figure 126: Work in Progress: Reduction fired porcelain and stoneware-fired clay structure, complete.

The porcelain tents are very fragile and precarious. The material has been pushed to its limit. The base level of the tent in figure 128 and 129 collapsed during firing. The porcelain tent is sound and the piece remains intact. The tent part forced the structure (through weight, and helped by a few weaker joints) to the ground. Some tents have cracks and breakages that have been stopped or repaired with epoxy or resin. Others are whole but remain visually under tension. The scaffolding and the tent shape each other, they almost physically compete with each other: the stoneware against the porcelain. The forms are tense and uncomfortable yet they also work together. They bend and warp with

each other during firing to accommodate each other. It is a balancing act. In their transformation (firing) they are at their softest and most vulnerable. As they cool tension is built up by the differing rates of contraction and shrinkage.

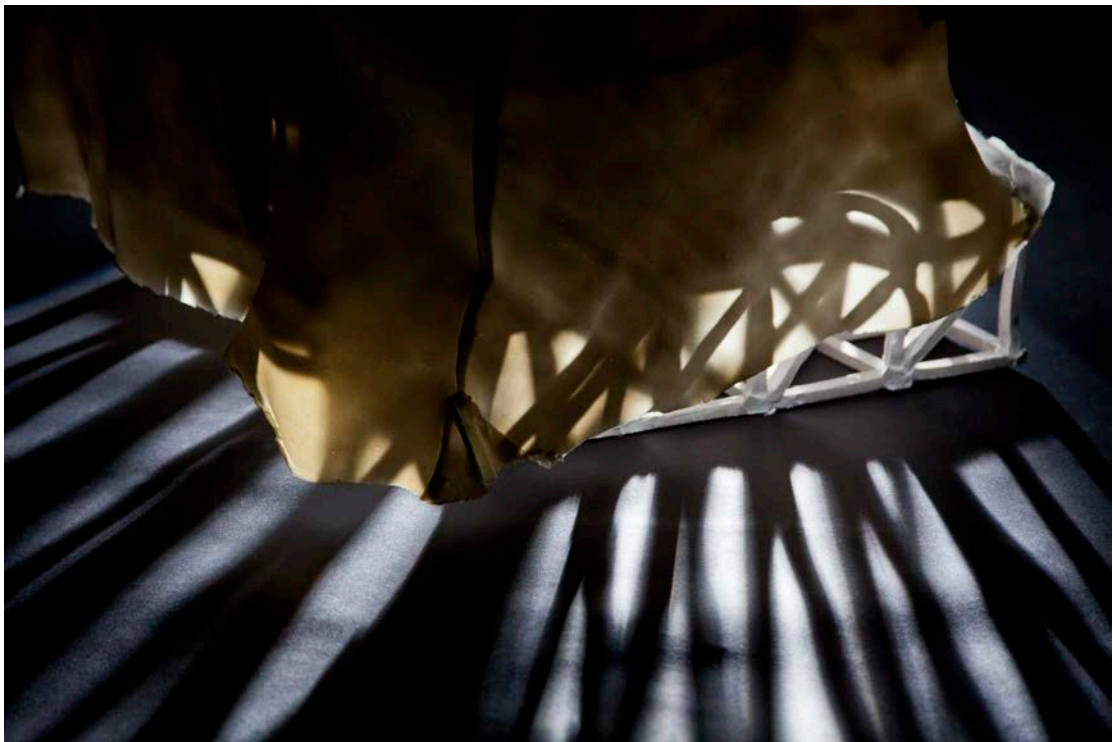


Figure 127: Completed porcelain tent over stoneware structure. This photograph was taken with extreme flash lighting to simulate day light and reveal the structure beneath the porcelain. Photo: David Summerill, 2013.



Figure 128: Work in Progress: Tent before gas firing.



Figure 129: Work in Progress: Tent after firing.

Variables like weight, shrinkage rate, drying and bisque firing have to be guessed and judged through experience rather than through finite calculations based purely on technical tests because each piece is slightly different because of the way they are constructed. This leads to some complete failures. The overall forms affect the flow of fire inside the gas kiln. Firing is a balancing act requiring sensitivity, observation and awareness. Measurements in making, and controls in firing, are useful but where there are differences in each piece they are just a guide.

The structures are geometric in principle but become warped and more organic once fired. They appear skeletal and alive. The tents appear soft and skin-like. They appear a bit hairy where there are clumps of flax fibre, also a bit papery because of their thinness and the toilet paper fibre they contain. The raw clay-fibre mix feels and looks quite leathery during making, and some of this effect is seen in the final piece. There is also tension between the soft appearance of the pieces and the hard, sharp quality of the fired, permanent material. This suggests animation and movement, but there is also a mechanical element to the pieces because of the geometric grid forms.

This tension between the interior and exterior of the pieces is analogous to tension in the reality of the South African political and social world. Tension is concealed beneath the exterior that South Africa shows to the world in world class sporting events, beautiful tourist destinations, being a leading economy on the continent and having a progressive constitution.

Surface Treatment

Some tents are also further embellished with text, colour and imagery. Screen printed text is all appropriated and falls into two categories. The first is potter's marks associated with the history of studio ceramics in South Africa, Nigeria and the UK. Recognising authenticity of pots through the identifying mark of their makers is relevant here, as is branding, lineage, teaching, tradition and heritage. The second type of text is officious sounding phrases from documents and disclaimers. These either refer directly to the borer fumigation and timber products industry, as in figure 122, 123 (which is printed with the text 'Frames

are treated...), or refer to social and political issues raised through the research (printed with 'Please provide the following for statistical purposes' from a Central Applications Office form for entrance into higher education courses that are subject to quotas based on race). The majority of the text-based embellishments are screen printed in black iron oxide while the clay is raw. The oxide prints tend to develop subtle halos around their edges which gives the impression that the text is branded or burnt into the surface. Any glaze is also added before firing. This allows the porcelain to be fired only once, minimising movement and tension.

Other embellishments include freehand painted slip and oxides to create contrasting panels and map-like areas. On two of the porcelain hanging tents some of my cow ear tag forms have been added. This draws attention to visual, material and conceptual continuities between the two bodies of work and adds visual interest.



Figure 130: Work in Progress: Porcelain tent with clay roof structure and screen-printed black iron oxide.



Figure 131: Work in Progress: Red clay tent with screen-printed black iron oxide.



Figure 132: Work in Progress: Porcelain tent with ear tag tiles.



Figure 133: Work in Progress: Porcelain tent with ear tag tiles in direct sunlight to demonstrate translucency.

The tents are purposefully ambiguous, both beautiful and light and permanent whilst tentative and sometimes fractured, under tension. Their hardness, sharpness and permanence reflects something of the ambiguity of my personal African experience and my engagement with the debates surrounding ways the continent is viewed and represented. The extermination, whilst destructive and violent on a micro level, is also a process of healing, repairing and self-protection.

The Cham-wana healing vessel from the Benue River Valley in the exhibitions *Central Nigeria Unmasked* have been a point of conceptual inspiration or a way of helping me to think through the potential of my tent forms. My upside down vessels or coverings can be seen to have a similar healing function. The human features of the Nigerian vessels are less overt in my works, but the suggestion of anthropomorphism is emphasised in a series of collaborative photographs of my tent pieces created with David Summerill, (figures 134 and 135). The photos suggest a relationship between my work and the makers of Cham-wana healing

vessels. In the photographs my pieces appear to be caught mid-crawl, meandering into or out of the frame.

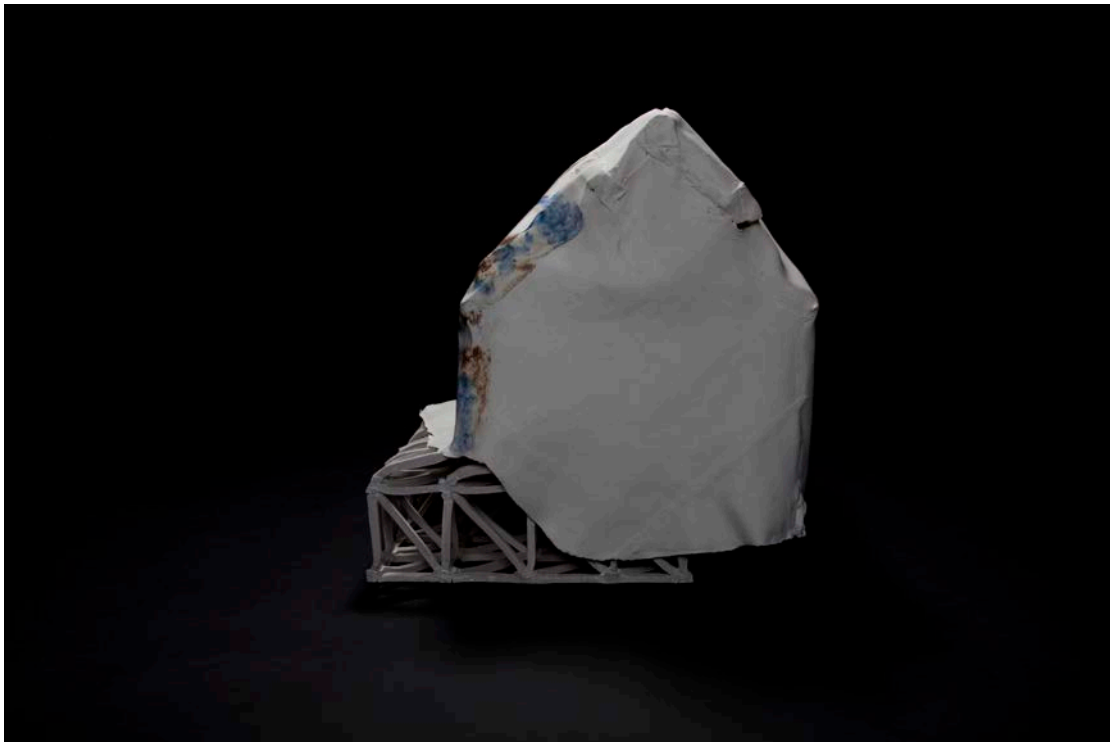


Figure 134: Studio photograph of porcelain tent over a stoneware structure. Note the sense of slow movement. Photo: David Summerill, 2013.



Figure 135: Bagley. K. 2013. Studio photograph of porcelain tent over stoneware structure. Note the sense of slow movement. Photo: David Summerill, 2013.

The ideas for the final installation of the tents were trialled at Foyer Gallery in Farnham, pictured in figure 136. The tents without internal structures were suspended at varying heights, the lowest being just below waist-height for an adult. The installation moved very slightly, adding to the ethereal and precarious quality of the hanging forms, and defying the grounded physical qualities more usually associated with ceramics. Rows, grids and city plans entered into thought so how the installation should be arranged, as did less formal arrangements of housing in the real world where urban planning is absent, such as squatter camps and some refugee camps.



Figure 136: Installation view of Extermination Tents I. Foyer Gallery, Farnham, 2013. Photo: David Summerill, 2013.

Linking three phases

The *Extermination Tents* are in a sense the conclusion to a personal journey to depict my own African experience and self-conscious engagement with the surrounding politics, using metaphor and material. They are also a new example of constructing a subjective, yet resonant African-ness using the ceramic medium and a new way of looking at the trope of 'skin' in African ceramics that moves beyond the established references of race and animal skins. The two preceding phases are integral to understanding how the tents

were conceptualised and created. To simplify, there is a movement from the specific (Nguni cattle) to the general (*Ear Tags*) and back to the specific (*Extermination Tents*) but open to more general interpretations. By breaking down and commenting on the process of making and positing links with peers who have related conceptual aims, and by making this transparent in this thesis, it may become a useful example to others engaging in similar discourses using visual means. I feel that I have produced a mature and complex body of work. It has been validated through self-reflection in this chapter. It embodies many of the common elements (identity issues, hybridity, anthropomorphism, historic reference, personal experience) used in constructing African-ness by other artists including those discussed in Chapter 3, and elements found to be common in Chapter 1 such as anthropomorphism. It is both like and unlike many of these works.

Research into the context of the cattle symbol was far-ranging and deeper in contrast with the tent forms. In part this is because there is a substantial body of work that uses the cattle form in relation to identities. It is a successful example within the 'stampede to invent[ed] symbols' that Verster had reservations about and described as characterising art production in the democratic South Africa. These animals and their skins are known to many people and part of the public imagination. However, in terms of creating an alternative and personal response to my own identity associated with my geographic origins, the tent presented a more fitting challenge. I used what I learnt about identity construction in investigating the cattle theme and borrowed some of the characteristics, including the implied movement in sculptural animal forms and pushed the notion of skin as a trope for 'African-ness' in a new direction in contemporary African ceramics. The tent metaphor is more complex, more personal and more unusual which will make audiences think about the metaphoric potential of bizarre but very normalised everyday occurrences in South Africa and find new ways of talking about the representation of Africa.

I feel that the tents have been the most successful, deep and resonant form that I have developed. They started with the observation of a locally specific and personally familiar image. In concentrating on my own personal, everyday experience of living on the continent, I was able to find a form that is particularly

distinctive and familiar within my own immediate community. Yet, I am unaware of anyone else using this tent form. This form embodies a fitting symbol or metaphor to engage viewers about shared experiences in South African and beyond. Hybridity and anthropomorphism are also present in these works and, as was argued in chapters 1 and 3, are common and successful tropes used by others in contemporary African work, which I feel makes the objects more familiar and accessible to audiences. This combination of existing tropes and unusual form (the known and the unknown) should initiate a different engagement to the better known cattle-related forms. Working from that, I began to see physical and ideological tents in many different places, from refugee camps to occupy protests and to politicians covering and hiding themselves with legislation and corruption. They are a much more complex and layered way to address the research question when compared to the cattle-related pieces. This is because they address many different grounds for understanding and constructing African-ness. They represent my personal experience of what it is to be African, and at the same time they can be used to ponder wider questions about identity and authenticity that were the catalysts for the research questions themselves. They lend themselves to embodying ambiguity which is a more fitting way to represent or address what some scholars call the postcolonial condition, something always becoming and never completely clear.



Figure 137: Bagley, K. 2012-2013. Piece from Extermination Tents series. Photo: David Summerill, 2013.

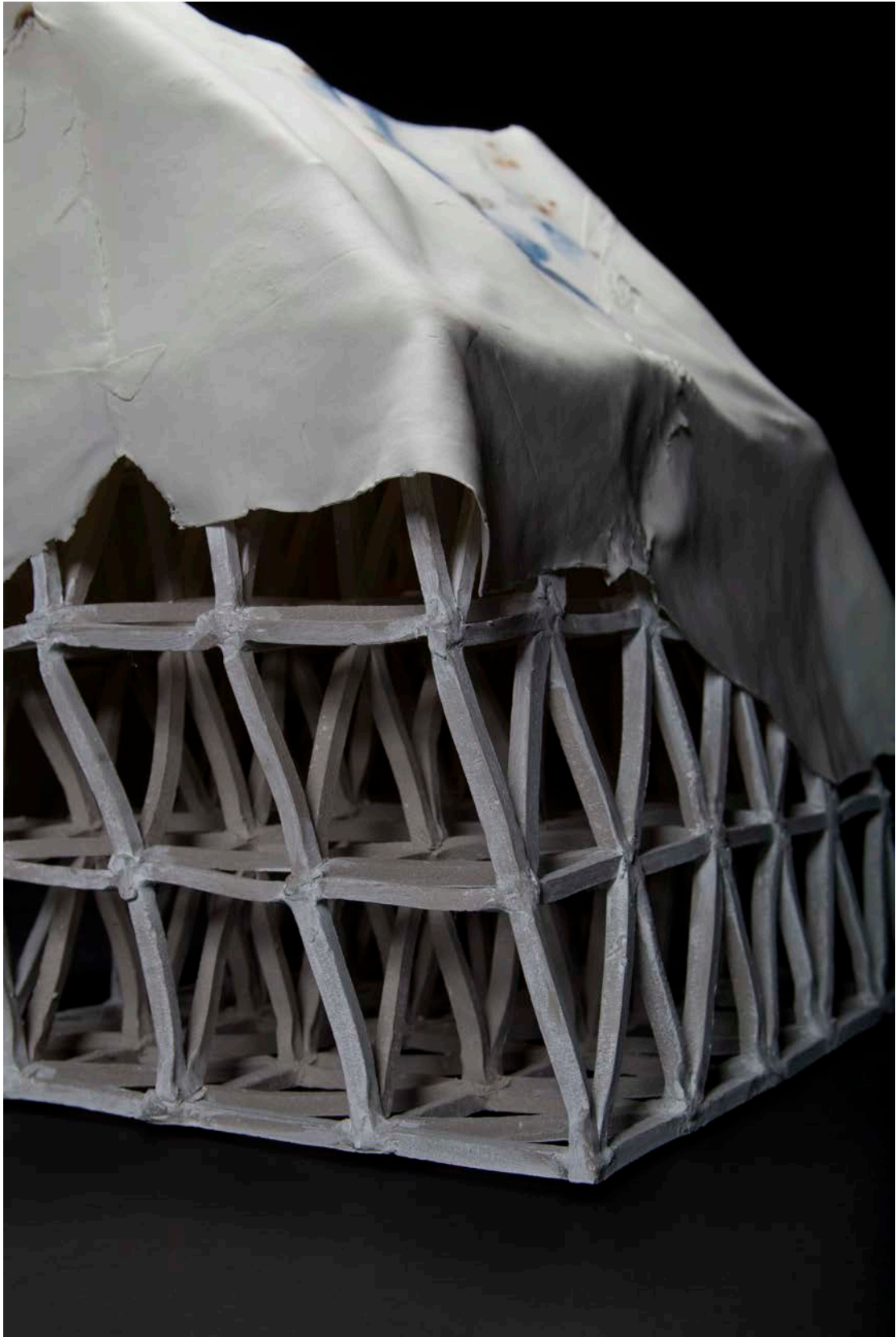


Figure 138: Bagley, K. 2012-2013. Detail of internal structure of piece from Extermination Tents Series. Photo: David Summerill, 2013.



Figure 139: Bagley, K. 2012-2013. Detail of piece from Extermination Tents series. Photo: David Summerill, 2013.



Figure 140: Bagley, K. 2012-2013. Piece from Extermination Tents series with bright flash lighting from behind. Photo: David Summerill, 2013.



Figure 141: Bagley, K. 2012-2013. Piece from Extermination Tents series. Photo: David Summerill, 2013.

Conclusion

This research explored various understandings of African-ness. Both the construction of African-ness and the representation of Africa were explored within the medium of ceramics. The research was presented as four written chapters and an exhibition of ceramic work that was the subject of the fourth chapter. In each chapter a different platform for exploring constructions and representations was focussed on: writing about ceramics, exhibiting or displaying ceramics, artists with a relationship to Africa in their making, and the making process itself from the perspective of the African artist-researcher. This was approached within a postcolonial theoretical framework that showed an awareness of power dynamics, the problem of representing an 'Other', questions of affirming identities and re-writing histories, and the proliferation of hybrid forms of expression. In adopting this framework I promoted multiplicity, complexity and individual expressions above generalisations. The central practice-led element was the adoption of the trope of clay-as-skin as a central theme within the practice and other aspects of the research. This methodological theme was adopted because of its conceptual and symbolic relevance to exploring African-Western interactions (race, humanness and boundaries) and its physical relevance to the medium of ceramics (hollow forms, vessels and surfaces that can be skin-like).

In the first three chapters a number of examples or cases were discussed, and recurring patterns or themes noted. Hybridity and anthropomorphism were fairly common in both historic and more recent work. Referring to historic objects from Africa in recent work continues to be popular. While Western museums are places where the representation of African-ness can be observed, and can be good examples of slow and considered reform, practical restrictions within these institutions continue to have an impact on how African work is represented in the West. Curators of temporary shows, such as the *Global Africa Project* in particular, have challenged, opened up and extended ways of looking at African-ness and in doing so broaden our understanding of both the continent and its ceramics. They point to diversity, ingenuity, hybridity and variation, and often include historic references.

In the fourth chapter, where I reflect on my practice, many of the themes, notions and ideas from the previous chapters have filtered into my work, either literally, as context, or symbolically. For example, objects in museums are labelled and classified or placed into a department that deems them to be African. The notion of labelling is an important part of the *Ear Tag* series which is made of many ceramic labels. In this way the written work re-iterates the practice and, in turn, the practice reiterates and extends the written work in a poetic and expressive rather than a discursive form.

In this thesis, both written and made, I have taken a philosophical and ideological question and tried to answer it with handmade objects. It touches on the word-based discourses of philosophy, representation, identities, postcolonial identities and social geography rather than exclusively on the language of clay and fire.

Outcomes

The outcomes of the research are a clearer, yet more complex understanding of notions of African-ness in ceramics. Hybridity and multiplicity characterise African ceramics today. One could argue that all artists pull from multiple sources of inspiration and experience when they produce their work. Yet the colonial and Apartheid history of South Africa, and the hybrid identities that are common there have a particular political, social and personal resonance for me, and for the other African artists discussed throughout the work. They are evidence of intertwined cultures dogged by tension, contestation and violence, as well as dialogue, sharing and reconciliation. Artworks can be sites to actively interrogate, question, illustrate or suggest solutions to social issues. I brought to the surface issues thrown up or informed by theoretical discussion that describes centre-periphery dynamics, hybridity, 'Otherness' and postcolonial identities, through both analysing and making ceramics as an alternative to exclusively word-based philosophy. I have shown that there has been progress towards a more complex presentation and understanding of African-ness.

'What does Africa mean and how is it represented in ceramic practice?' was the overarching concern of the research. While it is difficult to give a finite definition,

I have attempted to describe African ceramic practice as follows: Current practitioners from Africa, associated with Africa or interested in Africa create work in a range of styles and contexts. The examples in chapter 3 demonstrate the breadth and complexity of current practice, from the textile derived patterns of Garratt to the abstract meditations of Oyekan. Artists such as Oyekan and Armstrong embrace and identify themselves strongly with their particular African origin and make work with global resonance. The diversity and lack of a distinct thread through all of the work discussed points to the idea that the label 'African' is becoming less useful and more unstable as an overarching term. This is a positive outcome.

This broader issue was separated into two questions. The first is how can ceramics be used to picture, interpret and understand contemporary Africa? Through the research I found that artists construct African-ness in different ways but there were some recurring themes including referring to historic forms and continuing material or technical traditions such as burnishing, addressing social issues relevant to themselves as African, and engaging in some form of hybridity through materials, ideas or forms.

Reflecting on historic African objects and ways of making, for some makers, such as Oyekan, is a source of authenticity and aspiration, whereas for others, like Garratt, African-ness can be a pattern, colour or form. This almost seems incidental and appears motivated by issues not so strongly intertwined with issues of identity and representation. They might be more subtly political, as part of British counterculture or as a result of Britain's dealings with its colonies. There seems to be a set of particularly pertinent interactions between the British and their ex-colonies: a set of interesting and inseparable connections and crossovers between artists and scholars.

Social and political issues are engaged with by artists such as Swanepoel, Armstrong and myself using ceramics as a medium. As part of addressing this research question, the theme clay-as-skin was suggested and explored as a base on which to construct African-ness. Where identity is an area of concern, both the abstract and the more literal skin is a resonant and successful trope used by several artists. In my ceramics I have worked with a skin-clay

metaphor, which in the *Tents*, avoids the stereotype of animal skins as signifiers of Africa, but yet alludes to it in a subtle manner. I have also attempted to avoid focusing on essentialist racial readings and tried to draw attention to similarities rather than differences in both the way I have written up the contextual information, and in the way that my work which does not specifically use skin as a way to refer to race. Skin in the tents signifies similarities rather than differences. There is still a danger that the choice of porcelain lends itself to an association with whiteness. This element has not been resolved in this research. Throughout the research process I have been drawn to ambiguities and ways of hinting at that which is hidden and that which is left exposed which is an embodiment of ambiguity. This ambiguity is the 'African-ness' that I express in my ceramics, and the case or suggestion I present as an example of how African-ness can be constructed.

The second question was 'What does 'Africa' or 'African-ness' mean in modern and contemporary ceramic practice set in various contexts, institutional and otherwise?' In exploring the representation of African-ness I showed that new and revised museums displays demonstrate the way Africa is represented in public spaces. Institutional histories such as the V&A's still dominate but spaces and opportunities to display has allowed artists and curators to express ironic or critical approaches to the question of African history and identity. The passionate and varied reviews of *The Global Africa Project* indicate that the topic has currency and relevance within the establishment and press. The truly expansive nature of the show generated controversy which was productive. When a show about Africa obliterates people's expectations then curators are really getting to the heart of the diversity and reality of the innumerable versions of African experiences. The public now seems unsure of what African-ness means because of the diverse way it has been represented recently.

The depth of reading and observation required to produce the written element of this research has enabled and enriched the development of my ceramic practice. The ceramic practice was a case study like the artists discussed in chapter 3, but also it was an investigation in that I set the parameters and theoretical framework (clay-as-skin and a post-colonial emphasis) from the outset and tried three different ways to express a version of African-ness. The

analysis of texts and exhibitions in particular has sharpened my understanding of the way African ceramics are understood. This in turn has provided source material for a body of ceramics that contributes to discussions about hybridised and plural African identities.

Observing and researching the practical strategies used by artists like Armstrong and Oyekan facilitated the way I developed my own understanding of anthropomorphic ceramic objects. I have added to the body of anthropomorphic ceramics from and about South Africa and have given a sense that how an object comes to life, helps us consider our own motion and physical space in a slightly different way.

The practice also reiterated elements of the discussion. In some aspects practice and theory are a continuation of one another and a mirror to each other. For example Odundo's abstract vessel forms are difficult to clearly categorise in museums and galleries, as discussed in chapters two and three. This makes her work ambiguous, hybrid and mysterious. Odundo's African-ness is ambiguous and open-ended. There is also a sense of hybridity and ambiguity in my *Tents* which are purposefully hybrid structures in their references (skin, leather, paper, hide, house, tent), material (paperclay) and form (geometric and organic, floating yet suggesting stillness). They are open ended in that they may have other references to viewers such as homes and camping, refugee camps, concentration camps and many other temporary structures. Said called for using this critical analysis of culture to point out interdependence and connections between people rather than differences in the early 1990s:

The fact is, we are mixed in with one another in ways that most national systems of education have not dreamed of. To match knowledge in the arts and sciences with these integrative realities is, I believe, the intellectual and cultural challenge of the moment.' (1993: 400)

In a sense, with the critical analysis in this thesis and its extension and embodiment through practice, Said's words have largely been achieved in ceramics by the example of this research.

From the examples of artists and works discussed and through the self-reflective process of creating my own work I can deduce that ambiguity in

meaning, when intended by the artist or as a consequence of other factors is the most desirable and accurate example of representing African-ness in ceramics today.

Contribution to Knowledge

The contribution to knowledge that this research makes is a better understanding of the changes in the representation and understanding of African-ness. This was achieved through a critical discussion of African-ness and related identity issues within literature, exhibitions and displays, through ceramic objects and their makers. In general, one can observe a shift from negative to positive perceptions concerning the representation and understanding of African-ness. However there are still not enough examples and different perspectives to truly shake off stereotypical views entrenched by colonialism.

In terms of African-ness in British ceramics, beyond the legacy of Cardew, the presence of African teachers and objects within ceramics circles in Farnham is an example of where Africans or at least the idea of Africa have had (and continue to have) a fairly direct influence on British studio ceramics. African elements can be found at the heart of art forms that are thought of as non-African, such as the studio pottery movement.

The visual and material manner in which I have addressed the question of how Africa is represented is another aspect of originality. This was achieved through the particular combination of makers and exhibitions that I have explored and the reiterative practice which was both an important case study and an open-ended testing ground for the skin-clay metaphor as a powerful means of addressing African-ness.

Limitations

This research is useful to makers and students of ceramics and African ceramics in particular. It is valid within a ceramics and studio ceramics context and principally from an art and design perspective. This research focussed on the ceramic art of a continent and its interactions with the West, another large

and heterogenous space. To allow for depth, the selection of artists, works and exhibitions was relatively small. Most came from three countries which are South Africa, the United Kingdom and Nigeria. This excluded many parts of the continent. These detailed case studies give depth but do not give encyclopaedic breadth to the study. They encourage further investigation into ceramics in other parts of the continent. Text-based sources have been limited to those written in English, and geographic spaces to those where English is spoken. Though they are good examples due to their established contemporary ceramics scenes, connections between Nigeria and the United Kingdom, and South Africa and the United Kingdom do not represent all British colonial and postcolonial interactions in ceramics. This presents great potential for future research.

Future Research

There are many opportunities to continue this research in other English-speaking African countries as well as in the countries studied. The emergence of an HIV/AIDS activist type of craft in South Africa was mentioned in chapter one. This presents an area for future study to chart the emergence and contribution of this type of craft from the continent. It could perhaps be a new ground for understanding a politicised African-ness in terms of what has been called 'craftivism'. Future research and practice revisiting the cattle ear tag forms and their conceptual as well as material (and particularly their sonic) qualities is likely to follow on from this research. The group of young Ugandans associated with the annual *Feats of Ugandan Pottery* exhibitions present an area for further study on the continent, where there is potential to make a more detailed and direct analysis of these exhibitions, connecting them with emerging nationalisms and post-colonial identities in contemporary Uganda.

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Appendix 1 - List of exhibitions of work by Kim Bagley during research process

2013

All Fired Up. Musée La Piscine, Roubaix. 6 December 2013 - January 2014.

Herd for Jacob exhibited.

Time - Place - Space. James Hockey and Foyer Galleries, Farnham, Annual Research Students exhibition. 13-20 April.

Extermination Tents I exhibited.

David Walters and Friends 2013: Legacy, William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley. Travelling work selected by Julia Meinjies. From 24 July then travelling to the Witness Hilton Arts Festival, 13-15 September, Franschoek Art in Clay, November, the Juliet Armstrong Retrospective, Tatham Art Gallery, May/June 2014, the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Museum of Art in Port Elizabeth, and CSA National Exhibition Cape Town, November 2014.

Tag II (For Juliet) exhibited.

2012

Process. Perception. Phenomena. Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury, Annual Research Students exhibition. 14-23 March.

Tag exhibited.

All fired up: conversations between kiln and collection, Durban Art Gallery.

Curated by Jenny Stretton. 2 March-24 April.

Rummage/Rheumage exhibited alongside a selection of work by various artists, from the Durban Art Gallery collection.

More fired up, KZNSA Gallery, Durban. Curated by Jenny Stretton. 1-22 June.

Rummage/Rheumage exhibited.

For Juliet, Jack Heath Gallery, Pietermaritzburg, from 16 October.

Tags for Juliet exhibited.

2011

Concept and Context in Practice: Contemporary Applied Research at UCA, James Hockey Gallery, Farnham, 16-22 March.

Object/ify exhibited.

Exquisite: David Walters and Friends 2011, William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley. From 27 July.

A group of hand modelled cattle in black stoneware, or porcelain with gold lustred hooves.

ISCAEE International Ceramics Exhibition, Tokyo University of the Arts, Tokyo. September 2011.

A group of 5 wood-fired stoneware cattle with flecks of gold leaf was exhibited.

ISCAEE Members Fundraising Exhibition, Geidai Art Plaza, Tokyo. September 2011.

A herd of 16 hand-modelled cattle in various colours, stoneware, earthenware and porcelain was exhibited.

Memories, Artisan Gallery, Durban, curated by Sue Greenberg. 9 November-24 December.

A group of hand modelled cattle in black stoneware, or porcelain with gold lustred hooves.

Appendix 2 - Excerpts from laws and law commentary

National Building Regulations and Building Standards Act 103 of 1977.

‘GNR.2378 of 12 October 1990 Regulations: A13. Building Materials and Tests.

—(1) (a) Material used in the erection of a building shall be suitable for the purpose for which it is to be used. (b) All timber used in the erection of a building shall be treated against termite and wood borer attack and fungal decay in accordance with the requirements of SANS 10005 and shall bear the product certification mark of a body certified by the South African National Accreditation Systems.’

Sectional Titles Act 95 of 1986, Regulations, Conduct rules

‘1.An owner shall keep his section free of white ants, borer and other wood destroying insects and to this end shall permit the trustees, the managing agent, and their duly authorised agents or employees, to enter upon his section from time to time for the purpose of inspecting the section and taking such action as may be reasonably necessary to eradicate any such pests. The costs of the inspection, eradicating any such pests as may be found within the section, replacement of any woodwork or other material forming part of such section which may be damaged by any such pests shall be borne by the owner of the section concerned.’

Comment on the Protection of Information Bill: Rapulane Kgoroadira (2011):

‘The definition of ‘the national interest of the Republic’ and ‘national security’, two of the grounds on which information may be classified and/or protected from ‘unlawful disclosure, destruction, alteration or loss’ is too wide. •The Bill is a tool to mask corruption. •The Bill will undermine section 16 of the Constitution, which provides that ‘[e]veryone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes – (a) freedom of the press and other media; (b) freedom to receive or impart information or ideas; (c) freedom of artistic creativity; and(d) academic freedom and freedom of scientific research.’

Appendix 3 - Interviews

Appendix 3 is on the accompanying CD.