The inclusion of this essay on ceramics in this issue of *Art South Africa* is both an acknowledgement of the dynamism of the contemporary ceramic scene and a tribute to the Ruby anniversary celebrations of Ceramics South Africa (CSA). Over the past forty years CSA has nurtured local potters and ceramic artists, and their efforts are evident in the vast diversity of South Africa’s contemporary ceramic heritage.

CSA celebrations are accompanied by the launch of the exhibition, *All Fired Up: Conversation Between Kiln and Collection*, at the Durban Art Gallery in March (see p. 77 in this issue) and will include a special version of the National Exhibition at the Pretoria Art Museum in October. The latter will coincide with the release of the 100th issue of the Association’s journal, *National Ceramics Quarterly*. Another major ceramics exhibition, *Fired*, opened in February at the Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town. This scholarly retrospective of South African ceramic history included works from all of Iziko’s satellite museums, a massive logistical achievement by the curator of Iziko’s Social History Collections, Esther Esmyol. In addition to the retrospective, *Fired* included a temporary installation of 101 contemporary table settings, by guest artists, on a long banqueting table in the Lady Barnard Room. Esmyol acknowledges that the installation was inspired Judy Chicago’s, *The Dinner Party* (1974–9). However, unlike Chicago’s monumental feminist icon, the 101 table settings were not accompanied by lavish embroidered place-mats, silver goblets or a luxuriant floor-covering. The settings were placed directly on the sober, polished wooden table. The installation was an homage to the creative energies of the guest artists – nothing less, nothing more.

Esmyol’s choice of place settings is especially appropriate in South Africa’s economic context, which forces most ceramic artists to concentrate their production on these literally and metaphorically alimentary wares. Working as a ceramic sculptor or installation artist is a risky venture. Most artists who make ceramic sculptures or installations (with the notable exception of Wilma Cruise) also make vessels. It is thus important to be especially sensitive when considering local domestic ware. Plates, platters and tiles often are a substitute for a canvas in the case of frustrated painters; while vessels incorporate sophisticated, sculptural dimensions. Indeed, the course of South Africa’s most interesting ceramic artists articulates the imagined divide between utilitarian and sculptural and/or conceptual form as a continuum. Wilma Cruise laments that “Pots” in South Africa still evoke the concept of craft and viewers are conditioned to read each vessel as a discrete unit generally devoid – or mute – as to its significance.” This articulation of critical “significance” as a part of a broader cultural discourse is essential for the future of South African contemporary ceramics, especially for utilitarian objects.

**Utilitarian Domestic Ware**

The relationship between contemporary mass-produced Asian imported crockery and hand-made or partially mechanised local domestic pottery is mirrored in a comparison of McDonalds and Slow Food. Yes, good, real food takes longer to make. It may, at times, be slightly more pricey, but it is an authentic product of our **terroir** and **savoir faire**. Furthermore, it creates jobs and maintains dozens of small businesses.

The doyenne of contemporary South African crockery is Clementina van der Walt whose iconic “African” dinnerware charted new design territories. A new arrival on the scene, the Mervyn Gers Collective, which includes Gers, Diana Ferreira and Karen Kotze (Woven Ceramics), received rave reviews at the recent Design Indaba.

In the run up to Cape Town hosting Africa’s first World Design Capital in 2014, many ceramic artists are developing ranges that may be considered

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**Opening the Treasure Chest**

South African ceramics embrace dynamic design, collaboration and groundbreaking digital technology, writes Wendy Gers

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Mervyn Gers, *Untitled*, 2011, glazed ceramic, 60cm. Image courtesy the artist
“ghost” in their aspirations. While many of these ranges are rather predictable, depicting indigenous landscapes, flora and fauna, and obvious icons, or resembling glossy copies of wondy European creations, others are more conceptually sophisticated. Ceramic Makers, a collective comprising Gerhard Sturt and Anthony Harris, produces wry and urbane domestic articles. Their uphennished pots invert basic expectations of everyday objects, and play with the fragility inherent in the ceramic medium. Similarly, Ceramic Makers’ recent crumpled table setting and crockery for the Inhoo exhibition paradoxed slick, sanitised contemporary dining utensils through their sublimely ridiculous, warped forms!

**White Light and Music**

Various contemporary ceramic artists have, in recent years, developed bodies of work centred on a rinsing of the luminous quality of white snowflakes or the fragile translucence of porcelain. Aural Dahl’s sensuous organic forms are inspired by the botanical photography of Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932). She argues that white clay offers an unblemished canvas for organic forms. Her more recent English family’s love of “china”. The latter’s effusive surface references the surface as skin, marked by the passage of time, age and culture. Other interesting permutations of an Afro-contemporary visual idiom occur in the oeuvre of Cilest Sibhelo and Meyers Gers. Gers’ vessels, like those of Aural Dahl, recall seeds, but also reference Fox vessels from Burkina Faso, which are covered with prickly ananasque (wart-like protrusions). Gers reeks in the vocalist’s guises of gloss and in the rugged, earthy forms of his native northern Kavos.

**Personal Mythologies**

Hylton Nel, Chichemba Haines, Wilma Cruise and Lynnday Watson are among the most interesting contemporary artists, whose engagement with clay invokes the fantastic, ironic, ironic and sensible. Watson’s figurative sculptures depicting anonymous women are tributes to South Africa’s invisible abayas — women who have left their families to raise the children and clean the homes of others. In The Nanny Watson, drew from her “experiences as a child, but more from empathy for the domestic worker who makes so many sacrifices in her personal life,” Watson’s figures suggest moments of stress and resigned solitude. While embodying contemplative meditation, her female figures, especially the mares, are musings on the boredom of housework and the resentment of their isolation and frustration. Metaphors of frustration and didacticism are also evident in the work of Wilma Cruise whose sculptural oeuvre is characterised by limbless figures. In recent works, Cruise appropriates Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland and Alice through the Looking Glass as a metaphorical matrix for exploring the animal/human interface. Her Baby Field (2010–12) installation consists of hundreds of armless babies that can be cradled in the hand: Through recalling fertil fertility figures, the baby’s sterilised surfaces and anatomical deformities imply a threatened foetality and future impotence. Cruise’s motif of mother/babies provides a model for considering human/animal communication “that avoids the sentimental trap of anthropomorphism while still allowing for an empathetic and ethical response to the question of the animal’s experience.” For Cruise, the mutant baby/animals are also associated with the contemporary environmental crisis.

**Open Source Digital Futures**

Cruise’s apocalyptic reflections on the future lead me to consider another aspect of the future for ceramists in South Africa. 3D digital printers allow for the creation of complex ceramic forms that are not possible in artisanal or industrial production methods. The Bionic, Michael Eden’s iconoclast digital pieces epitomise many preconceived notions about pottery, and are radically altering the international ceramics scene. While these revolutionary tools may radically alter South African ceramics, the sector needs more than formal innovation and technique to sustain itself. Critical discourse is painfully lacking among potters, who frequently access the digital form: of a laser beam, the (invisible) digital material is “moulded” in thin air. Various accessories can be used to create a template for manipulating the digital form: sheets of paper, bent metal and turned timber. The resultant virtual objects can be printed in clay.

**Critical Futures**

While these revolutionary tools may radically alter South African ceramics, the sector needs more than formal innovation and technique to sustain itself. Critical discourse is painfully lacking among potters, who frequently access the digital form: of a laser beam, the (invisible) digital material is “moulded” in thin air. Various accessories can be used to create a template for manipulating the digital form: sheets of paper, bent metal and turned timber. The resultant virtual objects can be printed in clay.
professional spaces for display and research. While many art museums collect and research South African pottery, some significant institutions such as Iziko SANG, still turn a blind eye to potters. While galleries such as the Kim Sacks Gallery (Johannesburg), Artisan Contemporary Gallery (Durban), Ebony (Stellenbosch), Clemetine Ceramics Gallery (Windhoek), Kalk Bay Modern, Heartworks (Cape Town) and the Drop Street Gallery (Stellenbosh) are champions of the cause, many ceramic artists bemoan the lack of access to art spaces of a more radically contemporary nature. The white cube is a nonexistent formulation in the lexicon of most potters who are conditioned by the craft gallery format, where objects are displayed in compromised, aesthetically chaotic conditions. The lack of appropriate exhibition spaces thwarts the artistic potential and expressive liberty offered by creative scenography and the installation format, as proposed by Katherine Glenday in her 2001 solo exhibition at the Irma Stern Museum. 10

This essay is a partial and superficial survey of some significant actors 11 and issues that feature in the contemporary ceramics landscape. It is hoped that scholarly and prestigious journals will continue to embrace this domain. Critical craft, contemporary pottery and ceramic design are vital, rich and diverse aesthetic expressions that are art, South Africa.

I wish to thank the artists involved for their assistance as well as Claire Warner and Dr Elizabeth Perrill for their judicious comments.

1. Chicago’s installation represents 1 038 important women; thirty-nine are represented by place settings and another 999 names are inscribed on a Heritage Floor.
3. Correspondence with the author, 25 April 2011.
4. Ibid.
5. Baby Field was exhibited at the North-West University in October 2011. It is a work in progress and will ultimately include one thousand baby and additional sculptures.
7. Ibid.
8. The democratisation of Rapid Prototyping techniques has been facilitated by groups including Fab@Home and RepRap. RepRap stands for Replicating Rapid Prototyper and was initiated by Adrian Bowyer of the University of Bath. He devised a 3D printer that can be assembled in online building plans and open source software for the price of a commercial 3D printer.
9. Industrial 3D printers have been commercialised by Shapeways, Ponoko and others. Other pioneer artists and institutions undertaking original research using ceramic printers and developing new printers, include the Centre for Fine Print Research at the University of the West of England, The Solheim Additive Manufacturing Laboratory at the University of Washington, John Balistreri and Dadi Dadi.
10. Assisted by the artist Karel Nel, Glenday had bespoke tables, shelves and light boxes constructed. She grouped similar vessels on textured surfaces of found materials, including shells, lumps of charcoal, seedpods and sprouting beans. These evocative materials were placed between sheets of glass onto which groups of pots were arranged. In another example, vessels, painted and incised with images of gold fish, was displayed over a fish tank containing gold fish swimming amid potsherds (Cruise, 3).
11. I note the exclusion of various artists including Ian Calder, Ruan Hoffmann, Ralph Johnson, Carla da Cruz, Nicolene Swanepoel, Zizipho Poswa, Clive Sithole, Ivana Njovu, Yolanda Menyoto, Martin Stell, Claire Warner, Christina Bryer, John Shirley and Charmaine Haines whose oeuvres merit critical attention.

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