CRAFT ART IN SOUTH AFRICA
CREATIVE INTERSECTIONS

Elbé Coetsee
KATHERINE GLENDAY

Metaphysical conversations in porcelain

The remarkable site-specific exhibition ‘This Personal and this Particular’ featured the work of celebrated ceramicist Katherine Glenday. This retrospective included Glenday’s work spanning the past thirty years and was her first solo exhibition in South Africa in ten years. She says curating the installation in her studio (and indeed in her entire home, which is situated above the studio in Kalk Bay) came from an abiding question about perception. She attempts to render the perceived distinctions between art and the gallery environment; between the notion of private domestic worlds and public spaces (such as museums and shops); and between the creator’s imagined world and the larger contexts of history and nature. Her work is an ongoing exploration of the metaphysical in life.

She confidently merges the many facets of her own life, all of which influence her creative thinking and her way of being and working. Monumental slip-cast vessels and delicately thrown bowls, cups and plates – some purely decorative and several entirely functional and utilitarian – were displayed elegantly alongside one another. Some shards of porcelain were placed inside an unbroken vessel, the beautiful fragments alluding to the complex social histories of domestic ceramic collections. The artist’s strong connection to the natural world was evoked through the careful interspersing of pebbles, stones and fragile flowers among the ceramic pieces.

This eclectic collection of objects was displayed throughout her studio and private living areas: the kitchen, bedrooms, sitting room and even the bathroom, which was tiled with a personal history of moments she and her children recorded in a small patchwork of childlike illustrations.

Glenday’s paper-thin vessels are simple and pure in form. The detail of decoration is sometimes inspired by the optical effects that result from the interplay of water and light, and the passage of sunlight through air, water and glass. Although glass and water allow light to pass from one medium to another, they slow down and refract the light into the smallest visible pattern on a wall, often creating a remarkable range of tones. Glenday is enthused by light and successfully explores its endless spectrum in her work. She experiments with ‘chun’ glazing, and delights in the refracted light playing through eternally trapped air bubbles in the beaded drops of glaze.

She lives and works close to the sea and the rejuvenating energy of the ocean constantly informs her work. Her vessels are infused with the colours, scintillating reflections and personal histories of the sea. An ancestor of Glenday’s was First Mate on the Middelburg, a Dutch East India Company ship bringing a cargo of porcelain back
“I never wanted my art to push the viewer away; I feel the vessel is a way to bring the viewer in.”

Stephen Rolfe Powell, American glass artist
from the East. This ship was scuttled in Saldanha Bay in 1781 and she included in her exhibition a collection of the actual porcelain shards that were salvaged. She also made other works in response to this early history of trafficked and traded porcelain. She was drawn to how these objects pertain to the weave of domestic histories and also to the diverse colonial economies linking China, Europe and South Africa.

She acknowledges artist and academic Karel Nel as an important mentor who has supported her work as an artist, and who encouraged her development towards installation where context and content are inextricably linked. Subsequent study and studio retreats with artists and tutors Rose Shakinovsky and Claire Gavronsky have also had a profound influence on expanding the forms of her creative expression, and have brought her attention full circle to her earliest origins – as an art student who happened upon clay as her medium.