



Larger than life: Digby Hoets

By Nigel G. K. Tharg

Late adolescence, or the Navy, or just getting out of school does wonders for some people. Certainly **something** got into the endocrinal system of that toothy rather gangly bloke I used to know at school simply as Hoets. Nowadays Digby Hoets cuts a somewhat daunting figure. He is tall, supremely fit, supremely (and sometimes infuriatingly) self-confident and does nothing that cannot be shown to be twice as big, twice as far or as fast as his nearest rival. It is surprising in fact that with these characteristics, he has any friends at all. But he also has **charm**.

It is important to make this point because at 38, Hoets has established himself in the forefront of South African potters. If there were any doubt that one person was to take the place of Sias Bosch as the supremo of studio potters, then Digby's recent second win of the National Award in Cape Town ought to have dispelled those. It is hard to imagine any list of five South African ceramicists of any persuasion which did not include Digby. Much of the journalism which focuses on his work concentrates on the scale and the generosity of his pots. Enough has perhaps been said of the development of the gargantuan forms and their architectural qualities. In this article, which is perhaps more a tribute to Digby's outstanding achievements in ceramics than a documentation of them, I want to concentrate on how the pots are generated from a lifestyle and an attitude which is risky, uncompromising and committed to Digby's chosen craft. I want to make the point that he **deserves** to be a winner.

Digby gets written about a good deal. Lady columnists get excited by the hairiness of his arms and his "leonine" physique. Hermeneuticists get carried away by the ontological dualities of sculptural form and the exigencies of the vessel in his work. **Everyone** finds his pots big, expansive, generous and without too many intellectual pretensions getting in the way of one's enjoyment. Hoets pots, you would say, if you knew Digby, are just Digby fired to stoneware.

In 1967 Digby was slogging through the farcical gestures of a matric course. It was clear that the art master did not hold high hopes for his future in the field and he dismissed the young Hoets' request that he be allowed to work in clay as part of his practical work with scorn. By that stage Digby had already had some experience in pottery through working in his mother's studio in Albu House (where his father had been Dean of Residence) and then, after his father's death, in the family home in Highlands North. In a more flexible and perceptive educational context, Digby might have had the opportunity to achieve success and find his natural direction much earlier than he did. As it happened, there were three misdirected years at university (Natal and Wits) before two important things happened. In 1972 Digby won the major award at the Brickor exhibition with a throwware chess set. A little later, the Johannesburg potter-teacher John Edwards and his wife Val had decided to sell their house-cum-business in Fairwood and to go farming in Natal. Digby, now a

married man, raised the money to secure a mortgage and in 1973 the Hoetses were ensconced and Digby and his sister Lesley Ann teaching, while both produced work of an excellence and originality which quickly drew the attention of the art world.

So after a few years in the wilderness during which it was painfully clear that he was not going to be the **best** zoologist or geologist or biologist on the scene, Hoets found himself in precisely the right posture and in the right consistency of butter to begin to attract the reputation of a person who always manages to turn adventure into either profit or a good thing. But he is not just born lucky. People have to make their luck. Picasso's most memorable piece of advice to those wishing to make it in the art world was, "take risks". This Digby does. He is prepared to do anything even if it's just for a challenge. He sails hobie cats in the national championships, he has often done the Duzi canoe marathon, he rides a bicycle tolerably quickly, he has rowed for S. A. Universities (captained the Natal team), jumped off cliffs in (or under) a hang-glider and paddled most of the wilder parts of the South African coastline in a ridiculously unseaworthy paddle ski. In short, the man causes his friends, who are more sedentary, deep unease whenever it appears that the potter may want some company on one of his diversions.

It is comforting to know that at one stage of his career Digby wasn't at all sure of what he was to do with his life. While he was taking the stony road of academe (and doing odd jobs for the Natal Roads Department) he met Penny Hunter - a young woman apparently weightless but with a firm set to the jaw and a will which could halt stampeding bison with a **look**. It is hard to imagine that there would be any compatibility between these two **hardnekkige** characters, but it seems that Penny took about twenty minutes to enslave and thoroughly tame the bearded science-type in the shorts and flip-flops. In turn she allowed herself to get proposed to by a man who apparently had as many prospects for success as a bald peacock. No doubt she realized that if all else failed she would have the qualifications and the gumption to be able to support them both for a while.

The first time I went to visit Digby and his wife after not being in touch for the four or five years since we'd left school I was surprised at how marvellously domestic and **Habitat** he'd become. There were tasteful carpets on the floor of the **bijou** cottage and his wife looked like she had just been interviewed by **The Tatler**. I began to feel a little gauche but all was well because as we were leaving, Digby showed that he was still the same simple soul by throwing me (and a fellow guest) into the swimming pool. After that I didn't have to worry about whether I'd have to be on even my second-best behaviour and all was well. Ever since that evening I've been trying to get him at just the right spot next to a pool . . .

It turned out that the Hoetses had been flagrantly

breaking Municipal By-laws by conducting a business in the sacred groves of Fairwood and in any case there was a limit to the amount one could expand on John Edward's eighth-acre, so in 1976 they bought a 2¼-acre stand opposite the N. G. Kerk in Halfway House and set about turning old chicken/rabbit runs into a studio and a wasteland into a wondrous house and garden. Form the shifting sward of blackjacks and khakibos has arisen a splendour of trees, whitewashed studio buildings and reflecting ponds; the poplar trees planted in thick profusion ten years ago have turned the bleak plot into a shady park. One walks from the lush garden surrounding the house to the studio through about a dozen full-size trees. Digby has always felt that it is necessary for one's spiritual well-being to be able to move about one's property with the ever-present sound of poplar leaves rustling underfoot. Digby is a person who acts upon certain strongly-felt suppositions about the way things should be. When his two children (Penny is by way of being symmetrical and orderly in all things, so the elder is a boy and the younger a girl) could walk they were given a pony since it was felt that children should be able to ride and to have access to the means to do so. Never mind that the pony was a carnivorous Shetland with a long history of infanticide, Adam and Harriet rode till they dropped (which was quite soon after the saddling stage) or had been scraped against some indigenous and consequently thorny tree. Nowadays we who stable their horses don't see the younger Hoetses as frequently as we did before they

had learned enough English to tell their bearded parent to lay off.

This is all going into a ceramics magazine and some readers will, with some justification, be wondering why things are reading like the woman's page. Perhaps there are readers who would like me to give some slip recipes or something. Frankly, I don't know anything about **that** side of things. I do know about some of the processes of art-making however, and much of the preamble is to make the point that the Hoets **oeuvre** arises from an attitude to life – to doing things in general – which does not admit to petty interferences. Digby has a T-shirt (given by a sponsor of some Stygian canoe race) which reads "Ain't a Thing I Won't Do". I



am sure that his swift rise to eminence in South African pottery is the result of this kind of **insouciance** directed to his work. The first effect of Hoets' acceptance of challenges in pot-making is to make the work as expansive as he can. Secondly, he must balance this exuberance with technical understanding **and** a thorough insight into the principles of form and design. Thus, while the pots are often bigger than anyone else's, they tend also to look good in their bigness, like a tall girl who has learned to walk up straight and be proud of herself. A year or two ago I saw illustrations of some pieces belonging to a West Coast collector whose sole interest was in prodigiously large floor pots. It was interesting to contrast these side-show freaks and their self-conscious and angular altitudes with the dignity and proportion of Digby's best work. Clearly the difference is a combination of brain and eye with brawn!

So, while one can read about Digby Hoets in a variety of journals and get quite involved in the shades of aesthetics suggested by his work, it is also very useful to understand that the expansive, accommodating floor pots with their user-friendly handles and organic proportions arise from a person whose week is divided almost evenly in the business of clay and the business of being fulfilled on a wide range of levels. Being successful (and being married to an equally successful woman) means that there are none of the meannesses of anxiety surrounding Hoets' life or his work. He can afford to be uncomplicated and direct, even in an art world which shrieks for intellectual attitudes and a full set of matching socio-political baggage. And somehow I think his work will survive a good deal of what is currently being touted as the only "relevant" kind of expression.

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