In a remarkable moment of curatorial synchronicity, Esther Esmyol 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," Esmyol and Stretton have responded to the intense energy behind the South African contemporary ceramic market.

**Keywords:** exhibition review | ceramics | South African art | pottery

***Note: Full text of article below***
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 Esmyol 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 similarly titled, “Fired” and “All Fired Up,” Esmyol 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 Rorkes Drift Ceramic studios have been exporting vessels and sculptures to galleries and auction houses for years. Some ceramic artists, such as Hyton 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 Esmyol 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 burning methods of Ian Garrett and incising techniques of Andile Dyakane, 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 hint of the conservative politics behind apartheid-era production pottery establish-
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 Eilkou 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 (c, foreground) Rebecca Mtibe.
PHOTO: ELIZABETH PERRILL

ments. Esmyol'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: Ardmore Studio, Esias Bosch, Astrid Dahl, Euriel Mbathe Dammann, Ian Garrett, Dinah Molefe, Nesta and Jabu Nala, Lindsay Scott, Clive Sithole, Andrew Walford, and more.

To capture KwaZulu-Natal's dynamism, Jenny Stratton 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 Stratton's curation also ensures there is a conversation across the gallery; one moves from Astrid Dhal and Rebecca Mtibe's fluid hand-built vessels to the
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 Nkosinathi 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 Esmyol 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 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.

Elizabeth Perrill is an Assistant Professor in the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Art Department. She has published on and contributed to several exhibitions of Zulu ceramics. eperrill@uncg.edu

References cited

Esmyol, Esther. 2012. Interview by Elizabeth Perrill. March 6, Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town, South Africa.
