

On a Grand Scale

INTERNATIONAL – WILMA CRUISE puts the large pots of Digby Hoets in context.

PHOTOGRAPHY – DIGBY AND PENNY HOETS



Three qualities have been consistent over the twenty-five years of my friendship with South African potter Digby Hoets: a seemingly inexhaustible zest for life, passion for nature and his large pots. Hoets's love for the outdoors and enthusiasm for physical adventure borders on the irresponsible to the slightly more cautious of us. This tendency to wildness, combined with a penchant for engaging in vigorous argument with his friends, contrasts with the patient approach he demonstrates in his craft.

Since 1983 Hoets has worked exclusively on large open necked vessels and almost twenty years later, he is still engrossed in their development. These pots, (a word that seems inadequate given their architectonic presence), have been described variously as expansive and generous. Their size, which does say something of the tall blonde 'Viking' with an enormous appetite for life, belies that ebullience in sensitivity of form and surface; they are vessels with an iconic presence and stillness. The subtly textured surfaces allude to a topography of grassland and vistas of bushveld. A glance at his notebooks that record the details of the pots made over a period of decades, reveal the more thoughtful aspect of the potter. Each vessel is sketched, measurements of every stage in its making are recorded. The glazes are noted and the results of the firing documented; the latter with a photograph of the vessel in the just opened kiln.

Hoets's thatched studio overlooks a shallow valley. In the evenings the lights of the distant city of Johannesburg provide a twinkling kaleidoscope. A small dam, uncut veld grass

and a wooded aspect of acacias provide a constant in a view that changes only with the seasons. It is within this landscape that Hoets works, like the seasons, rhythmically, patiently and according to a larger scheme. The work is planned in three to four week cycles, which culminate in the firing of the 120 cu. ft. oil kiln. This has to fit in with the demands of the pottery school that he has run from his studio since 1973. He has currently around seventy students who attend one of the five weekly pottery classes. On a practical and emotional level Hoets's life is anchored around his wife Penny, a marketing research consultant. She keeps the books for the pottery, invoices the clients, manages the commissions, records the destination of each pot and provides feedback as he works.

There is a familial similarity in all the pots. Yet there is a gentle evolution in their development, which is only apparent when monitored over time. Every now and again one pot stands out from the rest. This does not occur with every firing but Hoets is alert to these occurrences and is quick to pounce on that vessel. It is this search for the ultimate harmony of form and surface that keeps him on his quest. Like the hunt for the Holy Grail, it is a search for an ideal that is always just out of reach.

The attainment of excellence within repetition has its antecedents in the Anglo-Oriental tradition typified by Bernard Leach and his followers. Nevertheless I am loathe to place him within that genre although he does owe something to its influence, particularly via the South African



exponents of that school such as Esias Bosch, Hym Rabinowitz, Andrew Walford and Tim Morris. Other admired potters are Svend Bayer, Walter Keeler, Ray Finch and Michael Casson. But it is Toff Milway and Bill van Gilder, both products of Harrow School of Art, who have had the most definitive influence. Hoets met Toff and Bill when they managed Kolonyama Pottery in Lesotho during the seventies. (Kolonyama was started by Ray Finch of Winchcombe Pottery and continued to be monitored from a distance by Ray and later Joe Finch.) After Toff left Kolonyama in 1977 he lived with the Hoets and helped to build their first trolley-kiln. Most importantly he instilled a passion for the craft tradition, and Hoets believes that it was Toff who made him realise that it is only by making the same object over and over again that the potter is able to develop his skills and sensitivity.

While Hoets's pots are not distinctly Anglo, neither are they particularly Eastern. Despite his admiration for Eastern ceramics I would be inclined to describe his pots as African were it not for the fact that this term is usually confused with an essentialist notion of Africa that is circumscribed by expectations of ethnicity, pattern and bright colour. Yet, his pots are African in a quite literal sense. They are made from African clays and glazed with the ash from indigenous hardwood trees. They take on the colours of the veld; the grey-greens of the hardwood trees, the ochres, browns and washed out textures of a winter on the high-veld. They express a love for the landscape that seamlessly

and inchoately melds from the vision of the craftsman into the forms of the pots.

Although of Dutch and English descent (he is a seventh generation South African), Hoets is, in what might be regarded as an anomaly in European eyes, a white African. But in terms of his rootedness to the land on the southern tip of the African continent, the appellation has a certain logic. It is not too fanciful to say that his work is evocative of the expansive landscape of southern Africa. The vessels are suited to larger spaces, both indoor and outdoor. They make an essential link between interior and exterior environments by providing a humanising presence in the often cool abstraction of corporate architecture. Hoets's vessels are also found in domestic homes and gardens, environments which vary from the rusticity of my own thatched house, to the city environment of the Johannesburg Art Gallery and the gardens of Highgrove in England. **CR**

Kerr, G. 1987. *Larger than life: Digby Hoets*. *National Ceramics Quarterly*, Spring: 25 - 27.

More information: www.digbyhoets.com

LEFT TO RIGHT: Pair of pure wood ash jars, 74 x 68cm | Thin wood ash jar, 92 x 78cm | Group of dry wood ash pots.

Digby Hoets – In Practice



Sketch showing details of pot



DAY ONE: Preparing clay



Wedging 20kg of clay for the first section



Securing clay on wheel



Centring clay



Opening the clay



Pulling up the walls



Ribbing the walls outwards



Measuring the first section



DAY TWO: Preparing rim before attaching first coil



Laying the coil on the rim



Securing the coil



Controlling the coil



Lifting the wall



Ribbing the inside



Ribbing to final size



DAY THREE: Attaching the second coil



Finishing the rim of the third section



DAY FOUR: Pulling up the fourth section



Ribbing the outside



Ribbing to final size



DAY FIVE: Preparing a coil for the fifth section



DAY SIX: Controlling the coil



Controlling the rim



DAY SEVEN: Adding final coil for the rim



Throwing the final rim



The finishing touch



Applying surface detail with roller



Pot moved for raw glazing with Watson Nyambeni



Pouring the glaze, starting at the base



Pot is lifted in harness to kiln using a hoist



Fully loaded trolley kiln ready for firing



After the firing; note the shrinkage

Technical Notes

STONEWARE BODY

Fireclay	73%
Ball clay	15%
Grog (60 mesh)	10%
Paper	2%

DRY ASH GLAZE

Ash (Lowveld hardwoods, mainly Combretum imberbe from camp fires)	25 (parts)
Kaolin	70
Ball clay	15

Depending on the thickness of application ranges from a dry beige to a sleek rich brown, like polished wood or leather.

ASH GLAZE

Feldspar	35 (parts)
Silica	10
Kaolin	10
Ball clay	12
Ash (Lowveld hardwoods)	35
Yellow ochre	2.5

Applied thickly, a rich, liquid pale green.

TENMOKU

Feldspar	60 (parts)
Silica	20
Whiting	12.5
Kaolin	15
Ball clay	10
Iron oxide	6.8

All pots are raw glazed and reduction fired to cone 13 in a 120 cubic foot trolley kiln fired by furnace fuel. The kiln is pre-heated using a gas poker for 24 hours before firing.