

Fired: An Exhibition of South African Ceramics & All Fired Up: Conversations between Kiln and Collection [exhibition review]

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Abstract:

In a remarkable moment of curatorial synchronicity, Esther Esmiol of the South African National Iziko Museums and Jenny Stretton of the Durban Art Gallery both recently launched historic South African sculptural, decorative, and utilitarian ceramic retrospective exhibitions. Choosing curiously similar titles, "Fired" and "All Fired Up," Esmiol and Stretton have responded to the intense energy behind the South African contemporary ceramic market.

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Article:

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exhibition review

Fired: An Exhibition of South African Ceramics

The Granary, Castle of Good Hope, Iziko Museums, Cape Town, South Africa
February 26, 2012–late 2013

All Fired Up: Conversations Between Kiln and Collection

Rotunda Gallery, Durban Art Gallery, Durban, South Africa
March 2–April 24, 2012

reviewed by Elizabeth Perrill

In a remarkable moment of curatorial synchronicity, Esther Esmiol of the South African National Iziko Museums and Jenny Stretton of the Durban Art Gallery both recently launched historic South African sculptural, decorative, and utilitarian ceramic retrospective exhibitions. Choosing curiously similar titles, “Fired” and “All Fired Up,” Esmiol and Stretton have responded to the intense energy behind the South African contemporary ceramic market.

After its selection by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design as the “World Design Capital” for 2014, a wildfire of commerce is bound to burn through South Africa and will require the tempering influence of museums and public institutions. Design firms and export companies already look to South Africa for inexpensive, highly trained ceramicists capable of producing high-end design. Astrid Dahl, Katherine Glenday, John Newdigate, and David Walters are all South Africans with high profiles in international design circles. Similarly, the Ardmore, Imiso, Mud, and Rorke’s Drift Ceramic studios have been exporting vessels and sculptures to galleries and auction houses for years. Some ceramic artists, such as Hylton Nel, who is featured prominently at the prestigious Michael Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town, even cross the line that still persists internationally between “fine art” and “ceramic art” exhibition and sale venues.

“Fired” and “All Fired Up” offer historical contextualization for students, scholars, and the design industry, and one hopes they take note and understand some of the subtle



exchanges taking place between South Africa’s many traditions of clay working. In these multiple exchanges indigenous traditions inspire patterns in high-design vessels, industrial methods are used by young ceramists who see themselves as part of local lineages, and centuries-old pottery importation serves as inspiration for postmodern reflections on what constitutes South African ceramics.

For “Fired,” Ester Esmiol and her team in Cape Town chose a more chronological curatorial approach. This semi-permanent exhibition takes advantage of the new Iziko structure, which merged over half a dozen museums into a single administrative entity. “Fired” draws upon the previously divided collections from the South African Museum’s archaeological and anthropological holdings, the South African Cultural History Museum, the William Fehr Collection, and the South African National Gallery (SANG), all of which, except the SANG, now fall under Iziko’s newly formed Social History Collections Department.

As one enters the display, the connected vaults of the Castle of Good Hope Granary (Fig. 1) create the sensation of intimate caves. A didactic label featuring a timeline extending broadly through human history, beginning with “Venus” figures produced in 31,000 BCE in what is today the Czech Republic and ending with a South African-focused twentieth/twenty-first century section, sets the chronological tone of the exhibition. Yet one should not expect this geographic diversity in the exhibition; the only non-South African pieces are imported works from the early colonial periods. Around a corner, a cycle of videos highlights a more contemporary era. Rural artists continuing the coil-building of the Zulu, Sotho (Fig. 2), and Xhosa traditions, as well as the burnishing methods of Ian Garret

1 “Fired: An Exhibition of South Africa Ceramics” exhibition, including works by (l) Andile Dyalvane and (r) Ian Garrett.

PHOTO: ELIZABETH PERRILL

This view welcomes visitors following an initial entry corridor featuring a timeline of ceramic history.

and incising techniques of Andile Dyalvane, are shown in rotations of film and still images.

Throughout the vaulted space a semi-chronological thematic organization marks the passage of time, the arrival of new populations, and the persistence of traditions. Themes such as Archaeological Fragments; Works of Khoesan Origin; Vessels for Drinking, Serving and Making Beer; and Ceramic Journeys signal historical shifts. The thematic grouping of plates, bowls, and tiles entitled Ceramic Journeys may be particularly unexpected for visitors unfamiliar with the globalization of ceramic trade. Eighteenth century Chinese export porcelains depicting Table Mountain are a particular highlight and tie South African colonial legacies to global ceramic history (Fig. 3).

Vitrines and wall texts entitled “Production Pottery” and “Studio Ceramics” highlight the complexity of South African ceramic traditions. Fine-grained historical details bring out not only technical but political trends. “Production Potteries,” enterprises that created “lines” of ceramics such as tableware sets or decorative vases, plates or sculptures, are discussed as entities that bolstered white South African employment during apartheid. The aesthetic trend of featuring bright colors and images of romanticized rural “Africans” in these studios gives one hints of the conservative politics behind apartheid-era production pottery establish-



(clockwise from top left)

2 Lenky Nhlapo, ceramic demonstration of a *lefiso* vessel. South Sotho region, Qwaqwa, South Africa, 2007.

PHOTO: DAVID M.M. RIEP

Demonstrations of South Sotho techniques are shown in a rotation of films and still images on view at "Fired."

3 Ellalou O'Meara (b. 1944)

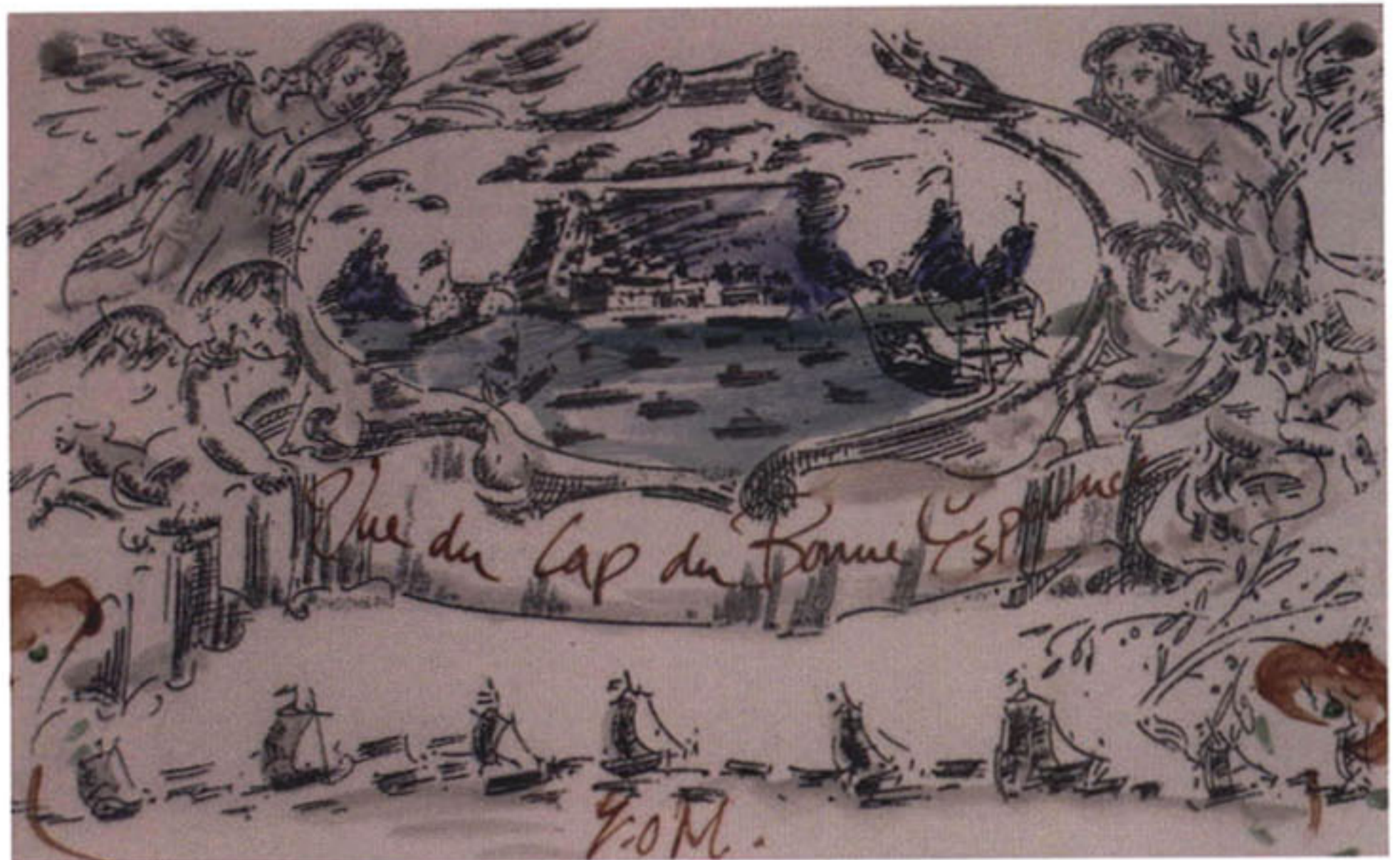
Engraved tile inspired by historical views of Table Bay, Cape Town (2009)

Iziko Museums of Cape Town, SH 2009/34

PHOTO: ELIZABETH PERRILL

4 "All Fired Up: Conversations Between Kiln and Collection," including a formal comparison of work by (c, foreground) Astrid Dahl and (r, foreground) Rebecca Mtibe.

PHOTO: ELIZABETH PERRILL



ments. Esmiol's curation places "Production Pottery" in contrast with "Studio Potters," small groups or individuals who often held anti-apartheid views and created unique works or small "lines" of Asian-influenced stoneware, high-fired ceramics. The aesthetics of these muted utilitarian vessels give very few hints of the artists' political views. Instead, one must dig into the exhibition's didactic labels to realize that black and white potters were exhibiting side-by-side in the Studio Pottery world of the 1960s and 70s.

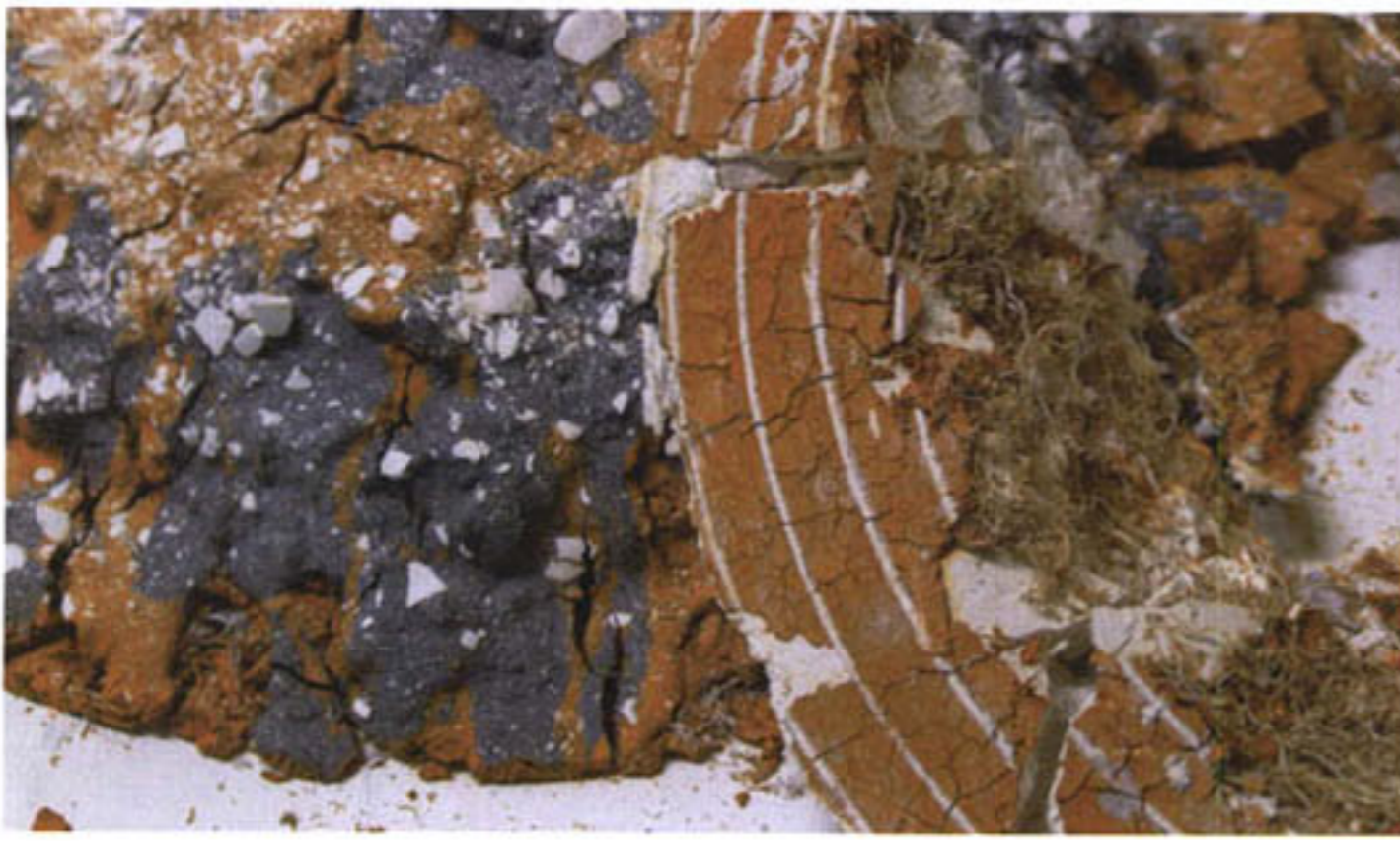
The second multichambered room of "Fired" features an array of work defined as Contemporary Ceramics. Loosely oriented by ceramic medium or technique, this space conveys a more aesthetic, less sociopolitical tone. The array of work is impressive and a perfect springboard for anticipated World Design Capital 2014 event attendees to venture out on studio visits.

One hopes that those who see "Fired" will also venture beyond the Cape, a challenge to some. Durban has historically been a breeding ground of ceramic talent in South Africa, and overlaps between the "Fired" and "All Fired Up" exhibitions attest to this fact. The list of ceramists with ties to KwaZulu-Natal represented in both shows is extensive: Ardmere Studio, Esias Bosch, Astrid Dahl, Euriel Mbatha Dammann, Ian Garrett, Dinah Molefe, Nesta and Jabu Nala, Lindsay Scott, Clive Sithole, Andrew Walford, and more.

To capture KwaZulu-Natal's dynamism, Jenny Stretton made the progressive curatorial decision to allow artists to "mine the archive" and collaborate in creating a Durban Art Gallery (DAG) ceramic retrospective. "All Fired Up" (Fig. 4) was a composite of work by fifteen contemporary artists and their selections from the DAG collection. The resulting exhibition created a provocative dialogue between

a wide-range of artistic practices. The one critique that might be made is that only two of the selecting artists were black and two of Indian heritage. To have some of KwaZulu-Natal's famous black female potters on the active side of the selection process would have lent further strength to the show.

Nevertheless, the comparisons of "All Fired Up" break the bounds of typical curatorial comparisons. Contemporary Zulu beer pots are placed next to precisely sand-blasted bone china; video work focusing on extreme close-ups of ceramic textures (Fig. 5) is juxtaposed with rural earthenware sculpture; embroidered panels are in dialogue with a tower of ceramic animals embellished with bright acrylic paints. As is often the case, artists break with linear art historical thinking. Jenny Stretton's curation also ensures there is a conversation across the gallery; one moves from Astrid Dahl and Rebecca Mtibe's fluid hand-built vessels to the



(clockwise from top left)

5 Kim Bagley (b.
Film still from *Rummage/Rheumage* (2011)
Digital Video, looped, 2 min 32 sec.
Collection of the artist
PHOTO: KIM BAGLEY



6 (l-r) Martha Zettler (b. 1939, Norden, Germany)
Bone China Form II, III, IV (2011)
Bone china; (l-r) 22 cm x 15 cm; 18 cm x 12 cm; 14 cm x 12 cm
Collection of the artist
PHOTO: MLUNGISI SHANGASE, DURBAN LOCAL HISTORY MUSEUMS

7 Isaac Nkosiinathi Khanyile (b. Durban, Umlazi Township, South Africa)
(background) *Izimpende, The Roots* (2011–12), partial view
Earthenware, fiber, beads, steel; size variable
Collection of the artist
(foreground, l-r) *African Queen III; African Queen; African Queen II* (1996)
Earthenware, beads, fiber; (l-r) 68.5 cm x 39.9 cm x 19.5 cm; 69.9 cm x 45.2 cm x 27.1 cm; 72.5 cm x 40.7 cm x 30.6 cm
Durban Art Gallery 3456, 3439, 3455
PHOTO: ELIZABETH PERRILL



geometric porcelain (foreground, Fig. 4) and bone china work of Martha Zettler (Fig. 6); the narrative whimsy of Hendrik Stroebel and Carol Hayward Fell's selections are contrasted with the politically and visually weighty sculpture of Nkhosinathi Khanyile (Fig. 7). The balance struck is impressive.

When one turns to the logistical side of these two shows, choices become a little less balanced. Both Esmiol and Stretton frankly discussed their struggles to find funding. Both exhibitions were drawn from the establishments' permanent collections in an effort to keep costs low. Both repurposed vitrines that are not designed for ceramics and distract from the work. Yet the priorities of how limited funding was spent end here.

At "Fired," Cape Town audiences will enjoy the large, illustrated wall texts, unobtrusive labels, professional lighting design, and high-end projection equipment. Outside contractors have ensured a professional polish. On the other hand, the municipally run Durban Art Gallery shows signs of provincial practices that sometimes lead KwaZulu-Natal's best talent to find greener pastures. White paper labels mounted on foam-core and unsightly electrical cords distract from the artwork.

Yet the Durban Art Gallery found one thing

the Iziko Museums in Cape Town are struggling to assemble—funds for a catalog (Esmiol 2012). The vision of "All Fired Up" is preserved for posterity in a catalog of the same name that was released at the exhibition opening (Durban Art Gallery 2012). In addition to artists' statements, contributions and collection choices, scholarly essays discussing the collection history, ceramic tertiary institutions, family traditions, and workshops create a document that will be of service to future students and art historians.

In an official press release Stretton commented that "[ceramic art] intrudes, demands space—almost as people do, and can alter its form as one circles it" (2012). Scholars of African art must circle, as one circles a ceramic piece, and turn to see the full breadth of Africa's ceramic traditions. Polly Nooter Roberts recently referred to "turning" via an essay by Irit Ragoff (Nooter Roberts 2012:1). Nooter Roberts documents the ability of curators to instigate disciplinary reflection and transformation; Esmiol and Stretton call for the same type of self-critique in the realm of South African ceramics. "Fired" and "All Fired Up" provide frameworks for historical inquiry into the typical analyses of ceramic lineages and technicalities and move deeper

into the politics of workshop dynamics, funding structures, and educational institutions that now shape African ceramics, and have for over half a century. Though Durban's "All Fired Up" will have closed by the publication of this review, it carries on through its catalog. But hopefully, some readers will make their way to the Castle of Good Hope to see "Fired" and a publication will eventually preserve this historic exhibition.

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