

Objects of consciousness and experience | The (very) large pots of Digby Hoets.

Ronnie Watt (2014, Art At Work Today)

In 1987, the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) introduced extensions to the building that was originally designed by Sir Edward Luytens and opened in 1915. The design of the new semi-circular north façade and galleries was sufficiently impressive to be awarded the South African Institute of Architects' Award of Merit. On completion of the upgrade project, the gallery management surveyed the enhanced architectural landscape and found it needed something to 'soften' the relatively stark new architectural space and link it with the original, classical building and with the gardens which were now more visible. Using funds from its furniture budget, JAG acquired around 30 very large reduction-fired stoneware pots by the South African potter Digby Hoets - all of them as ornamentation rather than as acquisitions for the permanent art collection. (1)

Hoets does not object that JAG considered his pots to be "ornamentation". It is also of little relevance for him whether his pots are displayed as sculpture, utilised in interior design or made to be landscape features... simply because all of these criteria and purposes fall within the ambit of architectural ornamentation whether that be architecture per se or the architecture of lived-in spaces. This begs for a distinctive debate about Hoets' pots as architectural spaces (as design) in their own right and to articulate with the architectural spaces (as environment) to which they are applied.

However, there is a clear distinction between the object as decoration and the object as ornamentation. Ornamentation goes beyond being ornament in the sense that despite the object being portable, it unifies rather than shares, architectural space. Jonathan Massey, architect and historian at Syracuse University, in essence describes this as a "meaningful elaboration" of architecture (2) and not an afterthought of architecture.

A pot is not merely matter energised into form, or in the case of Hoets, created as a large form. Nor is a pot the mere end result of material and process: a pot is created in the image of its maker (who gives it meaning) and a pot has the capacity to enter into a relationship with its receiver (by inviting other meaning) within the environment in which it achieves its being. Potters don't make pots simply because they are good at manipulating material and guiding process and have some flair for design. They make pots as an expression of their personal ethics and aesthetics. Ethics are not just about doing the right thing but doing right by the thing: to make a good pot in terms of durability, function, ergonomics, and similar attributes. And aesthetics is not just about the beauty of a pot but what it is about a pot that makes it beautiful, i.e. decisions which are influenced by personal and social affective response (experience via the senses) and guided by cognitive response (reasoning about values and meanings).

Hoets' pots are pots with ethics. The pots are invested with far too much experience and skill to be "happenings". Hoets has been involved with clay since 1972 when he attended weekly pottery classes. In the following year he started teaching wheelwork and by 1976 he had built his first

high-temperature reduction-fired studio kiln. His earlier works were functional pieces which, with Hoets' preference for clean and crisp forms and decorations, made them distinctive within the genre. As a self-taught potter he meticulously recorded details of material, design, decoration, and firing which guided him into evolving his preferred processes and forms. For process, he creates a base on the wheel to which he adds coiled sections over a period of days, finishing the pot with the addition of rims and for some, lugs and handles. The pots are green-glazed and may include having slips poured over and combed through when still wet to provide texture. The production is strategised but not mechanised and there is no mass output. In an average year, he produces at most 144 pieces. Hoets follows routine but not formula, and that permits him to coax a slow evolution of form and decoration by means of the discipline of repetitive throwing, decorating and firing. The discovery of a distinctive subtlety, as opposed to a purposeful invention of variance, will steer Hoets on a new course.

Hoets' pots do not submit to the vagaries of ceramic fashions and are not agonised reflections on ceramic debate. They are not presented as vessels, do not deliver social commentary, are not deconstructions of convention and are not new frontier designs. That does not mean that he merely plods on, producing staid pots. All that is the same-old-same, is that they are big pots. Such restraint can only be exercised by a potter who is in complete control of making and superbly confident that his pots have an essence that does not require to be teased onto the surface by means of fanciful decorative work. Where he does resort to decorative features, Hoets restricts himself to simple surface treatments and a limited palette of earthy-coloured glazes that integrate with the form. Nothing is imposed onto the form. Nothing is superfluous. And nothing clamors for attention. The pots have a wholeness derived from parts which can only exist as a whole.

Hoets' pots are pots with aesthetics. In essence the Gestalt theory is concerned with the relationship between the parts and the whole of a composition as well as our behaviour towards it by means of visual reception and psychological perception. In an essay, the Canadian ceramist and writer Paul Mathieu wrote about ceramics as actually being "about the relationship between a form and a surface" (3) coming together and defining space in specific ways. That could be translated as a pot being a singular space within a physical and metaphysical space. Hoets states that he "enjoy(s) making groups of large pots whose purpose is to enhance, enrich, vitalise and add character ... to suit the space and to integrate...". (4) In that single sentence we read that Hoets' pots are not objects to fill or punctuate spaces but are objects of consciousness and experience in a smooth continuity of space.

The aesthetics of art and architecture deal with the values of the nature, function, purpose and ontology of the object: what makes it good, beautiful, perfect, useful, understandable, balanced, appropriate, relevant, etc. but also how and why it fits into the human experience. In Aristotelian terms, a pot's aesthetics is "the being of being" or beyond being an inert material object. Different people will receive Hoets' pots differently and measure form, surface, stature, usage and meaning by their own standards and perspectives. They might or might not recognise that though Hoets' pots have assumed value and meaning as ornamentation, the pots remain fully functional with function as historical, social and cultural meaning.

As architectural ornamentation, Hoets' pots speak of design values of simplicity, generosity and balance. They sensitise the receiver to the pot as an experience of the environment rather than as an object in the environment. And they communicate the idea of the pot as an architected container of uncontained space.

Featured works

Photo 1: Urn, with combed blue slip with wood-ash glaze. Height: 55cm X Diameter: 46cm

Photo 2: Floor jar, with ridges, roped handles and dry-ash glaze. Height: 65cm X Diameter: 71cm

Photo 3: Jar, with combed iron slip and wood-ash glaze. Height: 50cm X Diameter: 54cm

Photo 4: Matovan jar, with celadon glaze and roped handles. Height: 53cm X Diameter: 51cm

Photo 5: Floor jar, with combed blue slip and wood-ash glaze. Height: 56cm X Diameter: 53cm

Photo 6: Floor jar, with combed iron slip and dolomite white glaze. Height: 51cm X Diameter: 50cm

Photo 7: Floor jar, with rouletted ridges, blue slip and wood-ash glaze. Height: 60cm X Diameter: 59cm

Photo 8: Floor jar, with ridges, combed slip and wood-ash glaze. Height: 73cm X Diameter: 72cm

Photo 9: Matovan jar, with dry-ash glaze and handles. Height: 80cm X Diameter: 71cm

Photo 10: Floor jar, with ridges, combed slip, wood-ash glaze and 'amasumpa'/knobbly rim. Height: 65cm X Diameter: 53cm

Photo 11: Floor jar, with flat rim, combed iron slip and wood-ash glaze. Height: 51cm X Diameter: 51cm

Photo 12: Urn, with rouletting, ridges, wood-ash rim and dry-ash glaze on body. Height: 93cm X Diameter: 73cm

Photo 13: Floor jar, with ridges, handles and dry-ash glaze. Height: 66cm X Diameter: 55cm

Photo 14: Bowl, with ridges, combed blue slip and wood-ash glaze. Height: 47cm X Diameter: 64cm

Digby Hoets in public collections

Corobrick National Collection at the Pretoria Art Gallery, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Tatham Art Gallery (Pietermaritzburg), Pietersburg Art Museum, Sasol Art Museum (Stellenbosch), Highgrove House (Gloucestershire), William Humphreys Gallery (Kimberley) and others.

Digby Hoets in private and corporate collections

The Development Bank, ABSA, Investec, South African Breweries, MTN, PSG, SAPPI and others in South Africa and commissioned works in New York, Los Angeles, Rio de Janeiro and Geneva and elsewhere.

Digby Hoets' awards and recognition

Multiple overall award and category winner at the APSA and CSA National Ceramic Exhibitions.

Gold Medal winner at FNB's Vita Craft Exhibition (2002).

Fellow of Ceramics Southern Africa

Source references

- 1 **Hoets, Digby. 2014.** In conversation with the author
- 2 **Massey, Jonathan. n.d.** Ornament and Decoration
- 3 **Mathieu, Paul. 2007.** “But is it (ceramic) art? Ceramics and the ‘Problem’ with Jean-Pierre Larocque’s Exhibition at the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art”, location 1737
- 4 **Ceramics Southern Africa. n.d.** CSA Members - Digby Hoets (CSA Fellow)

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- Ceramics Southern Africa. n.d.** CSA Members - Digby Hoets (CSA Fellow). (O) Accessed 4 December 2013. Available at <http://www.ceramicssa.org/DigbyHoets.html>
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- Mathieu, Paul. 2007.** “But is it (ceramic) art? Ceramics and the ‘Problem’ with Jean-Pierre Larocque’s Exhibition at the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art.” In Gustafson, Paula et al. *Craft Perception and Practice: A Canadian Discourse*, Volume 3. Vancouver. **Ronsdale Press.** eBook (Kindle DX-version). Downloaded from www.amazon.com

Recommended reading

- Cruise, Wilma & Hemp, Doreen. 1991.** *Contemporary Ceramics in South Africa*. Cape Town. Struik Winchester, p. 168
- Hoets, Digby. n.d.** “Digby Hoets (Full member).” In *Studio Pottery*. (O) Accessed 4 December 2013. Available at <http://www.studiopottery.co.uk/profile/Digby/Hoets>
- Hoets, Digby. n.d.** Digby Hoets Pottery. (O) Accessed 22 February 2014. Available at <http://www.digbyhoets.com/>
- Kerr, Nigel G. 1987.** “Larger than life: Digby Hoets.” In *National Ceramics Quarterly*, Spring 1987, pp. 25-27