KATHERINE GLENDAY (B. 1960) LIVES IN KALK BAY.

This is one of many small villages that hang
between mountain and sea on the west side of
False Bay in Cape Town, South Africa. Just beyond
Kalk Bay the land mass stretches southward to Cape
Point. Thereafter it is just the heaving ocean.

This part of Cape Town is swept clean by the winds.
Airy vistas are visible from the old house in which
Glenday lives. The wetter and woodier parts of Cape
Town lie on the other side of the mountain. Here one
is conscious of light, air and the vastness of the ocean
that rolls towards the wastes of Antarctica.

This place is entirely favourable to Glenday’s
work. It is as if Glenday has captured the elements of
her environment and spun them, like a magician,
into small artworks that are more containers of an
other world than mere pots. It seems contradictory
in ceramics, an art form that normally evokes the
Thorian elements of earth and fire, to deal with such
insubstantialis as air and water.

Glenday captures ethereal elements in porcelain, a
material that is hard and immutable. This is only one
of the many paradoxes of her oeuvre. Her vessels also
express complex ideas in the medium more usually
associated with the notion of craft, rather than that of
art with all its conceptual ramifications. Herbert Read
said that because pottery was neither imitative nor
illustrative, it was form in its purest essence. Read

was writing in 1931 before postmodernism permitted
a more complex interpretation of the vessel format.
Yet in 1979 – 1982, when Glenday was studying for
her undergraduate degree in ceramics at Pietermar-
itzburg University in Natal, a formalist approach to
ceramics was still dominant. Under the twin impera-
tives of a modernist formalist aesthetic and the dying
influence of Anglo-Orientalism, Glenday felt her op-
portunities for self-expression constrained. She had
originally wanted to study painting but, under the
influence of a mentor, the potter, Marietjie van der
Merwe (1935 – 1992), who was a visiting lecturer,
Glenday turned exclusively to ceramics. Against the
advice of her other teachers she chose to work expres-
sively, and somewhat perversely, through the tech-
nically demanding medium of porcelain. Its whiteness,
fineness; its subtlety and delicacy fitted in well with
Glenday’s approach to life, so much so that in years
to come it became easy to confuse the potter with that
of her work. But both perceptions would be wrong.
As delicate as Glenday might look, a steely resolve
and a searching mind belie her persona and – as with
her vessels – the fineness of the pot forms a disguise
of complex iconography. Yet, Glenday did not en-
tirely shrug off the formalist influence. A tension
exists between the formal elements in her work,
which are understated and restrained, and the ideas
embodied in her vessels.
Drawn by the translucent surfaces of the pots, the patient viewer will find a depth of meaning therein. Glenday’s early post-graduate porcelain vessels tended to use the pots as small pedestals for sculptures or, and this occurred quite frequently, the porcelain would become a white sheet on which paintings and drawings would trace the artist’s explorations. At this time a motif appeared. An attenuated androgynous figure, often caught in the act of flying or swimming was set on lids or clung to the sides of the pots.

As her work progressed, Glenday engaged more explicitly with its sexual nature (or the denial of it) believing that gender functions along a continuum, the outer boundaries of which are represented by extreme forms of masculine and feminine attributes. Glenday terms this the ‘Ken and Barbie syndrome’. She explores the idea of a gender continuum in a mature work, entitled Tuning (2001). This is a series of 13 subtly distorted vessels, which formed part of a solo exhibition held at the Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town in November 2001, the title of which was Tuning Narcissus.

Glenday wrote: “The Tuning vessels refer to a range of notes played on a journey toward harmonious balance with another or from resolution within. The masculine on one side and the feminine on the other can be seen to be more airborne as they enter the middle ranges on the continuum. These matters are sacred and delicate as is the concept of love in all its forms.”

Glenday’s pots appear as light as the beat of a butterfly’s wing and as ethereal as a wisp of a cumulus or nimbus cloud. The forms are indented, edges are broken, the pots are penetrated and coloured textured elements are inserted – all this with an authority of one who has mastered her material. The androgynous figure is now contained within the walls of the vessel. It is drawn with the light so it lies simultaneously on the surface and diffuses through the clay. Its pale form is luminously captured in the walls.

Glenday is not averse to piercing the surface in areas – over the hura or pelvic region – and at times to insert darker elements of matter into the transparent hardness of the body. Some vessels are given titles, which are clues to her intention but not essential to decoding the messages which are apprehended at a more emotional level. In some works the title is written into the walls of the pot. The words can only be read when held up to the light.

Given the iconographical weight of her work, Glenday was faced with a problem as how to exhibit the vessels. 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. For her 2001 solo exhibition at the Irma Stern Museum, Glenday chose to exhibit her work in installations. She sought the help of the artist, Karel Nel who helped construct the high
tables, shelves and light boxes. Glenday placed groups of similar vessels on textured surfaces, found materials such as shells, charcoal, coloured seed pods and growing bean sprouts. The materials were placed between sheets of glass on which groups of similar pots were arranged. Tuning was displayed at eye level against the wall, where it became a sentence to be read from left to right – or a line that pivoted on its central axis, pot number 7, the point of equilibrium.

In 2002 Glenday took part in a group exhibition at the Kim Sack’s Gallery in Johannesburg. In the series of works created for this show Glenday evoked the magical other which she described as a yearning for an imagined other who would bring qualities of harmony and balance in which a state of completion is achieved. In Jungian terms the personality becomes actualised. In a work entitled, The Journey (2002) a figure swims across a series of shallow bowls reaching towards a point which has no beginning and no end.

And, once again, the viewer discovers by carefully looking that Katherine Glenday is writing in light:

As my vehicle drove into the sunlight
The soft plop of your insect body
starburst on to my windscreen
and I saw the universe
dancing its rainbow
in the hologram of your bright grains
if you, then why not me.

Wilma Cruise is a ceramic artist and author from South Africa. Karel Nel is a painter and Associate Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. She is an expert in African art. Natal University is the only university in South Africa to offer a degree course in ceramics as part of the Fine Arts degree. Marietjie van der Merwe was influential as a teacher of ceramics throughout South Africa. Among others, she was involved in setting up kilns and imparting technological knowledge to the Art and Craft Centre at Rorkes Drift in the rural area of Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal). This was at a time when black people had few opportunities for art or craft education.