

On a Grand Scale

INTERNATIONAL – WILMA CRUISE puts the large pots of Digby Hoets in context.



Three qualities have been consistent over the twenty-five years of my friendship with South African potter Digby Hoets: a seemingly inexhaustible zest for life, passion for nature and his large pots.

Hoets' love for the outdoors and enthusiasm for physical adventure borders on the irresponsible to the slightly more cautious of us. This tendency to wildness, combined with a penchant for engaging in vigorous argument with his friends, contrasts with the patient approach he demonstrates in his craft.

Since 1983 Hoets has worked exclusively on large open necked vessels and almost twenty years later, he is still as engrossed in the development of his large pots. These pots, (a word that does not adequately describe their architectonic presence), have been described variously as expansive and generous. Their size, which does say something of the tall blonde "Viking" with an enormous appetite for life, belies that ebullience in sensitivity of form and surface; they are vessels with an iconic presence and stillness. The subtly textured surfaces allude to a topography of grassland and vistas of bushveld. A glance at his notebooks that record the details of the pots made over a period of decades, reveal the more thoughtful aspect of the potter. Each vessel is sketched and measurements of every stage in its making are recorded. The glazes are noted and the results of the firing documented; the latter via a photograph of the vessel in the just opened kiln.

Hoets' thatched studio overlooks a shallow valley. In the evenings the lights of the distant city of Johannesburg provide a twinkling kaleidoscope. A small dam, uncut veld grass and a wooded aspect of acacias provide a constant in a view that changes only with the seasons. It is within this landscape that Hoets works, like the seasons,

rhythmically, patiently and according a larger scheme. The work schedule is planned in three to four week cycles, which culminate in the firing of the 120 cu. ft. oil kiln. His working cycle has to fit in with the demands of the pottery school that Hoets has run from his studio since 1973. He currently has around seventy students who attend one of the five weekly pottery classes. On a practical and emotional level Hoets' life is anchored around his wife Penny, a marketing research consultant. She keeps the books for the pottery, invoices the clients, manages the commissions, records the destination of each pot and provides feedback as he works.

The sensitivity revealed by the forms and surfaces of Digby's vessels defy easy description. The separation of the elements of form, colour and texture is only made through descriptive necessity. Even then words seem poor coinage for sensations that are essentially tactile. "Decoration" is all but absent were it not for the understated details of combing and roping on rims and lugs. Glazes vary from the deep glossy depths of classical tenmoku to the driest of ash glazes that reflect the highveld landscape in winter. There is a familial similarity in all the Hoets pots. Yet there is a "gentle evolution", in their development, which is only apparent when monitored over time. Every now and again one pot stands out from the rest. This does not occur with every firing, or necessarily that often. But Hoets is alert to these occurrences and is quick to pounce on that vessel. It is this search for the ultimate harmony of form and surface that keeps him on his quest. It is like the hunt for the Holy Grail; a search for an ideal that is always just out reach.

The attainment of excellence within repetition has its antecedents in the Anglo-Oriental tradition typified by Leach and his followers. Nevertheless I would be loathe to place Hoets within that genre although he does owe something to its influence, particularly via the South African exponents of that school, Esias Bosch, Hym Rabinowitz, Andrew Walford and Tim Morris. Other admired potters include Svend Bayers, Walter Keeler, Ray Finch and Michael Casson. But it is Toff Milway and Bill van Gilder, both products of Harrow School of Art, who have had the most definitive influence. Hoets met Toff and Bill when the two of them managed Kolonyama Pottery in Lesotho during the seventies. (Kolonyama was started by Ray Finch of Winchcombe Pottery and continued to be monitored from a distance by Ray and later Joe Finch.) After Toff left Kolonyama in 1977 he lived with the Hoets' at which time he helped Hoets to build his first trolley-kiln. Most importantly he instilled in Hoets a passion for the craft tradition. Hoets believes that it was Toff who made him realise that it is only by making the same object over and over again that the potter is able to develop his skills and sensitivity.

While Hoets' pots are not distinctly "Anglo", neither are they particularly "Eastern". Despite his admiration of Eastern ceramics, I would be inclined to describe the Hoets pots as "African" were it not for the fact that this term is usually confused with an essentialist notion of Africa that is circumscribed by expectations of ethnicity, pattern and bright colour. Yet, his pots are "African" in a quite literal sense. They are made from African clays and glazed with the ash from indigenous hardwood trees. They take on the colours of the veld; the grey-greens of the hardwood trees, the ochres, browns and washed out textures of a winter on the highveld. They express a love for the landscape that seamlessly and inchoately melds from the vision of the craftsman to a physical manifestation in the forms of the pots.

Although Hoets is of Dutch and English descent (he is a seventh generation South African), he is, in what might be regarded as an anomaly in European eyes, a white African. But in terms of his 'rootedness' to the land on the southern tip of the African continent, the appellation has a certain logic. It is not too fanciful to say that his work is evocative of the expansive landscape of southern Africa. The vessels are suited to larger spaces, both indoor and outdoor. They make an essential link between interior and exterior environments by providing a humanising

presence in the often-cool abstraction of corporate architecture. But Hoets' vessels are also found in domestic homes and gardens, environments, which vary from the rusticity of my own thatched house, to the city environment of the Johannesburg Art Gallery and the gardens of Highgrove in England.

*Kerr, G. 1987. Larger than life: Digby Hoets. *National Ceramics Quarterly*, Spring: 25 – 27.

Photographs by Digby and Penny Hoets.

From: Ceramic Review, issue number 194 March/April 2002

www.ceramicreview.com

TECHNICAL NOTES

All pots are raw glazed and reduction fired to cone 13 for approximately 18 hours in a 120 cubic foot trolley kiln fired with furnace fuel. The kiln is pre-heated using a gas poker for 24 hours before firing.

STONEWARE BODY

Fireclay	73%
Ball clay	15%
Grog (60 mesh).....	10%
Paper.....	2%

DRY WOODASH GLAZE (parts)

Ash (Lowveld hardwoods, mainly <i>Combretum imberbe</i> from camp fires)	25
Kaolin.....	70
Ball clay	15

Depending on the thickness of application this glaze ranges from a dry grey green (when thick) through to a sleek rich brown, reminiscent of polished wood or leather when applied thinly. This glaze runs when pure woodash is applied over the glaze.

WOODASH GLAZE (parts)

Feldspar.....	35
Silica.....	10
Kaolin	10
Ball clay	12
Ash (Lowveld hardwoods, mainly <i>Combretum imberbe</i> from camp fires)	35
Yellow ochre	2.5

Applied thickly, this glaze is a rich, liquid pale green.

TENMOKU (Parts)

Feldspar.....	60
Silica.....	20
Whiting.....	12.5
Kaolin.....	15
Ball clay	10
Iron oxide	6.8