Art that is ‘sacred in fabric of profane’

ARTIST Katherine Glenday has turned her living and working space into an entire installation titled This Personal, and this Particular. The retrospective, somewhat philosophical and entirely domestic celebration is being shown in her home in cobbled Windsor Road in Kalk Bay.

Glenday’s work in porcelain has been present in South African art since she graduated from the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, with majors in ceramics, history of art and English in 1982. She has won many national awards and has exhibited her porcelain vessels internationally and extensively in New York since 2006. Her work can be found in national and corporate collections all over South Africa and was recently bought by the Museum of Art and Design in New York.

Glenday’s porcelain vessels are symbols and metaphors that aim to capture light, movement, sound and silence. These vessels have been her central voice since she graduated and she describes her journey with porcelain as a life-long passion. She continues to be inspired by gestures and objects from nature and the recent collections of porcelain vessels she took to New York have strong cobalt and bronze oxide strokes and splashes, representing the distilled human mark of a mature artist.

"Somehow osmotic ‘conversations’ are birthed by the simple act of bringing objects into my studio and I begin there. Clay, rock, shells, feathers and stones, shards and old metal engender many thoughts and ideas and being a painter at heart, I am acutely aware of the subtleties of colour, texture and light. I live by the sea and in the same way in which water does, porcelain holds light and lends itself to many transformations. I see porcelain as my true medium and view it as a canvas in the round," she says.

For the past 10 years, Kalk Bay, which is known for its eclectic community of artists, musicians and writers, has been her home, and the work that she has produced has been largely collaborative. Glenday’s current space has housed an artists’ collective, a furniture restorer, a mechanics workshop, the original Olympia bakery and at the turn of the century, the original blacksmith’s forge.

This Personal and this Particular is an exhibition which resonates with other shows curated by Glenday at the Irma Stern Museum, and with her last solo show there in 2001, Tuning Narcissus. It has taken her 12 years to come to a place of “going inward” again and to leave off collaborative engagements in order to sharpen her insight about her own practice, and “to clear out and to move on”.

The show has taken a year of intense focus and 30 years of professional work with her medium.

The artist describes her work as “living in the spaces between silence and chaos”. Technical ability governs her ability to subtly manipulate her various media. The resulting installations embody the moment “when a balance is struck, somewhere between control and surrender”. The exhibition hopes to evoke her “enduring pursuit of a quality of silence and poise, while being simultaneously fragile and tenuous, caught before the moment of collapse”.

Works on show include porcelain vessels and her more recent experimental works in resin, which are being exhibited for the first time, along with a selection of drawings and sketches and a personal collection of objects from her children’s and her own childhood and also family treasures which have informed her artwork. This intimate life journey has been curated into installations throughout her home.

This Personal and this Particular’s wry commentary and appreciation of beauty and light is her “essay on the sacred in the fabric of the profane”.

How has South Africa as a personality become interwoven in her work? “I am very aware of the cultural splice in my ancestry and the mix of Dutch, English and Scottish threads that are in my fourth-generation South African blood. The role of trade and seafaring has become an important aspect of how I think about my engagement with porcelain. My earliest Dutch forbear was a man called De Smidt – he brought porcelain past these shores in the 1700s (I have some of these actual pieces that were salvaged when I was six years old),” she says.

“I also worked on a project called Exchanges with three well-known South African ceramic artists. We explored our very distinctive cultural heritages with clay and what had brought us to the point we were all at professionally. As ceramicists we were able to work with one another with mutual respect and appreciation for one another’s roots. We learnt a lot through the process and I believe that creativity is a great leveller in life. We all are simply human.

“I also have worked with a Malian indigo cloth-dyer and what
OSMOSIS: Clay, rock, shells, feathers, shards and old metal bring Katherine Glenday's art to life in her working studio in Kalk Bay.

Picture: DAVID ROSS

FRAGILE: The role of trade and seafaring is an important aspect of Glenday's approach to porcelain.

LOST AND FOUND: Katherine Glenday presents This Personal, and this Particular until April 12.

unites us is our humanity and belief in our craft as a valid cultural and social tool. “Though we are both craftspeople, we believe that we are artists.”

For quietude Glenday goes to the sea, for a run, or to her studio to work. “Inward is the best wherever my legs take me to find it.”

Were there any moments, people or artworks that moved her in the direction she chose?

“In the direct line of mentorship, inspiration and artistic production, I would say that artist Karel Nel has influenced me very profoundly. “The tutelage of Rose Shakinovsky and Claire Gavoronsky over the past seven years has transformed my creative practice and helped me to deploy more of myself into the creative act.

“The artist Pierre Bonnard is also always in my mind as I work towards this show – dealing as it does with the sacred in the profane and daily aspects of domestic life. His translation of light into paint in a domestic setting has a very strong resonance for me.”

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The show runs until April 12.