

Restraint and richness in the ceramic work of Juliet Armstrong

by Terence King

IN the fields of ceramic production, collecting and research, KwaZulu-Natal may reasonably lay claim to being one of the principal centres in South Africa. The municipal art galleries in Pietermaritzburg and Durban have comprehensive holdings of historic and contemporary ceramic work, the number of studio ceramists regularly exhibiting work of high quality is impressive, and the research generated by the Centre for Visual Art at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and other local institutions has placed the region in the forefront of academic inquiry into ceramic practice, theory and history.

Professor Juliet Armstrong's contribution in all of these areas of activity was exceptional. As an artist, she is represented in all major public collec-

tions in South Africa. She assisted in assembling an unrivalled collection of indigenous ceramics for the Centre for Visual Art. Her participatory research work enabled her to convene international conferences on ceramics and ceramic education in the region, thereby advancing the standing of the discipline for practitioners and scholars.

Participatory research, generally held to mean extending the investigation of one's material to include elements of direct action, perhaps by way of educational activity or making a contribution to the development of a community, was Armstrong's preferred methodology. The principle is that there should be a collective dimension to the research work, in which researcher and participants (rather than subjects) all benefit

from the inquiry. The expectation is that levels of critical awareness of both researcher and participant are enhanced in the process.

Such was the compass of Armstrong's research in, mainly, the communities of northern KwaZulu-Natal, especially with members of the Magwaza family of traditional potters (notably Buzephi and Shongaziphi Magwaza), that she was able significantly to enrich and augment the content of her own work. She brought the pots of a distant rural community onto a world stage and afforded her students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where she taught from 1977 until her death in 2012, an excellent understanding of the depth of ceramic history, here and internationally. For her pioneering research work Armstrong was the recipient of eight grants from the University and the National Research Foundation.

Trained initially in the Anglo-Oriental and modernist modes of individual ceramic production, Armstrong understood well the craft and design principles which underpinned her own studio pottery background. She was, however, able innovatively to adapt these principles to create works which, while essentially sculptural, referred always to the conventions, sources, rituals and symbols associated with functional ware across cultures and periods.

Following undergraduate fine art studies at the University of Natal in the early 1970s, Armstrong completed a postgraduate diploma in design, specialising in glassware, at Leicester Polytechnic in 1974 and obtained an MAFA degree in 1981 from the University of Natal. The subject of her master's degree dissertation, the tiles of Victorian-era ceramist William de Morgan, is revealing in terms of her

future development. De Morgan was closely associated with the English Arts and Crafts Movement and typified the thinking characteristic of this artistically complex period in those years which were to herald modernism. To combine respect for the craft techniques and communal methods of a pre-industrial age with the bold experimentation expected in an age of developing technology in art and design, required the ability to juggle conflicting interests on the part of early modernist practitioners. Armstrong, too, engaged in this balancing act, adding her recognition of the importance of maintaining the historic traditions of functional pottery to a contemporary inquiry into new ways of making sculpture.

Her own work was inventive, experimental, technically assured and pointed to the sources that were to absorb her over a productive and influential career. Her studies of the Zulu *ushwala* beer drinking vessel, for example, while not necessarily reflected formally in her work, are indicative of a wider interest in the longevity of the vessel form as a container of expressive thought and symbol of communal values.

One of the last substantial pieces made by Armstrong, *Bream Dream* (2010) (Fig. 1), in the collection of the Tatham Art Gallery, is in porcelain and silver leaf, relatively flat, and distinctly reminiscent of its source, a fish skin. The work is in many ways a summation of several of the themes which she returned to frequently in her work. Apparently representational in its mimicry of fish scales, it quickly becomes abstract in its absence of a literal context, reflecting the balance between the general and the specific, the familiar and the uncertain, which Armstrong sought. The multiple overlays of



*Fig. 1 Juliet Armstrong, Bream Dream (2010).
Porcelain, silver leaf, 138.5 cm × 836 cm × 4 cm (approximately).
Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg*

the sculpture's several hundred small component parts, each meticulously fashioned and joined, suggest a constant state of gentle movement, or instability, in the work, countered though by the near-symmetrical formality of its tightly organised composition. Here is a feature to be found in much of Armstrong's work – a state of poise, of quietude, is contrasted with a sense of tension and ambiguity. This she was able to achieve in various ways; sometimes by making the sculpture in several parts, which could then be adjusted in relation to each other so as subtly to change the composition, by using unexpectedly different materials, such as bone china set against bronze, through stark tonal contrasts and by compounding meaning through simultaneous references to ceramic tradition and a cutting edge contemporaneity.

A related work, *Izimpukane obisini* (*Flies in the milk*) (2006) (Fig. 2), on loan to the Tatham Art Gallery, may be considered a seminal work in the way in which it marks a consolidation of themes and ideas explored by Armstrong over several decades and points to possible future directions.

Based on an *nguni* cow hide, the life-size work comprises around 600 separate bone china planes, and an upper-central insert with raised *asumpa* (nodules), all held physically in place by plastic-coated stainless steel wire connectors, most of which are intentionally visible and which contribute to the sensation of a flickering light playing over the surface. The high fired bone china is slightly translucent, a property of the medium exploited by Armstrong, who developed unique clay recipes incorporating bone ash in order to explore the paradox of a delicate, fragile appearance generated by a tough, resistant

material. Before firing and assembling the piece, a slip was spattered across the surface to create a set of small, irregular black markings, the kind of sudden tonal accent favoured by Armstrong.

A key feature of *Izimpukane obisini* may be found in Armstrong's recognition of the symbolic significance accorded the skin or hide in many traditional cultures. Immediate precursors to *Izimpukane obisini* include several near life-size, though relatively small, single-component works derived from animal skins, which refer to the ceremonial protective aprons which Armstrong had studied in her field trips with colleagues and students to, among other areas, Kranskop, Rorke's Drift and Nongoma. These works, in what she titled her *incayi* and *isibodiya* series, are on a scale which allowed for firing as unitary pieces, generally around 300 mm to 500 mm, and which therefore required little subsequent re-assembly. Almost all of the works which have animal hides as their sources, are intended to be suspended vertically, sometimes ideally in front of a light source such as a window, so as to take advantage of their faint translucency and be viewed frontally, in the manner of relief sculpture.

This planar approach to sculptural composition harks back to Armstrong's early understanding of the important role of tiles and related ceramic surface embellishments found in a variety of cultures, underscoring the thematic consistency of her work.

In other ways, too, do these animal hide pieces show a steady and consistent progression of formal aims over a long period of inquiry. They frequently include small, tonally distinct elements such as animal hooves, or beaded inserts and raised textural nodules or isolated

incisions, all intended to draw attention momentarily to larger areas of clean, unencumbered space. This pared-down approach to design, in which the integrity and autonomy of the plane is foregrounded, relates to her personal inclination to an early modernist design ethos but is also grounded in her interest in the forms and surfaces of Eastern and of traditional Zulu ceramics and, in this regard, chiefly *ukhamba* beer-drinking vessels and protective pregnancy

aprons, with their clarity of form and controlled use of applied surface elements, such as *amasumpa*.

The fieldwork and the collaborative practice with rural potters which she undertook made Armstrong aware of the centrally important role played by cattle in the cultural expression of the communities with which she worked, notably of the essential connection between the homestead to which the cattle belonged and the ancestors.¹ This

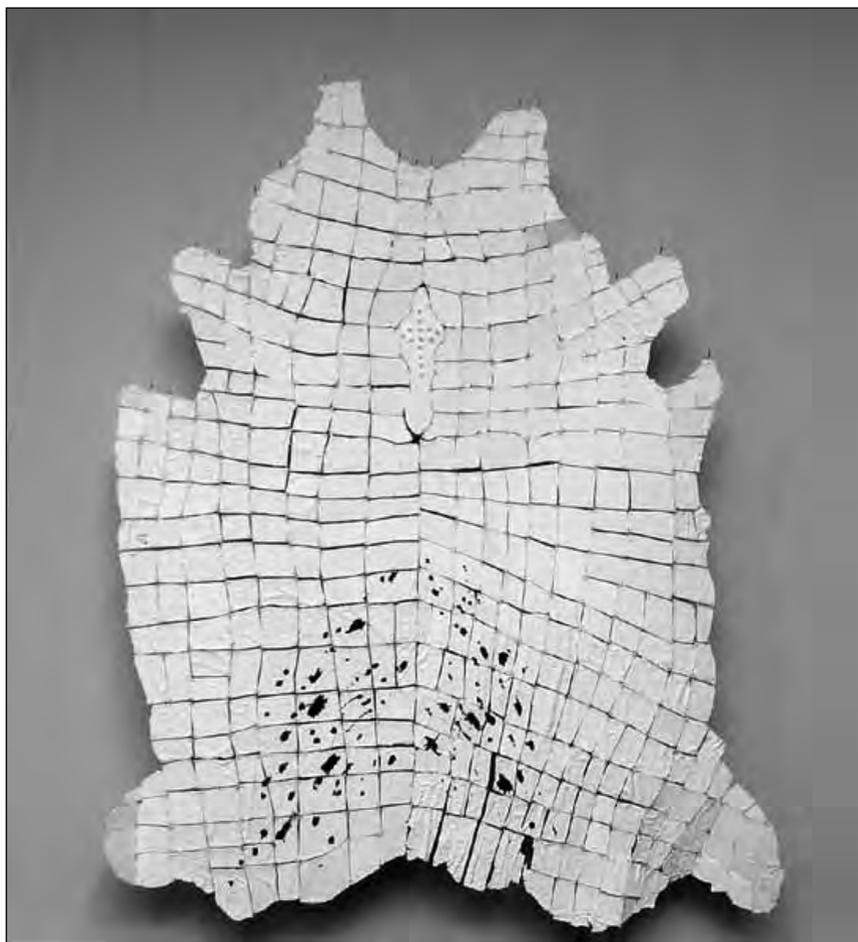


Fig. 2 Juliet Armstrong, Izimpukane obisini (Flies in the milk) (2006). Bone china, stainless steel, 213 cm × 183 cm × 12 cm (approximately). Private collection, on loan to Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg

seems to have inspired Armstrong to create *Izimpukane Obisini* as, in part, a protective device for her then recently deceased mother and, in part, as a reflection of the life-sustaining, nurturing and shared community values which she understood to be embedded in a community's ceramic objects.

Armstrong's interest in the interaction between symbol and usage in functional pieces, reinforced by her early experience in both studio work and industrial design, may be seen in the refinements found on otherwise unadorned useful objects. In Zulu traditional ware, for example, and particularly on the *utshwala* pots, the use of surface motifs would not be entirely, or even primarily, decorative in intention, as they help provide a firm grip for the user. But the tactile geometric patterns, formed of raised surface projections or warts or pellets, (the *amasumpa*), and the incised linear markings, are also imbued with a symbolic value, specifically a spiritual and respectful connection with the ancestors. This connection is intrinsic to the ceremony of beer drinking and its associated utensils. The rituals associated with the world of functional ceramics more generally were always of importance to Armstrong. She considered the small ceremonial acts which accompany events such as feasts, community or family gatherings, dinners and the like, to be richly value-laden. In not dissimilar vein, archaeologist Gavin Whitelaw, with whom Armstrong worked on research projects, observes the importance of a limited range of surface decorations as a structured and symbolic form of communication of cultural norms. He cites David in support of his discussion on the ways in which motifs on pottery are "low technology channels through

which society implants its values in the individual every day at mealtimes".²

These were very much the sorts of values instilled in generations of students who studied ceramics as part of a fine art curriculum at the University campus in Pietermaritzburg. This was done through Armstrong's rigorous and imaginative teaching, reinforced by daily exposure to the collections of ceramic works built up over time by Armstrong and her colleagues. The challenging range of projects and studio assignments set for students by Armstrong, which ranged from radical (though temporary) transformations of the University grounds and buildings to the production of funerary urns, was her way of introducing students to the ideas of cultures other than their own, thereby expanding their stores of source material. The accessibility of the richly diverse collection of functional and sculptural work in the students' studios was particularly helpful in this respect.

This study collection, begun by Hilda Ditchburn, who had been appointed the first permanent lecturer in ceramics in 1946, at first contained works mainly in the Anglo-Orientalist tradition, typified by potters such as Bernard Leach and his followers, as well as some rare examples of classical Grecian and medieval pieces. Valuable as these works were to students, both for inspiration and for historical studies, it was the unique collection of pots which she assisted colleague Ian Calder in acquiring and accessioning which was perhaps to prove of greater significance. This large collection of items from the northern parts of the province (supplemented by some donated works from north of South Africa's borders) includes pots from areas which have a long history of missionary involvement, including

Nongoma and Hlabisa, and reflects the curators' sensitivity to the problems of traditional rural work transplanted into an entirely new environment. Armstrong was herself mindful of the economic and social conditions of the communities in which this research was undertaken and, as she worked largely with women, particularly of the gender issues involved. Her field trips confirmed the vitality of this aspect of KwaZulu-Natal ceramics: that current rural production was not a residue of an outmoded practice, and that utilitarian objects have the capacity to convey individual expression as well as the values of communities. In her own work and in her role as a collector Armstrong managed the contest between so-termed craftwork, associated with traditional practices and often inappropriately considered conservative, and the innovativeness demanded of individual creativity. It was because of the consistency with which she engaged these multiple sets of values in her work, research and teaching that her students were able to grasp the complexity of the field and the necessity for having a grounding in and respect for the conventions of ceramic production as a precondition for original experimentation.

In addition to the collections readily available to them in the Centre for Visual Art and the Tatham Art Gallery, students of Armstrong's had access to her and her husband Michael Hart's fascinating and diverse collection of artworks, some 2 000 pieces in all, which covers a variety of periods, styles and media. In utilising these works in her teaching activities, Armstrong encouraged students to share her own understanding of the importance of combining insights gleaned from direct

personal experience with those learned more formally. Here again, Armstrong maintained a balance in the way in which she drew on source material; her extensive professional travels to, among other places, China, South Korea, Kenya and Australia provided her with helpful visual information in support of a sense of location which she looked for in her work, this provided by familiar and personal contexts and experiences.

Indeed, direct personal experience forms an important and evident part of Armstrong's range of sources, constantly generating ideas to which she would return in subsequent works. As an illustration, an early cycle of body-cast sculptures of the female torso, from the 1970s, developed a decade or so later into a number of single, breast-like forms, more ambiguous in their isolation from the body. Some of these were closed forms, made into solid objects, small yet monumental, with a realistic nipple a reminder of their origin. Others became hollow and inverted, increasingly vessel-like, a suggestion perhaps of the ubiquity of the vessel and its many metaphors in ceramic history.

The breast- and vessel-like forms preceded in appearance and intent what was to become a major part of Armstrong's production from the late 1980s onward – the single cone nestling in an irregular cradle of, usually, bronze. Several of these are commemorative works, as in *For Mazwi* (1992) (Fig. 3), in the collection of the Tatham Art Gallery, a confirmation of Armstrong's belief in a ritualistic and ceremonial dimension to ceramics. The cone pieces, although modest in scale, mostly around 100 mm – 300 mm in their maximum dimension, initially present an unexpectedly imposing appearance. This is probably because of their uncomplicated,



*Fig. 3 Juliet Armstrong, For Mazwi (1992).
Bronze, bone china, 21 cm × 15 cm × 18 cm (approximately).
Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg*

direct, formal and spatial properties and relative structural simplicity. The monumentality is, however, countered by the manner in which the barely-perceptible surface detailing draws the viewer to the work, leading to a more intimate reading and re-establishing a connection with the hand-held vessel.

The majority of works made by Armstrong through the 1990s, and thereafter, are essentially tonal, employing large areas of unvarying white with accents of matt black, brown, charcoal or similarly light-absorbing colours. Armstrong seldom used coloured glazes extensively in her later work, preferring the detailed intricacy of a low-relief texture as a way of articulating the surface. In a series of late works exhibited on the “All Fired Up” exhibition at the

Durban Art gallery in 2012, moments of intense, saturated colour are, however, introduced. Significantly, though, the colour is intrinsic to the shards of historic ceramic remnants found on a beach and incorporated physically into the body of the piece and is not applied via glazes. This rather confirms Armstrong’s purist leaning toward retaining the integrity of the original material.

The absence of conventional coloured glazing in Armstrong’s later work generally does, however, tend to draw special attention to variations in the edges of planes and the role played by cast shadow in her work, which in turn influences the sometimes ambiguous spatial location of components of the sculptures. A tension is set up between a sense of rootedness and drift-

ing in undefined space. The idea of an uncertain spatial position is confirmed in those several works where the irregular cradle or other supporting structure is not fixed to the cone shape, which makes possible slightly different configurations of the main elements of the sculpture. *For Mazwi* is one such work.

Armstrong's work deals with translation and incorporation. Translation from sources which are themselves objects of cultural expression is not a matter of transcription from one set of received meanings into another set of understood meanings. It is instead a process in which the artist positions herself in relation to the source, the original cultural object, and then presents for others a selective, but not prescriptive, response. In keeping with her own curiosity about a global reach of ceramic production, Armstrong extends to viewers an invitation to reacquaint themselves with previously encountered sources, which

may at first be difficult to recognise in their new guise, and then introduces hitherto unfamiliar elements with a range of evocative associations. This is an imaginative process, in which the incorporation and translation of familiar and fresh aspects of the source material creates opportunities for the viewer to embark on an equally imaginative process of engagement with the work.

Editor's Note. This article draws to a degree on one written by the author for *de Arte, the art historians' journal*, in 2012.

NOTES

- 1 Armstrong, J. "Artist's statement", in Bell, B. and Venter, K. (eds) *Jabulisa 2006: the art and craft of KwaZulu-Natal* (Durban, Natal Arts Trust, 2006) p.29
- 2 Whitelaw, G. "Twenty one centuries of ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal", in Bell, B. and Calder, I. (eds) *Ubumba: aspects of indigenous ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, Tatham Art Gallery, 1998) p.3